

# Visual Perspectives

## DPs Reflect On Their Varied HD Experiences, New Creative Opportunities

By Robert Goldrich

Lexus' long running campaign slogan, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfection," is a mantra that cinematographer Jordan Valenti knows all too well not only in terms of the high standard of artistry he sets for himself, but also his experience over the years shooting Lexus commercials for Team One Advertising, El Segundo, Calif.

Over the past couple of years, though, that pursuit has entailed navigating a different course—two-minute documentaries that are shown on the Lexus website, on TiVo On Demand, on airlines and in theaters.

In 2006, Valenti—who is repped by the Sheldon Prosnit Agency, Los Angeles—made his first foray into the brave new media world, lensing three of these two-minute documentaries in Paris, which were directed by Jeffrey DeChausse of Boxer Films, Los Angeles. Each mini-documentary in this *Science of Desire* series profiled an artisan sharing insights about his art. The individual subjects in each piece were: Jean-Michel Doriez, a perfumer with Jean Patou, Paris; Pierre Marcolini, a master chocolatier and Christian Pol-Roger, a fourth-generation vintner. Their passion for perfection in what they do was subtly tied to that which goes into the making of the Lexus ES 350 automobile.

Valenti landed the branded content assignment in part due to Team One's comfort level in having worked with him in the past on assorted commercials. And director DeChausse had a similar comfort zone with Valenti in that they had collaborated previously on varied spots, though not for Lexus.

### Safety first

Most recently, Valenti shot the second series of Lexus documentaries, this time portraying the concept of extreme safety. One of the two-minute films profiles a French ski patrol that uses explosives to prevent avalanches in the Alps. The second film features a Swiss master bridge designer who discusses new high-tech methods for preventing bridge failures. A subtle link to Lexus is made at the end of

each film with the presentation of a Lexus RX luxury utility vehicle that too is equipped with advanced safety features that help prevent accidents.

Both films were directed by Boxer's Danny T and showcase an approach to "active safety." Whereas ordinary safety measures help you to survive an accident, active safety helps to prevent accidents from happening.

Both documentaries are engaging. For example, bridges are revealed in a unique way, starting with abstract features until it gradually dawns on viewers that they are looking at the architectural marvel of a bridge. The documentary features interviews with Christian Mann, a renowned Swiss bridge designer known for his work in structural analysis, and representatives of Smartec, a Swiss company that has developed fiber optic sensors for bridge monitoring.

### HD lensing

For Valenti, all the Lexus documentaries involved a mix of shooting HD and 35mm film. HD was used primarily for capturing the documentary subjects while 35mm was deployed for Lexus vehicle running footage.

Valenti shot HD with Panasonic's HVX200 camera and found the experience gratifying in that it was the ideal means by which to capture his documentary

subjects. "It's a small and unimposing camera and you can shoot continuously, which was perfect for this particular kind of filmmaking," relates Valenti. "The people being profiled could be themselves; they didn't feel intruded upon. This is especially important for people who aren't professional actors. This setting made it easier to have a conversation with each amazing person."

Valenti adds that this form of HD shooting—sans the baggage of large crews, trucks and lights—to be "very freeing, opening up a different world. It was just me, a camera and my director free to move about and take any opportunity we saw to advance the story, with the help of a small creative agency ensemble. Also freeing was the fact that these documentaries were a departure from the advertising norm—we weren't necessarily just shooting to sell a product. We were relating this product to the world in the sense of telling stories about fascinating, unique, interesting people. It was a bold and brave approach by the client and the agency, opening up new avenues creatively."

### Toolbox

While he enjoyed the HD lensing experience, Valenti feels the need to put it into the proper perspective. "Although we are undergoing an incredible revolution and exciting time in terms of technology and creativity, HD just

provides us with additional tools as cinematographers. I have a bit of a problem with the thinking that this is going to replace film. There are times when it [HD] is appropriate for a project and it's a different toolset we all need to know. But it's not the be all and end all. For me making the HD and 35 mm work together in the Lexus films was a tremendously positive experience.

"It's like playing a musical instrument," he continues. "You learn, practice and study but you need to forget about the instrument ultimately, get out of the way of it and play. People are getting too caught up in the instrument, in the technical nitty gritty. No matter what the instrument, it still comes down for the cinematographer to composition, lighting and expressing the intent of the director and telling a story visually. That never changes. Like playing a musical instrument, you have to let the universe play through you. Let that creative inspiration take over."



Scenes from the Lexus' Bridge documentary shot by Jordan Valenti