



# SHOOTING STAR

Andrew Conder ACS SOC  
catches his breath after wrapping  
a whirlwind first season of the  
new Australian fantasy series  
*The Bureau of Magical Things*.

- by *Sam Cleveland*







Andrew Conder ACS SOC behind the camera on location with 'The Bureau of Magical Things' - PHOTO Supplied

The Gold Coast-based Cinematographer shot twenty episodes in eighty-six days, for prolific Queensland producer Jonathan M. Shiff, who's sold childrens' television to more than 170 countries.

Conder had operated the camera (and DOP'ed individual episodes) on previous Shiff series including *The Elephant Princess* (2008) where Liam Hemsworth and Margot Robbie got breaks, and *H2O: Just Add Water* (2006-2010). He was booked to DOP the full season of *The Bureau of Magical Things* once the decision was made to give the new series a bolder, more international look.

In the show, a teenage girl name Kyra (Brisbane's Kimie Tsukakoshi) discovers a secret world of magic all around her, and becomes embroiled in a hidden struggle between elves, fairies and humans. The key visual challenges on *The Bureau of Magical Things*, says Conder, were defining distinct looks for the two worlds the story takes place in. The mundane world and the fairy realm, and delivering on the producers' mandate to deliver a more dynamic product on a tight television schedule.

Conder started in the early 1980s as a Lighting Cameraman on Seven Network's *Wombat* (1979-1990), then entered the film industry as a Second Assistant Camera for David Egby ACS on the Queensland-shot features *Survive the Savage Sea* (1992) and *Fortress* (1992).

While developing his own cinematography, Conder also progressed a parallel career as one of Australia's most respected camera and Steadicam operators, shooting for

heavyweights including Don McAlpine ACS ASC and Darius Khondji AFC ASC. He was accredited by the US-based Society of Operating Cameramen (SOC) in 2007 and got his ACS letters a year later.

In the lead-up to *The Bureau of Magical Things*, Conder had shot four Queensland feature films including *Punishment* (2008), *Bullets for the Dead* (2015), *Nice Package* (2016) and *Red Billabong* (2016), as well as the ABC docu-drama *Blue Water Empire* (2017) on the Torres Strait.

**AC** Congratulations on *The Bureau of Magical Things*, how did you come to get the job?

**AC** I'd operated on quite a few of Jonathan Shiff's previous series and DOP'ed a few episodes, then the *Bureau* directors requested a new look for the show. They wanted fresh eyes and a different approach – a distinctive look from previous Shiff series – and they knew I could work quickly and handle the show's increased visual effects component.

**“Lots more camera movement is part of a new look.”**

Netflix, video-on-demand suppliers and broadcasters want nicer-looking product. Audiences expect it these days. We're outputting at 2K and the show doesn't look like anything Shiff has done before, and the financiers and Shiff are loving what they're seeing.

Lots more camera movement is part of a new look. Shiff's





*The young cast of 'The Bureau of Magical Things' - PHOTO Supplied*

previous shows have been quite formal, but on this one I've been able to move the camera a lot more, mostly on cranes and Steadicam.

**AC** When did you fall in love with Steadicam?

**AC** I don't think I've ever been in love with Steadicam! (laughs). I love good Steadicam operating, but I didn't want to be 'the Steadicam guy', I wanted to get work as a DOP, so it was an operating tool I avoided for a long time, but eventually I had to add that string to my bow as I was being overlooked for jobs without it.

**“We used the BlackMagic URSA Mini. It's a great little camera and the very best match for the ARRI Alexa look I've seen.”**

**AC** Did *Bureau's* VFX component play a big part in your process?

**AC** We've had to deal with a relentless amount of VFX, it's actually massively influenced the look of the show within itself, just because the design and style of the effects is such a dominant element in the picture.

And then technically I've had to consider the effects component on so many shots... it's played into the sizing, the blocking, the shot selection. I want to say the other big

contributor to the look of the show is production designer Michael Rumpff, his sets have been amazing and his work has made my job so much easier.

They planned a new look for the series – a more international feel – and a lot of work went into the main magical library interior. We started with five weeks on locations while they were still building the set, and that arrangement did cost us some lead time planning how to light it so we had to work out an efficient lighting plan to do the set justice.

**AC** Was the ARRI Alexa Classic your first choice?

**AC** I actually wanted to shoot on the VariCam because of its low-light capacity. My initial plan was to shoot natural light with less supplementary lighting, cut the lighting budget and move quicker through our days. We scouted Brisbane city locations before we settled on the Gold Coast.

I wanted to find a contrasting look between the human and the fairy worlds of the story by capturing harder and colder light in the city with reflections from the buildings. But the visual effects department had a solid Alexa workflow in place – Jonathan's used Alexa for the past four or five years, before that he shot 16mm – and as the show had a heavier VFX component than any other Shiff series that's where we ended up.

**AC** Did your approach change on the Alexa?



Behind the scenes on 'The Bureau of Magical Things' - PHOTO Supplied

**AC** I love the Alexa, it's got a great sensor and it's beautiful with skin tones. I'm shooting young actors with flawless skin so I've been able to get away with no filtration for the non-magical, real-world scenes. I needed to give the two story worlds distinctive looks and I tested a bunch of different softening filters to give the magical world a nice romantic glow.

I ended up using Tiffen's Warm Pro-Mist, a filter I used in the 1980s when early video cameras looked really cold and hard. Something about that old style looked the most 'magical' to me. It really softens the elves and fairy characters and makes the highlights bloom.

Here and there I even used an old-school eight-point star filter that pinged the highlights out like starbeams. That's not a look you've see around much since *Young Talent Time!*

**AC** What was the volume of work like on *Bureau*?

**AC** We did twenty 30-minute episodes in 86 days, averaging fifty setups a day. There was some studio work but largely Gold Coast locations and we've had pretty easy access, Gold Coast City Council has helped a lot. In Brisbane we built a really nice exterior to the show's magical bookshop at the base of the Story Bridge.

Making our days came down again and again to the camera department, the grips and the lighting teams. They kept up with the nonstop pace every day and always had the forethought to have gear ready ahead of time. I can't really

remember a single time over the season we were waiting on them for anything.

**AC** Where are you doing the stagework?

**AC** Schiff shoots in his own warehouse studio on the Gold Coast. For *The Bureau of Magical Things* it held about a half a dozen sets and huge green screen. The big challenge is that the warehouse doesn't have a gantry so there's nowhere to hang lights and they're quite big sets.

**“Certainly operating gives you an incredible relationship and rapport with the talent.”**

Mick O'Brien (Gaffer) and I solved that on the main library set by using four scissor lifts with a Dinette (12 x 1K lamps) on each so they could be re-positioned and gelled or diffused easily and efficiently. These rigs also meant that I could go from 1K of light to 12K of light on each scissor lift at the flick of a switch on the switchboard.

The solution gave us a big American-style system with lights everywhere, but it was quite cost-effective and efficient. It's also given the directors freedom with the actors. I try not to light from the floor anyway, so the scissor lifts give me quick options to light from above.





Andrew Conder ACS SOC on location with 'The Bureau of Magical Things' - PHOTO Supplied

**AC** What's your basic camera setup on the show?

**AC** Alexas for A and B and we're almost always on two cameras for coverage. C camera is the Steadicam. I wanted a body on the Steadicam all the time to give us flexibility and keep our pace up. We couldn't get a third Alexa so we used the BlackMagic URSA Mini. It's a great little camera and the very best match for the ARRI Alexa look I've seen. We're very happy with it.

We had zoom lenses on everything to save time, and zooms are much more like adjustable primes now. They track better and breath less. There's almost no compromise in the image.

**AC** How has your background operating shaped your work as a cinematographer?

**AC** Certainly operating gives you an incredible relationship and rapport with the talent. I find that on all my jobs I get close to the actors and that's developed from working long hours together in very close proximity. The biggest professional advantage for me was the opportunity to work with other cinematographer's and see how they light and choose the camera for the job.

Whenever I worked for a prominent cinematographer I researched their work; if you go in cold, you don't know if you're doing the right thing to suit their approach or style. So my lighting has evolved over time by working with these guys, seeing how they light and incorporate that into my next job.

To be honest, what you learn as you're coming up is their

demeanour on set, the politics of being a cinematographer. All the best DOPs are very calm and very pleasant, and they get great respect from their crew because of their nature.

**AC** Who were the big influencers?

**AC** I learned a lot about lighting operating for Darius Kondji AFC ASC on a film called *The Ruins* (2008), but his style was very different to Don McAlpine ACS ASC, who I shot *Peter Pan* (2003) with on the Gold Coast. I like to think I can blend the best of their techniques into something that's a little bit my own. From McAlpine I learnt about soft light and colour separation. With Kondji I learnt about the darkness, and not being afraid of the dark.

**“Operating gives you an incredible relationship and rapport with the talent.”**

Some of my early work in Brisbane was as an Assistant Camera for now ACS National President Ron Johanson OAM ACS. He has this incredibly soft touch and from him I learned about lighting talent, especially the women and being very kind to the lead actresses.

Another big early figure in my career was David Eggby ACS. I worked on *Fortress* after shooting for Seven Network with basically a station wagon full of gear. Eggby was the first big-time cinematographer I worked for, so seeing him confidently

light these huge sci-fi sets with huge lights cemented him in my head as the blockbuster Hollywood guy, this figure I could aspire to become.

**AC** Are you still tuned in to good operating when you see it?

**AC** I've been around around a long time, so I think I've seen every style come and go. Nothing's ever really new, just recombinations of old ideas. Sometimes done well, sometimes not.

For a while shooting action was about shaking the camera around, maybe it started as a way to hide an actor's stage-fighting ability and caught on from there. Lately longer takes have come back, until you get films such as *Birdman* or *The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance* (2014), a whole film made to look like one take.

**AC** Do you bring a style to your operating?

**AC** You can't beat classic framing and good classic storytelling. Fundamental film language is understood by audiences all over the world so maybe it's not something to muck with too much.

**“Fundamental film language is understood by audiences all over the world so, maybe it's not something to muck with too much.”**

David 'Daisy' Williamson was one of my mentors, I shot B camera on *Crocodile Dundee in Los Angeles* (2001) and *Jindabyne* (2006) with him. He's probably Australia's best operator in my opinion and my style of operating came from how he worked. He's very good at blocking action and in particular he never over-operates.

**AC** Over-operates?

**AC** There's a tendency I see with newer operators to over-operate and not just leave it alone. You even see wide shots that move unnecessarily. Better gripping gear that lets you move the camera more easily – Movis and Easyrigs and drones – has probably made it worse.

As you get more experience, you tend to let the actors move within the frame a bit, rather than force the camera into

an unnecessary move. My tendency now is to spend time making beautiful frames and letting the actors play in them.

**AC** Has the decision to stay based in Queensland influenced your career?

**AC** It is quite political up here and a lot of good technicians have had to leave the state to get bigger opportunities. You always feels like you're behind the 8-ball because of your post code. I started getting good traction as a cinematographer just as the Australian Dollar rose and production in Queensland slowed down, so that was frustrating. I certainly like shooting here more than anywhere else: the weather, the locations, the hard-working crews.

We do get a good amount of big Hollywood films and smaller domestic jobs to keep us going, it's just harder to get the break because producers tend to look interstate for senior crew and heads of department. Then it gets harder and harder as the credits stack up for interstate crews and they're booked on subsequent big jobs.

**AC** Do you think access to HD consumer gear has levelled the playing field in terms of industry entry?

**AC** The digital world has opened the doors to a lot of younger guys shooting now on small HD cameras. The Sony A7 series is incredible. Some of these guys are great at lighting and shooting, but knowing how to run a set is key.

I think there is a learning curve to understanding that the job is as much about completing a schedule, running a crew and solving problems efficiently when they come up. You can't talk about a problem for an hour, you've got to fix it immediately.

You might be able to make beautiful images with consumer gear, but often these guys are working as solo operator / DOPs and not learning how a camera and lighting department integrate. Creatively, our job is about finding a look that fits the story, not just image-making.

**AC** Well that's a tidy soundbite...

**AC** There's a mantra I stole from David Fincher that influences my shooting more and more... **“People can forget that the art of photography is first and foremost about manipulating emotions. All the ones and zeroes and pristine glass and titanium fittings do not matter unless they help to impact the viewers feelings.”**

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*Andrew Conder ACS SOC on location with 'The Bureau of Magical Things' - PHOTO Supplied*