



Size Matters

WITH COSTS SHRINKING,
FILMMAKERS IN POST
PUT THE DI IN INDIE

By Debra Kaufman

‘We were shooting in the desert,” producer-director Richard Brandes says of his experience making Brandes Films International’s upcoming horror feature “Penny Dreadful.” “It couldn’t decide if it wanted to rain or to shine: In one take, the sun would peek out; the next, it would be behind the clouds.”

But Brandes and his crew did not worry.

“I knew I’d be able to do something about that in postproduction,” he says. “(Digital intermediate) gives you greater leeway than it ever did in the past, and I was able to take creative license with the color palette.”

The key to Brandes’ tale is that “Dreadful” is a low-budget independent film. After years of being used primarily on major-studio tentpole movies — and by a handful of highly specialized facilities relying on proprietary software and hardware, banks of expensive processors and teams of trained computer geeks and color scientists — DI’s previously high costs are being democratized.

Filmmakers now know they can afford DI — the Photoshop of filmmaking, through which every frame of a project is scanned into the digital realm and color-corrected — and that affords them unprecedented power at the click of a few buttons, within their respective

budgetary constraints. The trickle-down of high-end technology has been DI solutions that do not cost a bundle, and post houses suffering the twin burden of upgrading for high-definition and coping with ever-thinner profits have jumped at the chance to offer DI services, potentially a quite-profitable revenue stream.

“It has certainly become a lot more accessible because the demand is there,” Visionbox Media Group president and owner Chris Miller says. “In the last year, it has graduated to nontechnical directors knowing about and demanding DIs.”

Hollywood-based PlasterCity Digital Post has taken cost-effective DI to the nth degree: Basing its work flow on the popular indie desktop editing system Final Cut Pro, the facility is using FCP plug-in Silicon Color FinalTouch for DI services.

“FCP costs \$1,000, and FinalTouch costs \$5,000,” PlasterCity post-production supervisor Michael Cioni says. “We souped up the system a little bit more, but we’re using off-the-shelf, software-based technology.”

Through a custom-built storage area network, PlasterCity can output signals to a digital cinema with a 30-foot screen and Christie 2K projector. Cioni’s company only possesses enough storage and bandwidth to handle one DI at a time, but that works fine for cost-effective indie projects lined up for less-expensive DIs.

Competition among facilities to offer lower-cost services is a boon to indie filmmakers. “Scan prices have become negotiable, like any other post service,” says Miller, whose company has post-supervised numerous DIs, including a “very low cost” one for Gaiam Media and Awakened Media’s upcoming drama release “Illusion.” “There are so many vendors that it has reached critical mass of competition.”

The trick to keeping costs down for facilities like PlasterCity is not only purchasing off-the-shelf software but also keeping resolution at HD’s less-than-1K, rather than the typical 2K or 4K used for studio features.

“Most of these movies are headed to small screens and DVD,” Cioni

SAVE IT FOR LATER

Thanks to digital intermediate technology, directors such as “Illusion’s” Michael Goorjian, left, and “Penny Dreadful’s” Richard Brandes (pictured with “Dreadful” star Rachel Miner, also inset) are enjoying freer rein in shooting.



says. "There's no need for a 2K or 4K DI: The difference between HD and 2K is imperceptible on most average-sized screens."

Visionbox CEO and producer John Manulis agrees that top-of-the-line 4K DI is unnecessary for indie films. Whereas the average major-studio DI costs \$250,000, a more-affordable 2K DI "can be had for \$120,000 almost anywhere in town," he says. "And if it's an HD SR DI, you can do one for just below \$100,000."

Theatrical trailer house Karma Bank jumped on the DI bandwagon after founder and principal Preston Kuntz realized that he and his staff already were performing mini-DI processes by finishing trailers using Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master. Rather than purchasing the least-expensive off-the-shelf tools, though, Kuntz invested in two of the industry's top DI systems: the Discreet Lustre for color-correction and the Discreet Smoke for editorial conform.

"It's competitive out there for DIs," says Kuntz, adding that his facility is finishing work on "Dreadful." "To me, it's all about (return on investment): I'm going to be able to let the filmmakers be artists, and I want them to have the best equipment they can have."

Founded in 2001, iO Film began as a digital optical-title house then built a DI pipeline. The boutique facility has worked on 30 DIs to date, including those for Lions Gate's May release "Crash" and the upcoming Barnet Bain Films production "The Celestine Prophecy."

iO went online in 2003 as a beta site for the Nucoda Film Master, according to iO president and co-founder Tim Krubsack, whose facility also boasts two proprietary scanners. "Yes, the Nucoda Film Master is lower-cost, but what attracted us to it is that it's open-architecture," he says. "We're able to customize it as we like, and we can tie it directly into our iPerf proprietary data-management program."

Iridas SpeedGrade, another off-the-shelf DI option, is not a bottom-basement solution. Nonetheless, for \$50,000 a license, the color-correction software allows some post facilities to charge a great deal less than those that boast the highest-end equipment and research-and-development-heavy proprietary solutions, according to Iridas spokesman Eric Philpott. "It's possible to put together a powerful color-grading suite — including storage from Globalstor, for example — for less than \$100,000," he says.

But the Wild West of competing DI solutions and facilities means caveat emptor, especially for nontechnical filmmakers.

"If you don't know the specific processes and personnel to assemble and how to most effectively design the process and manage the work flow, you're just wasting whatever money you're spending on DI," Manulis says. "'Garbage in, garbage out' definitely applies here."

That warning might make some indie filmmakers more comfortable at big-name DI facilities offering lower-cost services. Not to be out-done, then, some large facilities have devised parallel tracks for features with smaller budgets.

LaserPacific Media's low-budget inDI work flow uses an HD telecine "with some TLC," president Leon Silverman says. "We scan the full dynamic range of the negative to a HD SR tape. Color-correction is applied to the original HD scan and an eventual film-out."

Technicolor Creative Services offers a "basket of services" for a fixed price, according to Marco Bario, vp at the company's postproduction unit. "It's unsupervised, and we ask for a bit of flexibility in the schedule," he says. "But it can cut the price by 30%-40%."

Likewise, Post Logic Studios is turning two of its telecine rooms into mini-DI suites. "We're trying to broaden our outreach to the market with a more-affordable configuration," managing director Kelvin Duckett says. "For the cost of a projector and a few other aesthetic changes, we can make DI accessible to our lower-budgeted films."

DI thus is on a fast track to ubiquity because indie filmmaking, with its on-the-fly procedures and budgeting, requires innovative solutions — and the market finally is waking up to the possibilities. ■



iO Film