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INCORPORATED

Luc Montpellier csc Crafts a Dark Future

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By Fanen Chiahemen

The original Syfy series *Incorporated* (airing on Showcase in Canada) follows the travails of Ben Larson (Sean Teale), a young executive living in the year 2073 – where mega-corporations have unlimited power – as he infiltrates a dangerous biotech company to save the woman he loves.

“Essentially, the show is about a potential dark future,” DP Luc Montpellier csc explains. “It’s taking issues with the environment and government and with big business and consumerism of today, but amplifying it to show us a possible future for society if our world keeps going the way it’s going. And that’s really what I gravitated to the most when I read it. Essentially, a bunch of environmental crises have happened, natural resources are very much treated like currency, green spaces and everything natural has become a very in-demand commodity. Countries we’d consider developing today have been turned into shacks and shanty towns. The classes have been more deeply divided and the middle class has been pretty much eroded.”

Incorporated’s executive producers include the Oscar-winning duo Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, and the show also stars Eddie Ramos (*Teen Wolf*), Dennis Haysbert (*24*) and Julia Ormond (*Legends of the Fall*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Mad Men*).

Although it takes place in the future, the show’s creators and co-executive producers Àlex Pastor and David Pastor – the Spanish filmmaking brothers whose credits include *The Last Days* and *Self/less* – still wanted to base the look in a reality that would be recognizable to today’s audiences, Montpellier says. “So in the show you see things that are a bit futuristic, but it’s always based on what we all know. And that’s what I loved the most about it. It was a real access point for me,” he says.

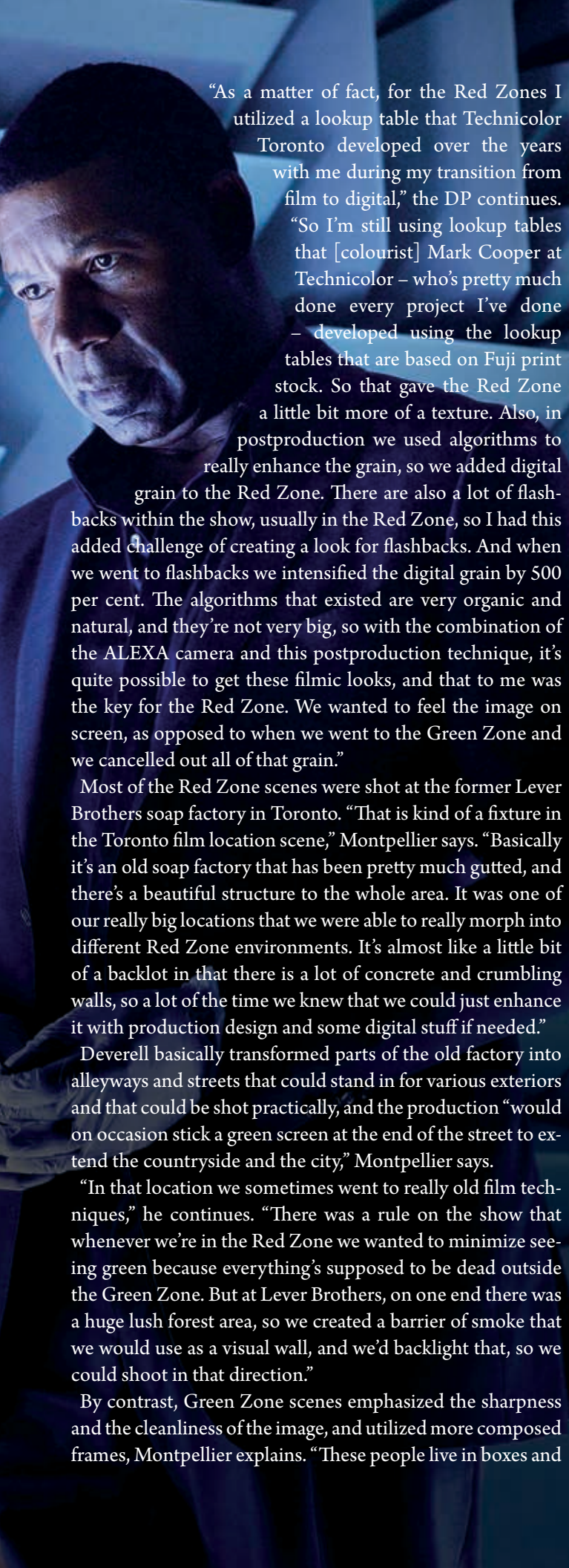
Using the pilot – shot by Ben Nott – as a template to build upon, Montpellier and the producers created a future world in which humanity is divided into two societies – the Green

Zone, inhabited by the rich, and the Red Zone, inhabited by the poor. “All the corporate private communities – very much like you see in the U.S. right now, where there are gated communities with guards, some of these corporations even have their own private armies – those are called Green Zones, where everything is clean and clinical and controlled and beautiful and idealized,” the DP explains. “And everything outside of those walled cities are called Red Zones, which are the shanty towns with all the poverty, essentially.”

Montpellier was instrumental in developing the look of the Red Zone, which was only minimally ventured into in the pilot. “The Pastor brothers wanted to really explore that world and make it very immediate and treacherous and real so that you got a real sense of what it was like to live outside the Green Zone. So that was something we really developed to an extreme so that when we go from the Green to the Red Zone you have a real departure,” Montpellier says.

“It really was a dream scenario because the light was a lot more honest and raw and real in the Red Zone, and in the Green Zone, it was very controlled and very much like Apple computers. It was clean but also very cold in a sense. There’s not really any warmth and people are essentially dressed in the same tones. The whole Green Zone had an extremely limited palette that Tamara Deverell, the production designer, beautifully designed. It’s a cool, gray, steel environment, as opposed to the Red Zone where it was all about the earth tones, red and passion tones and chaos.”

To further delineate the two worlds, Red Zone scenes were shot handheld with lightweight zoom lenses, while Green Zone scenes were shot on sticks and dolly. “The Red Zones were supposed to be chaotic, so it was good to keep those a bit less planned because you were able to let the camera be looser, the actors were looser and they could walk anywhere they wanted on the set,” Montpellier says. “We largely had sets in the Red Zone that we could shoot 360 so that we could go anywhere we wanted with the actors. We had a very structured story, but when it came to blocking and camera, it was a very freeing scenario, and I made the camera wireless in the sense that the operators weren’t hindered by any kind of video cables that were coming out. And it was important to have the freeness of film.”



"As a matter of fact, for the Red Zones I utilized a lookup table that Technicolor Toronto developed over the years with me during my transition from film to digital," the DP continues. "So I'm still using lookup tables that [colourist] Mark Cooper at Technicolor – who's pretty much done every project I've done – developed using the lookup tables that are based on Fuji print stock. So that gave the Red Zone a little bit more of a texture. Also, in postproduction we used algorithms to really enhance the grain, so we added digital grain to the Red Zone. There are also a lot of flash-

backs within the show, usually in the Red Zone, so I had this added challenge of creating a look for flashbacks. And when we went to flashbacks we intensified the digital grain by 500 per cent. The algorithms that existed are very organic and natural, and they're not very big, so with the combination of the ALEXA camera and this postproduction technique, it's quite possible to get these filmic looks, and that to me was the key for the Red Zone. We wanted to feel the image on screen, as opposed to when we went to the Green Zone and we cancelled out all of that grain."

Most of the Red Zone scenes were shot at the former Lever Brothers soap factory in Toronto. "That is kind of a fixture in the Toronto film location scene," Montpellier says. "Basically it's an old soap factory that has been pretty much gutted, and there's a beautiful structure to the whole area. It was one of our really big locations that we were able to really morph into different Red Zone environments. It's almost like a little bit of a backlot in that there is a lot of concrete and crumbling walls, so a lot of the time we knew that we could just enhance it with production design and some digital stuff if needed."

Deverell basically transformed parts of the old factory into alleyways and streets that could stand in for various exteriors and that could be shot practically, and the production "would on occasion stick a green screen at the end of the street to extend the countryside and the city," Montpellier says.

"In that location we sometimes went to really old film techniques," he continues. "There was a rule on the show that whenever we're in the Red Zone we wanted to minimize seeing green because everything's supposed to be dead outside the Green Zone. But at Lever Brothers, on one end there was a huge lush forest area, so we created a barrier of smoke that we would use as a visual wall, and we'd backlight that, so we could shoot in that direction."

By contrast, Green Zone scenes emphasized the sharpness and the cleanliness of the image, and utilized more composed frames, Montpellier explains. "These people live in boxes and

are very much repressed in a lot of ways," he says. "It's like the hand of the corporation is keeping everyone down, even though they own everything."

Shooting Green Zone scenes required much more digital enhancement – whether it was digitally altering practical sets or shooting on green screen – as technology in that society is supposed to be significantly more advanced. The crew shot a lot of those scenes in some new developments in Mississauga, Ontario, "where the houses pretty much all look the same, and we would enhance digitally and put solar panels on the existing houses," Montpellier says.

They also shot some scenes in a self-storage facility "because there are a lot of clean lines there," he says. "It was just a real fun and challenging process to find the skeleton of real locations that we would be able to enhance. It was a tremendous amount of work. There was very little we could just walk in and shoot naturally."

The Green Zone scenes were also primarily lit with lights built into the sets, whereas in the Red Zone, Montpellier employed practicals, as well as older technology like incandescent bulbs and fluorescents. "We just knew that for a futuristic environment, LEDs would be key in creating the quality of light that we wanted in the Green Zones," he says. "And with LEDs, we could also change the colour and have it fully controlled by a board operator. I think we had kilometres and kilometres of these LED strip lights that we installed."

"That was an element throughout the entire show that I had a lot of great fun working on with Tamara, figuring out what these things were going to be because in my ideal world, we would be using practical lighting on the set to light the actors. You can't get better than that; there's no more honesty of light," he says.

For example, Deverell designed a futuristic kitchen within Ben Larson's home "that was all interactive with LED lights inside that the actor could go up to and actually touch the stove and the cook top and the light would just shift," Montpellier says.

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Dennis Haysbert as Julian Morse.



Credit: Courtesy of Conus Entertainment

DP Luc Montpellier csc (standing, left) with Episode 106 director Nick Gomez (lying down) and A camera operator Sean Jensen.

“And it was interesting because our set decoration department was able to largely become kind of a lighting technician for me,” he adds. “I really had to work closely with Tamara and with the set decoration people. It was a lot of fun because I collaborated with these art departments in ways I hadn’t before. It also enabled us to move quickly.”

Although the production spent “thousands of dollars” on LED technology, they had to be diligent about selecting “the type of LEDs that are appropriate for film production,” Montpellier explains. “They had to have the quality of light that you require – what we call the CRI (colour rendering index) value. There’s lots of LED technology out there, and a lot of it is really cheap. Everyone thinks it’s amazing, but a lot of people don’t know that there is a very small amount of LED technology suitable for film production that recreates

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light very much the way we’re used to when it comes to skin tone.”

In the end, Toronto-based MOSS LED supplied the show, Montpellier says, adding that the production “pretty much cleaned them out of their stock.”

One room that was tough to light was a set called “the quiet room,” essentially a padded interrogation room, Montpellier explains. “Tamara designed the entire room like a cube and had these foam cones sticking out, hundreds and hundreds of cones very close together. The notion of that room is that corporations bring people in there to torture and to interrogate. So it was really important again that we showed the kind of cold environment that the Green Zone is, especially this part of the Green Zone. But it was a challenge to get it to the colour we wanted because a lot of that was done with light. In that room, we used the [Chroma-Q] Color Force LEDs. They’re these big strip lights that are used a lot these days. So the whole scene was illuminated from the floor using this technology.”

The production ran at least two ALEXAs all the time, sometimes with an additional one on a Steadicam, and used two sets of Leica Summilux prime lenses. On some episodes Montpellier supplemented the ALEXAs with a Sony a7S outfitted with Rokinon primes in order to get the camera into tight places.

Having DIT Josh Jinchereau on set was indispensable, Montpellier says. “It’s really important to have a DIT,” he stresses. “There is a tendency, especially in Hollywood, to omit that position from TV productions, I guess because they treat it like film, but I really do believe it’s important, especially for a new show. I was able to tweak at least my dailies and have things match up for the editing process. Specifically with different environments, I think the texture of the visuals is such a necessary aspect to experiencing the story. I would go at lunch time and in the evenings after we wrapped and spend a good hour just looking at dailies before they went out, just to make sure they were exactly the way I wanted them and also because I was using this print lookup table. Josh on set would apply the print lookup to the dailies so that it was at least starting from a place that we both understood was where I wanted to be. That’s what I love about lookup tables; it does take away a lot of guesswork and it enables you to be a lot more creative in the process of dailies, and on top of that I wanted the texture of film print that I love so much.”

Thrilled to be working on his first science fiction show, a genre he loves, *Incorporated* particularly appealed to Montpellier because it has something to say. “I’m very much a fan of smart science fiction, things that can give me thought about whatever subject it is,” he says. “And this just kind of hit all the notes for me as a science fiction fan.” 🍷



Eddie Ramos as Theo.



Allison Miller as Laura Larson.



Julia Ormond as Elizabeth Krauss.

Sean Teale as Ben Larson, an executive living in the year 2073 where mega-corporations have unlimited power.