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The Road To HD

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Cutting a feature in HD

By Christine Bunish

W hen David Dodson was asked to edit *Outlander*, a mixed-genre Vikings-sci fi feature which The Weinstein Company will release next March, it didn't take long for him to say yes. "How many chances do you get to edit a Viking movie?" he asks. "This was *The Vikings* meets *Predator*."

The new film, produced by Chris Roberts and John Schimmel (*Lucky Number Slevin*) and written and directed by Howard McCain with Dirk Blackman co-writer, stars James Caviezel, John Hurt, Ron Perlman and Sophia Myles. "It's a $50 million movie that looks like a $100 million movie," says Dodson. *Outlander* was shot on 3-perf S35mm and full-aperture 4-perf in Halifax, Nova Scotia which doubles for Norway. Some 500 VFX shots enhance the Viking landscape and give life to the fully-CG creature.

With an effects-heavy edit and limited funds available for film outs, Dodson opted to establish an HD workflow for the picture which he began cutting in a sea-

Editor David Dodson stands at his Avid editing station on location in Halifax, Nova Scotia

side house in Nova Scotia. All dailies were transferred to HDCAM by Deluxe Toronto; then the drives were digitized into a Mac-based Avid Adrenaline v. 2.6.7 with the DNxHD 115 codec so Dodson could cut in 1920x1080 HD. Eventually, the entire film will be scanned out to 2K for theatrical release.

"With 500 VFX shots and the pace of production I felt it was essential to have the most information possible in the off-line," he explains. VFX house Spin, in Toronto and Vancouver, "would send us QuickTimes of VFX shots in progress. We couldn't afford to film them out and evaluate them on a daily basis, and it was pretty clear that SD would slow us to a crawl: There was no way to really understand what we were seeing. So I petitioned to off-line in HD. Not a lot of people were doing that before DNxHD 115 was available. I got demo codecs from Pivotal Post in North Hollywood, and they were stunning – it was HD in an SD bandwidth. I was sold!"

Dodson cites a number of benefits to editing in HD. "When you're dealing with a lot of very emotional moments with great actors being able to see them better and read the subtleties of their performance gives me an

A Panavision TechnoCrane looms out over a Viking feast in *Outlander*

advantage in any scene I'm cutting," he reports. "I'll never go back to cutting off-line in SD."

The HD off-line also offers easy integration of pick-up shots. "We'll be getting an underwater sequence soon that was shot with Sony's F950 CineAlta HD camera," says Dodson. "It will marry perfectly with 35mm. I'm not the least bit concerned about it."

Dodson moved back home to LA after Christmas where he has continued to cut on Avids from Pivotal Post, a company which has been pioneering all-HD workflows for editorial, he says. Dodson is using Facilis's Terrablock fiber-channel shared storage and has a full-resolution HD projector for screen outs direct from the Avid.

Dodson has worked extensively with Apple's Final Cut Pro HD too and says Final Cut and Avid each has its own advantages and disadvantages. "This movie had thousands of feet of film, seven cameras, two units and masses of dailies. Avid media management is legendary, and I needed the best for tracking multitudes of elements."

Dodson was creatively challenged by the two genres inherent in *Outlander*. "Historical action and sci fi is not a natural marriage," he points out. "I tried to balance one with the other and keep a coherent whole."

He also endeavored to "keep a peaceful workflow when you have hundreds of elements going back and forth between the VFX house and the edit room and need interaction between two cooperative but very different departments."

Avid's previous editing model was to work in low resolution and save drive space, Dodson notes. "But now with improved storage, faster processing and better algorithms for compression, there's no reason to be stuck looking at fuzzy images," he says. "In the future there will be no intermediate step: You'll cut and your file will be the film's release element."