



The Mayflower: History as Drama

Many of us remember the Pilgrims from grade school plays or as a boring chapter that was required in high school. But far from that, it is an incredible human drama brought to the screen in an epic three-hour special by The History Channel. *Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower*, produced by Lone Wolf Documentary Group of Portland, Maine, premieres this November as one of the network's marquee programming events. Styled in the look and feel of a feature film, it almost seems inappropriate to describe the program as a 'docu-drama.' Helping to create that cinematic look was the task of Cinefilm in Atlanta where the final color correction was performed.

The production went to great lengths to capture the drama of this small band of religious rebels and their epic journey from England to Holland and across the Atlantic to the New World. Shooting took place on location in Massachusetts at Plimoth Plantation and in Maryland and Virginia, as well as in Europe. The cast features Royal Shakespeare Company actors as well as members of the Wampanoag Indian tribe. With a special of this scale and complexity it is easy for costs to sky-rocket.

"In an effort to keep costs down, we made the decision early on to shoot in HD rather than film," explains Writer-Producer-Director Lisa Wolfinger as she oversees the color correction in the main suite at Cinefilm. "We shot with the new Sony HDV camera and lighted as if it were film with a dark, cinematic look. Some of the scenes in the hull of the Mayflower II (a full replica of the original) were lit only with lantern light to give it an authentic feel. We wanted to be sure viewers 'felt' the claustrophobia the original colonists would have felt in the bowels of the ship at sea. But shooting in such low light can be tricky, it can get very muddy fast. We took a big risk counting on color correcting to get the final look we wanted. Colorist Ron Anderson was able to bring out the detail in the blacks (which you get with film) and give it a very cinematic look, the HDV material looks remarkable."

Special adapters were used with the Sony HDV camera to allow the standard zoom lense to accommodate 35mm primes. "That allowed us to create a shallower depth of field which is often critical to a cinematic look," notes Tony Bacon, First AD and Co-Editor. "We then converted the 1080i HDV mpeg stream to HD-SDI with a Mirada converter, and digitized the show into the Avid Adrenaline. Third party film motion and grain effects were added, before the final color correction at Cinefilm. It's a very post intensive path, but I think people will be stunned to see how good HDV can look."

It seems a bit unusual for a Maine production company not to be finishing in Boston or New York, but not so with Lone Wolf. "We discovered Ron (Senior Colorist Ron Anderson) several years ago when working with an Atlanta DP on our *Deep Sea Detectives* series," said Wolfinger with a smile, "and whether we shoot on film or tape, we wouldn't finish a special now without him. The HDV material looked good to begin with, but Ron really pushed the look to a whole new level. It was as though he lifted a 'haze' off the HD video to make it look like 35mm film. You just can't get the same color results from non-linear editors." "Lone Wolf's projects are always exciting to be a part of," replies Anderson, "not only for the technical challenges, but the scope and quality of the content. The control

you have with the daVinci 2K using the Colorist Toolbox is especially important when working from an edited tape master to create a film look.”

Though much of the Pilgrims’ look is ‘dark’ – from the clothing, to the ships hull, to the cold winter scenes – there are dramatic and visual contrasts with the vivid colors of the scenes in Elizabethan England and Holland during that period. When watching the special, you forget it’s a documentary as you get absorbed into the drama. Sure, there are noted academics and historians adding commentary, but they feel more like the ‘Witnesses’ intercut in Warren Beaty’s feature “Reds”. In more ways than one, the producers have cast the Mayflower and our nations founding in a whole new dramatic light. It’s our history interpreted as drama...or more appropriately, the drama of our history.



The interior hull of the Mayflower II along with the dark clothing of the Pilgrims illustrates the challenge of holding detail in the blacks in the HD color correction of this dramatic special for the History Channel.



The producers went to great lengths to authentically recreate the Pilgrim’s meetings with the Wampanoag native people. Being sure the subtle colors and moods of these scenes were maintained was a challenge for Cinefilm colorist, Ron Anderson, correcting tape-to-tape in the DVCPRO HD format.

(cont.)



The drama of the Mayflower crossing was not all dark moods as evidenced by this scene in the courts of England. Writer-Director Lisa Wolfinger, right, sets up a shot with actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company.