



**Gavin Finney, BSC, uses ALEXA to create a modern look for the swash-buckling adventures of...**

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# Sinbad

***Sinbad* is an Impossible Pictures production for Sky1 HD and BBC Worldwide, with assistance from Nine Network Australia. This epic 12-hour drama follows the mythical exploits of 21-year-old Sinbad, who flees his home town of Basra under a curse and finds himself cast out to sea in the company of an intriguing band of travellers. Serving as cinematographer alongside director Andy Wilson on the first 10-week block of an eight-month shoot – and establishing the look for the series – was Gavin Finney, BSC. The Malta-based production, serviced by ARRI Media and ARRI Lighting Rental in London, made the decision to shoot with ARRI ALEXA cameras.**

**VisionARRI: How did ALEXA come to be chosen for *Sinbad*?**

**Gavin Finney:** You always have to look at what the production requires and in this case we were shooting entirely in Malta, which is a hot country with bright sunshine and a lot of dust flying around, so we needed a solid and reliable camera. In addition, the director wanted very fluid, handheld camerawork, so we were after a lightweight system, but also one that could cope with the sunlight and shadow. The ALEXA, with its wide dynamic range and on-board SxS card recording, was exactly what we were looking for.

**VA: And how did you set about visualizing such an ancient legend for today's young audiences?**

**GF:** It was very much a modern day approach, both in terms of the casting and the way it was shot. We always worked with two cameras and we were handheld about 80% of the time, which kept it very free and loose. The core cast were all fairly new actors, in fact the guy playing Sinbad hadn't even graduated from drama school, so we wanted to let them go and just follow them, in order to capture some of that energy. If we'd locked the camerawork down on tracks, that in turn would have meant the actors being locked down to their marks.

► **GAVIN FINNEY, BSC**, at the viewfinder of an ALEXA

▼ **ON SET:** Ashely Bond, A-camera 1st AC; Xandy Sahla, A-camera operator; Gavin Finney, BSC; Alex Howe, B-camera 1st AC (left to right)

**VA: As well as Cooke S4 primes, you had the ARRI/FUNINON Alura 18-80 & 45-250 zooms. What did you think of them?**

**GF:** The Aluras were something I really wanted to try. The normal package of two Optimo zooms is very adaptable, but they are quite heavy lenses. I was interested in a lighter weight alternative because of the speed at which we'd be working. We were doing 40 or 50 setups a day, so having less weight to move around really helps the crew. I also knew it would be good to have a zoom that could go on a crane without overloading it, so the smaller and lighter Aluras looked like a good bet. And technically they were fantastic – very sharp and solid, with no vignetting or irising.

**VA: Did you stray from the EI 800 base sensitivity?**

**GF:** I prefer to stay at EI 800 and use IRND filters for day exteriors, even though it is a lot of ND. I did occasionally push it to EI 1600, which was very useful when we had to extend the day. In Malta you're nearer the equator, so the sun sets very quickly; you don't get a magic hour, you get a magic few minutes and then it's dark. Being able to push the camera to 1600 allowed us to wring every second out of that end of the day. It was extraordinary really – the director would be convinced that it was too dark to shoot but you'd look at the monitor and it was fine.

**VA: Were your crew comfortable with the camera's functionality and menu structure?**

**GF:** Yes, the crew adapted very quickly. The ALEXA menu structure is simple to learn and knowing that there is a limit to how much you can change is great; I really hate cameras that have 75 pages of menus and you have no idea what tweaks have been made deep down. Being able to change the frame rate without changing the SxS card was also useful – it's all timesaving and often means the director can have an extra take.

**VA: Was there studio as well as location work? What kind of lighting challenges did you face?**

**GF:** The designer built the top deck of Sinbad's ship by the deep tank at the MFS studios in Malta. It was on a turntable so we could point in any direction we liked and shoot day or night. The full-size, below-deck set was built in a studio and was a challenge to light because we wanted to see everything, including the ceiling and the floor at the same time, so we had to use hidden Kino Flos and small tungsten lights, as well as in-shot candles and torches. As the set was fixed, gaffer Mark Taylor built a free-swinging lighting rig above the set to help simulate movement. Again, with a lot of in-shot flame, it helps having a camera with the range of the ALEXA because the brightest part of the flame doesn't clip and it feels more natural.

We used the LFXHub for a flicker effect; you can plug in a number of different types of light and have them all flickering randomly, so it looks very real. We had that both inside and outside to supplement torch light and real flame, and it blended in extremely well. There was a range of different shooting situations and everything had to be lit or adapted in some way. Even with day exteriors you've got to control the bright sun as it goes across the sky, so we had a lot of reflectors and large lights to combat that.



**VA: What were your recording and image workflow solutions?**

**GF:** We shot everything ProRes 4444 Log C onto SxS PRO cards and the quality was excellent. On the camera truck we had a MacBook Pro that we used to do our own backups of the SxS cards. Then the cards went to the editors and they did another backup before we wiped them. The great thing about having our own archive of the original material was that we could check back on anything without relying on DVD rushes, which are usually very low quality.

I used the ALEXA's frame grab facility a lot, which was something I've always wanted in a camera. It means that at the end of a production I've got a library of perhaps 500 stills, taken by ALEXA on each lighting setup and captured on a little SD card, which I can then grade at home and use as a starting point for the online grade. It's great if you're operating the second camera, as I was, because you can have it as a user select button and quickly capture frames whenever you want.

*Sinbad* will premiere on the UK's Sky1 HD channel in 2012. At the time of press, cinematographers that have followed Gavin Finney on subsequent blocks are: Peter Sinclair and Fabian Wagner. ■

Mark Hope-Jones