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SUCK

D. Gregor Hagey csc
Shoots Vampires in *Suck*

Paul Sarossy csc, bsc
and Atom Egoyan
Together Again on *Chloe*



A Tribute to Alan King ★ John Banovich csc Uncovers *Sacred Secrets*

Cutting
through the
RED Bull:
D. Gregor Hagey Talks
about Shooting

SUCK

with Director
Rob Stefaniuk

By Micol Marotti

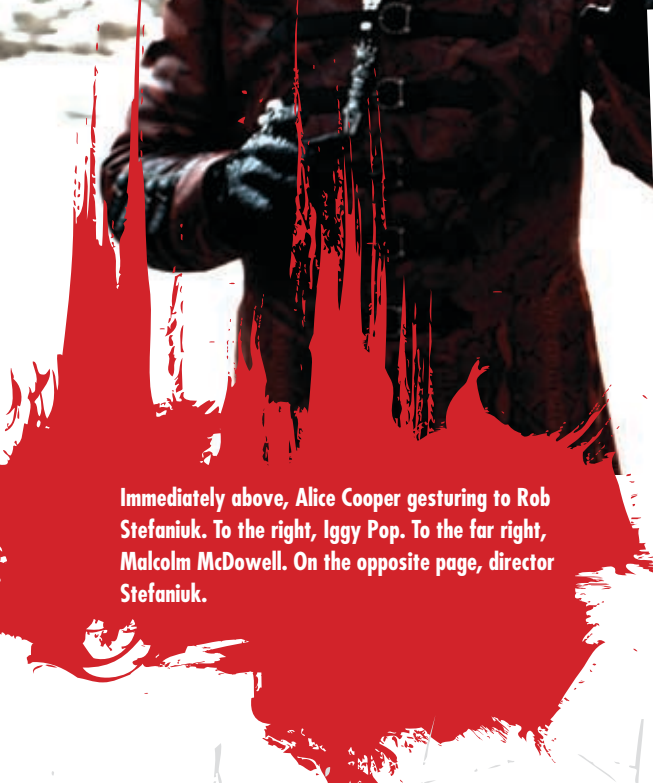


Since hitting the scene in August 2007, the Red One camera market has been bullish with its promise of matching 35 mm resolution without the huge budget. Cinematographers have enthusiastically worked through Red's kinks along the way in the hopes of fulfilling that promise – and probably no one more than D. Gregor Hagey csc. Considered the 'King of the Red,' he has not only worked its quirks but on his latest feature *Suck*, a vampire, rock-band comedy written and directed by Rob Stefaniuk (of *Phil the Alien* fame), Hagey has pushed one of the camera's main shortcomings to generate a never-before-seen technique that may convert others to Red's charge.

"One of the technical weaknesses of the Red is that when heavy NDs are used the shadow areas can take on a magenta hue because of the sensor's sensitivity to IR. When I was testing with the Red, I noticed that under infrared light colours would alter and textures changed dramatically. When Rob approached me that he had written a scene in the film where the lead actor is 'tripping out' on a bad Ecstasy trip, I thought of exploiting Red's sensitivity IR and pushing it even farther by shooting the scene completely in infrared lighting. I used a neutral density filter to block out the visible light and then put a 10K full spot on him – he was sweating heavily, but it was perfect for the scene. I also used 5Ks and 2Ks at full spot," explains Hagey.



“Rob wanted his vampire rock-band film to be an homage to other great films like *Nosferatu*, which used shadows and light to enhance the story and used old-fashioned special effects that you can’t achieve with CGI.”
D. Gregor Hagey csc



Immediately above, Alice Cooper gesturing to Rob Stefaniuk. To the right, Iggy Pop. To the far right, Malcolm McDowell. On the opposite page, director Stefaniuk.



The visual trick that Hagey achieves is that the skin tones are smooth in texture and there is almost a luminous glow to the skin. To understand the effect better, he likens it to camping memories of pressing a flashlight close to your skin so that it becomes almost wax-like in appearance. Hagey then punctuated the drama by using an HMI light to sweep the room so that flashes of normal colour are visible in the scene.

“It looks terrifying, because the flashes of normal colour are on the bright red, blood-stained mouths of the band members while the rest of their face and body have an ethereal quality about them – so that the audience has this jarring visual cue that all’s not well with the band, at the same time as the lead actor realizes they have become vampires,” he says.

Hagey admits that shooting in infrared not only heightened the drama on camera, but on set too. “For the scene our B camera was two stops less sensitive to infrared light so that was a bit of an issue. And monitoring with the Red also remains a bit of challenge in normal conditions, but shooting in infrared meant

that I had to depend on the monitors to actually see what I was shooting. In this case I used the Panasonic’s 1700 HD field monitor with true 720p, but you never really know the full effect until the 2K DI,” he says.

And what did Stefaniuk think about shooting some of the biggest music celebs in the world in the dark? “I trust Gregor, he’s really the king of the Red. When we worked together on *Phil the Alien* [Hagey was the DOP] we learned a lot about each other’s styles and how to stretch our budget and still make it look good. But you know, on a tight shooting schedule and when we have limited time with people like Moby, Iggy Pop and Alice Cooper, yeah, it’s a bit of a risk because no one’s ever done this, and we didn’t have too much time to experiment,” says Stefaniuk.

To convince the skeptics, Hagey and Stefaniuk decided to shoot an elaborate test. “Knowing that 40 per cent of the film would be shot essentially in the dark, we decided together to shoot a short film in similar conditions to show the producers what it could look like and what we could achieve,” comments Stefaniuk.

"Rob's films are never conventional," says Hagey. "Rob and I had been talking about *Suck* for four years and it looked like we could only afford to shoot on HD, but when my brother's Red camera arrived in 2007 we decided to shoot a short film [*Feel My Pain*] to test this new format to see if it could work for us. Rob wanted his vampire rock-band film to be an homage to other great films like *Nosferatu*, which used shadows and light to enhance the story and used old-fashioned special effects that you can't achieve with CGI. The test looked great and a year later everything finally came together for *Suck* and we were happily shooting it on Red."

Stefaniuk achieved some of his special effects with the help of Neil Burns (*Edison and Leo*) whose stop-action animation and models added another challenge for Hagey. "Neil's animation definitely added another layer to the production. We worked very closely on matching the lighting so we could transition smoothly between the animated map sequences, and the stop motion action as the band travels from town to town in the story," explains Hagey.

Smooth transitions are a trademark of Hagey's. Starting his career 16 years ago as a PA on the feature film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), he was so impressed by Conrad Hall's work on the film that he decided to take up cinematography instead of a career as a director. He has since then completed more than 200 projects as a DOP in documentaries, feature films, shorts and television series. He has garnered numerous awards and nominations including four CSC Award nominations – two just this year for his work on the series *Mayday: Fatal Distraction* (Discovery Channel) and a music video for the Randy Rogers Band.

"I guess my career has had a unique trajectory, but with every project for me, it's been ultimately about finding a film where, through my cinematography, I can create visual unity with the story so that the characters and the mood are enhanced by the shooting," he says.

"Gregor goes above and beyond what a normal guy should be able to do with lighting," laughs Stefaniuk. "*Suck* looks like a more expensive movie than my \$3-million budget. Gregor gave me the option to add so much more to the film because I don't have to worry about the look of the film. I know it sounds cliché, but films for me are a collaborative effort and it just wouldn't work out if we didn't respect each other."

After pushing the Red's limits on *Suck*, what is Hagey's verdict on the outcome? "I like this camera a lot. 35-mm film is still the gold standard, but the Red compares quite favourably. The reality of our times is that our industry is always looking for more cost-effective ways of shooting. This is a beautiful looking format that can offer filmmakers a more affordable option. And the mobility of the Red is hard to beat too," he concludes.

Next up for the busy cinematographer is completing two comedies for director Dan Eisen, *Child Wild*, written by and starring Harland Williams, and *Shark City* starring Vivica A. Fox and Corey Haim, as well as shooting second unit on the series *Flashpoint* (which shoots on 35 mm Panavision cameras) and on select episodes *The Border* (which shoots on S16 on the Arriflex SR3).

Suck, starring Malcolm McDowell, Jessica Paré, Dave Foley and Rob Stefaniuk, is scheduled for a release October 30 by Capri Releasing.

