



Face Off

DP Bruce Dorfman & production sound supervisor Danny McCullough capture an innovative challenge series.

by Kendra Ruczak

On Syfy's *Face Off*, special effects makeup artists put their skills to the test to craft fantastic creatures from every realm of the imagination. After 10 seasons, the unique reality competition series continues to deliver creative new challenges, talented cast members, iconic judges, and fresh concepts. Competitors use their mastery of design, sculpting, molding, prosthetics and hair application, painting, puppeteering, costume design, and more to survive elimination challenges and to advance their career by claiming the season's top honors.

Face Off is hosted by McKenzie Westmore, whose father, world-renowned Hollywood makeup artist Michael Westmore (*Star Trek*), appears on the series as a mentor to the contestants. The show's legendary panel of judges includes multiple Academy Award-winning makeup artist Ve Neill (*The Hunger Games*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*), effects industry veteran Glenn Hetrick (*CSI: New*

York, *Heroes*), acclaimed creature designer Neville Page (*Avatar*, *Prometheus*), and other special guest judges.

Throughout Season 10, contestants used their makeup and special effects expertise to create Valkyries, intergalactic bounty hunters, hyper-realistic *Mission: Impossible*-style disguise masks, chest-bursting parasites à la *Alien*, creatures from King Kong's home turf of Skull Island, *World of Warcraft* characters, and more. In the season finale, finalists collaborated with up-and-coming directors and super-producer Jason Blum of Blumhouse Productions (*Paranormal Activity*, *Sinister*, *Insidious*) to bring their makeup designs to life in short horror films.

Despite such high stakes and the limited time contestants have to plan and execute their elaborate concepts, a strong feeling of camaraderie is always present on the show. This sense of teamwork extends to the *Face Off* production crew as

well, and their collaboration grows stronger with each season. Production on this series is a tremendous feat: Every aspect of the extensive makeup development and application process must be captured, along with all phases of the competition and the presentations to the judges. The contestants travel to various locations for special challenges, and the short film finale episodes add an entirely new facet to the production logistics. Cinematographer Bruce Dorfman and production sound supervisor Danny McCullough work tirelessly to capture the competition as it unfolds. We spoke with Dorfman and McCullough about their workflow for the award-winning series.

How did you first join the *Face Off* team, and what interested you most about the series?

Bruce Dorfman: I've worked with the production company [Mission Control Media] before on similar shows in the past, and so when this came up, they gave me a call. The subject matter is very interesting, so that explains how it's gone on for so long.

Danny McCullough: I joined in Season 3. I had actually seen the show on TV and I had worked with some of the production staff before. I'm a fan of the monster makeup and sci-fi genres, so when they called me for an interview, I was pretty excited. I've been on it ever since, happily.

Bruce, how do you prep for an episode, and what types of camera equipment do you use?

BD: We use anywhere from four to nine cameras, depending on the episode. We're currently using Sony F800s with standard and wide angle lenses. We use a jib on every episode and a lot of Steadicam as well. As far as prepping, we get the creative in advance and talk about references. I work with the lighting and grip crew to reference old films or whatever we're talking about in the episode, and try to inspire the artists in that way.



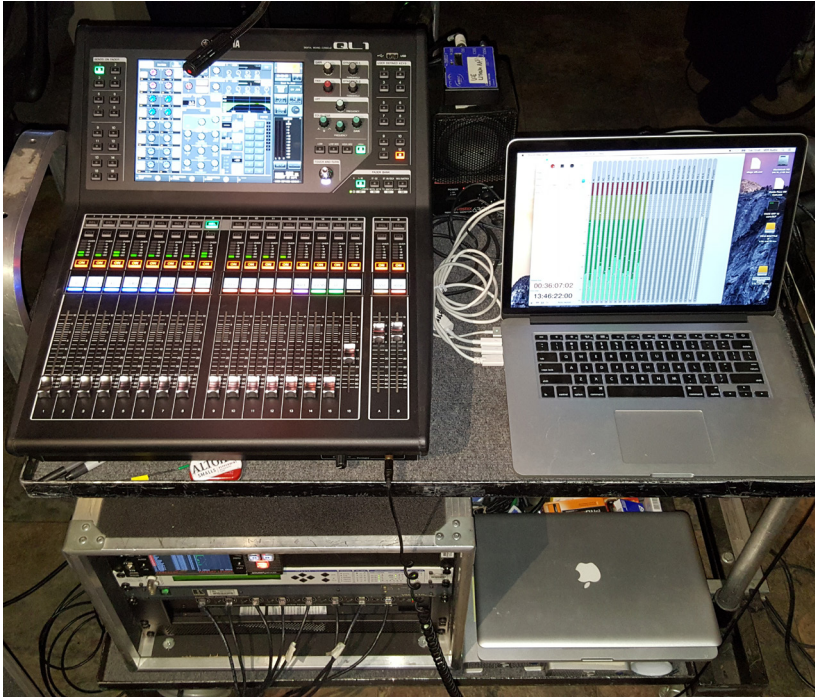
"Aliens" actor Lance Henriksen makes a guest appearance during the "Foreign Bodies" challenge



Artist Yvonne Cox applies makeup during the "Smoke and Mirrors" challenge



DP Bruce Dorfman's monitor during an elimination stage presentation



Production audio supervisor Danny McCullough's workstation on set



Walter Welsh applies airbrush effects during the "Smoke and Mirrors" challenge



Contestants descend upon the lab for the "Foreign Bodies" challenge

Danny, how do you prep for an episode, and what types of audio gear do you use?

DM: It's changed a lot from season to season, because the technology has changed a lot in the last few years. Every season we're trying to change and streamline things a bit. I run a master control mix and ISO multitrack into a recorder. I have a mobile control room and a stage control room. We run the mobile control room at the lab where the artists prep their designs and work throughout each episode. When we go out into the field, that control room from the lab becomes mobile, so I try to replicate the lab setup in the field as far as monitoring and recording. On the elimination stage I have a bigger setup, but I also have ENG mixers recording backups to their cameras as a safety. It's a weird hybrid of a stage show where I'd just be doing straight recording myself, and an ENG show, where we have mixes to camera as well.

But it changes a lot from episode to episode, and there's always something different going on. I sit down with the challenge crew a week before each episode and go through my mic count and any other sound considerations we have, like if we have more or less cast or if we're doing music playback.

Danny, what types of microphones do you use?

DM: We've always used Lectrosonics, and this season we're using SMQVs. Ninety percent of the mics are hidden or taped onto outfits. Sometimes we mic the people in makeup, which is always tough for us, so we work with wardrobe and with the artists themselves. The transmitters are Lectros, we use Sanken COS-11s as our lavs, and sometimes we use Countrymen B6s if we need miniature mics, especially if we have to hide anything in hairpieces.

Bruce, how do you approach the show's lighting?

BD: The lab for makeup is set up to look like a working lab, so we try to stay out of the way lighting-wise. We have added quite a bit of light-

ing over the years to make the picture more beautiful, but we kept the same kind of look for the lab. They need to be able to go 360 degrees, so that kind of limits the dramatics of it, but it does look like a working lab. As far as the stage goes, we try to light as dramatically as possible, although there's a fairness aspect. We don't get to do special, individual lighting for the creatures because they're all being judged, though we do build in a lot of contrast in the rest of the set. We use a lot of black and a lot of colors. A lot of our contrast comes from color and that evolves as well. We're always fine-tuning and replacing equipment from season to season, so I think every year it looks better and better.

How do you work with the camera crew on set?

BD: At the lab we'll generally have four or five cameras and each one has a camera assistant. We have a tech department of two or three people at all times as well. On the stage we're generally doing six or seven cameras for each elimination. That always includes a jib and sometimes a Steadicam, and each camera also has an assistant. If we're shooting XD, they're just collecting the media and sending that off to post immediately. The change in the last couple of seasons has been for our finale episodes when we're shooting short films. Those have been single-camera ALEXA shoots, so that brings a real film style to what we're doing and a whole film-style crew as well.

Danny, how do you set up your production audio workflow on set?

DM: We start the season really cast-heavy, so it's usually me plus an ENG mixer per camera, four or five mixers per day. I don't really have A2s [audio assistants], but since I have ENG guys, they help me troubleshoot on the floor. About four seasons ago, I switched to Yamaha CL5s. I'm using the Audinate Dante network, so all of my audio is networked over Ethernet. I can control all patching and routing from a central hub, my computer. All of the story producers



Rob Seal applies prosthetics for the "Wanted Dead or Alive" challenge



McCullough's production audio workstation

Photos courtesy of Syfy / NBCUniversal



The "Face Off" lab set. Where the magic happens



"World of Warcraft" art director Chris Robinson & host McKenzie Westmore introduce a new challenge



Judges Glenn Hetrick, Ve Neill, & Neville Page carefully evaluate a makeup application

have monitoring workstations, and they can pull up anyone's mic or mix from a camera. I can designate on the fly. If a producer says, "I want to see Bob's mic," I can immediately pull it up and send it to wherever it needs to go. So the Dante network has really made things easy. We're fibering everything back to the control room, so I can put myself several thousand feet from where the contestants are, and I don't have to be close to set. The ENG mixers use Sound Devices 552s to mix everything, and they don't multitrack. They're basically doing scratch mixes in camera and I'm multitracking everything myself over Dante, which helps a lot in post.

How do the camera and sound crews work together on set?

BD: It's almost invisible to me because the contestants are mic'd, so the mixers don't even need to be in proximity to the cameras. There's usually one Steadicam day out of every three days. As far as the workflow, all of the cameras are on microwave, so there are no wires running anywhere most of the time. So they have a lot of freedom to work their way around. They know which angles are shootable and which aren't.

DM: We put the mixers off the floor, per the director. We worked it out early on, and it really helps him to be able to shoot 360, especially in



Behind the scenes of an elimination challenge with the Technocrane in action

the lab. I send high-wattage sends from the ENG guys to each camera, and we usually have a monitor that they can sit in front of and then send mixes based on what they're seeing. They're rolling all day long and I am too, so they just follow the action on the camera. We rarely boom anything, unless we need dialogue from someone in makeup that is completely prohibitive, and we cannot get a mic on them. We've had the same camera crew for almost every season, and those guys nail it. It's a very well-covered show and is pretty seamless. They know what to look for, what gets shot, and what isn't a part of the story.

Do you have any communication with the series' post-production teams?

BD: I have unsolicited contact with them several times a season. I go into post and ask them, "What are we doing wrong?" and just solicit the problems that they might come up with, and there are very few. The cut is pretty standard and they know what they're looking for, but I check in with them quite often to see what's going on, and we just secretly correct things before it becomes a problem. Also, our EPs are so equally involved in post that we get feedback really quickly.

DM: At least once a week I either talk to post or they talk to me, and



Anna Cali completes an application during the "Lost Languages" challenge



Yvonne Cox & Melissa Ebbe apply body makeup during part 1 of the "Sinister Showdown" challenge



Melissa Ebbe brings a video game character to life during the "Art of Warcraft" challenge



Kaleb Lewis © Rob Seal touch up a makeup job during production of their short film



Melanie Licata airbrushes a character during the finale challenge

we just keep each other updated. I'll talk to the post supe or one of the editors and touch base with everybody, especially for the finale, because that's a different thing for audio as well. We had a film camera crew and a film sound crew, so I did some tests with them and recorded some ambience to make sure they were happy with that. If I do any change of workflow or technology, I'll do a test during the install. I'll go into post and make sure they're happy with the files I'm sending them. Most of the time, I'm turning drives in and not hearing from them unless there's a real problem. They're ingesting things every day, so usually if there's an issue, we know within 24 hours. On some shows I've worked on in the past, they've edited it six months after we've shot, but on this show, it happens so fast that we know immediately if there are any issues. And we've had the same editors as well, which I feel has really helped.

Were there any particularly challenging production situations in Season 10?

BD: The finale short films, because those were not only new to us, but they're so different from what we've done on this show before. For us it's wonderful because we've all made features before, and we're finally getting a chance to treat the creatures and the makeup the way we hope to every week, as far as lighting and camerawork. Like I mentioned, on account of fairness in judging, we sort of standardize everything, but this has been a whole different thing.

DM: We go to so many different locations when we do challenge setups. A lot of times I get to set and then find out I'm having RF issues, like if someone's broadcasting near us, so I'm chasing that more than anything. Also, we might scout a location and there's no wind blowing and everything seems fine, and then we get to the location and there are 40 mph winds. So we just adapt as we can. The great thing about this show is that we've all worked togeth-

er so long, as far as me and Bruce, and also lighting, grips, everybody. It's been almost the same crew every season, and we all get along and work together really, really well. Because on some shows I've been on in the past, I feel departments work against each other. On *Face Off*, we all have each other's backs, so I can go to grips, lighting, anybody, and we can work out the problem when we're on location, between us all.

Bruce, how do you approach the cinematography for the short film finale challenge?

BD: It's been a wonderful challenge and it's given me a chance to turn my crew loose, because they're just chomping at the bit to do this sort of thing. We love the makeups, and so to get a chance to come around and not treat them as display items and really work dramatically with them is great. We gave three different young directors the same script and asked them to turn it into their own story. They're all using the same location as well. I met with them and we were able to reference what they wanted to do, what their favorite horror films were, and do a lot of research.

Within the confines of a very short schedule, we were able to turn out films that looked significantly different. We were really on top of it and we moved quickly. Each of those shorts was shot in about six hours, over a period of two days, so I'm proud not only of the product, but that we were able to turn around and have a language that we could communicate with, and turn out something that nice.

I act as the DP not only for those short films but for the finale show as well, so it gives me a chance to operate the camera and be in there. That cuts some of the communication short, so I know what I'm doing without having to pass it through too many people. It's been great for me to work with so many different directors in a short amount of time. The films were all single camera and used Steadicam and Technocrane. We shot film-style, with grip, lighting, special effects, whatever it



Kaleb Lewis, Anna Cali, & Rob Seal provide makeup touch-ups during production



Johnny Leftwich adds detail to an eye-opening effects job on location



McKenzie Westmore, Glenn Hetrick, Ve Neill, Neville Page, & producer Jason Blum



Yvonne Cox @ Johnny Leftwich touch up a gory effect for their short film



DP Bruce Dorfman on location during the finale challenge



A winner is revealed after the season's final elimination challenge

takes. We've used lightning quite a few times. You need several humongous strobe units to make a realistic lightning effect. I don't know if any season has gone by without at least one lightning episode.

Danny, how do you approach the sound for the short films?

DM: I usually have one of my ENG guys be the film mixer, so he is with Bruce and with the film crew. While the films are going on we're still shooting behind-the-scenes and shooting content with the judges, who are watching and commenting as the films happen. I'm capturing content from the film and content from the TV show. Once the film shoot is done, we shoot the final elimination and the winner reveal. It's odd, because a lot of us come from film backgrounds. So it's like we're back doing film for a day and a half, and then we have to shift gears and do the TV show again. It's pretty interesting and it keeps us on our toes. For the finale, we had to reposition every single piece of equipment in a short amount of time, but we made it happen. We always do. I was really happy with the sound on the short films as well. I think my film guy did a really good job. There was quite a bit of dialogue compared to the season before, and it turned out really well.

BD: And we have to overcome our self-consciousness of actually appearing on screen.

DM: That's the other thing. Not me as much, because I stay out of the way in the trailer, but Bruce is on camera. Not only is he shooting, but he's on camera with our AD and my film sound guy for the whole film. So they're shooting a short film and they're being shot themselves.

BD: I've been mic'd, but we're getting away from mic'ing me from now on for sound. I'm monitoring multiple walkie channels because I'm still DP'ing the behind the scenes of myself, including the movie, so I'm hearing two directors, and I'm hearing my name quite a bit.

DM: And I'm trying to cover the short film and the TV show, so I'm trying to go between the two.

BD: I hope it doesn't sound like we're not enjoying ourselves [laughs].

DM: [Laughs] No, it's a lot of fun. We like a challenge. And I have to say I really think the format of the finale with the short films is great. Being able to see the makeups in a film setting is really great. I love the fact that they're doing that.

What do you like best about being a part of the show?

BD: I love the crew, I love the artistic work that the contestants do, and now I really love the finale, when I get to surprise everyone with some really different stuff. But although the show is episodic, it's different every time, and there's a different challenge each time that we're overcoming. We aren't the highest budget show out there, but we're hiding

our shortcomings and we're getting much better than I think anyone expects us to.

DM: I echo Bruce, I love the crew and everyone I'm working with, and I like the fact that we have head of department meetings constantly with the challenge department. Every time they hand out the rundown of a new challenge, I get to see technically what I have to do to make that episode work. I'm constantly changing equipment around, getting things in, making plans, adding cast, subtracting cast, adding music, whatever we have to do. I've done a lot of shows where it's the same thing day in, day out, but on this show, it's always something completely different. We have to be on our game all the time and I enjoy that. 🙌