



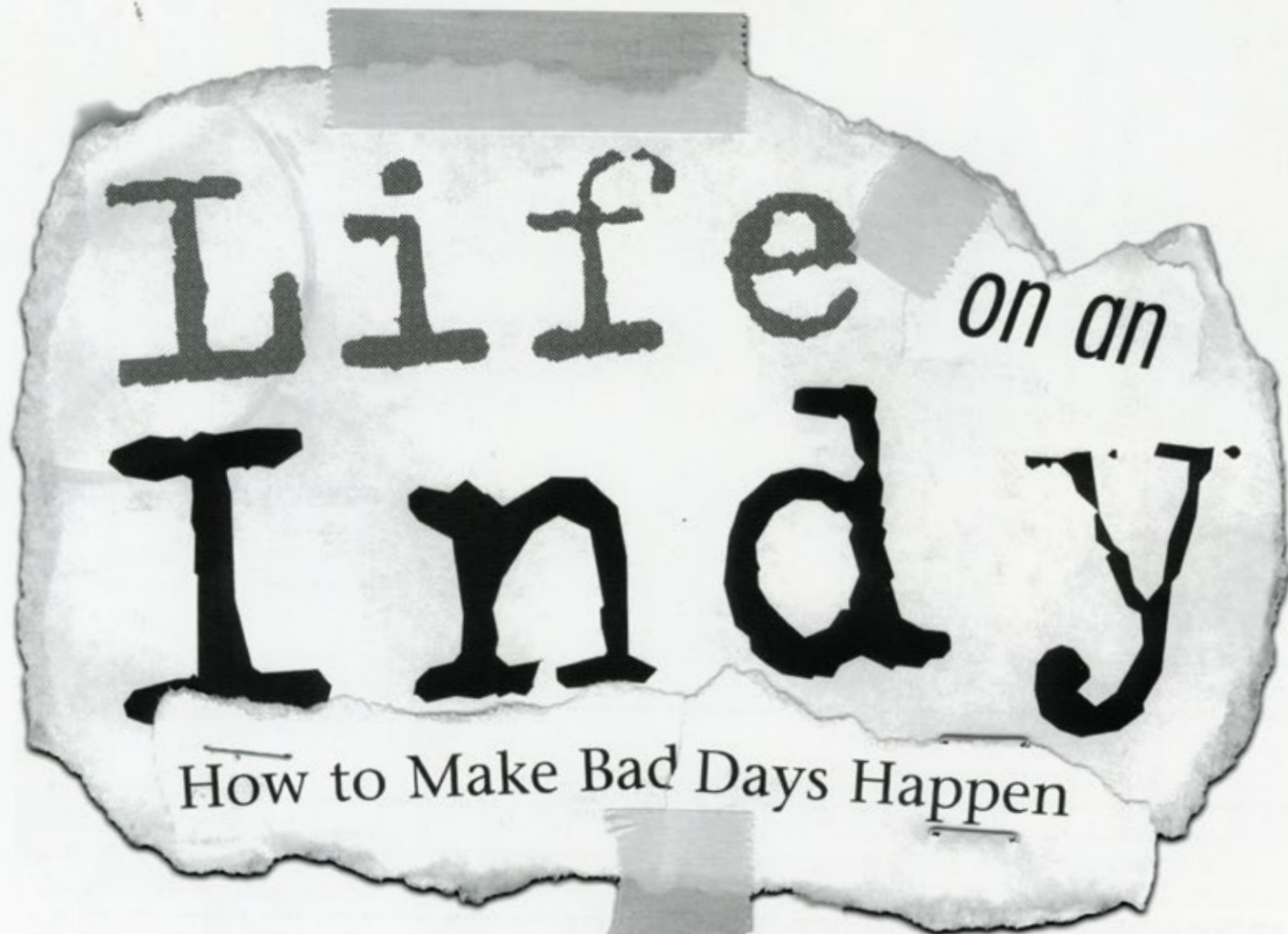
Making  
**Bad Days**  
happen.

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# Life on an Indy

## How to Make Bad Days Happen

By Phillip McGregor and Amanda Walker

“I had to squeeze between the desk and a shelf. I don’t think many other camera operators could physically do that” – *DOP Gregor Hagey*

**W**hat does it mean when you find yourself in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont., for five weeks straight, sleeping in a cheap motel at the edge of town and losing all contact with kith and kin?

It means you’re working in the low-budget world of independent features, that’s what. Specifically, it means you’ve been working on *Bad Days*, an indie written and directed by first-timer Neil Lewis, a Barrie, Ont., teenager, and shot by Toronto cinematographer Gregor Hagey.

*Bad Days* is a tale as old as time itself. Like Cain and

Abel, it is the story of conflict between brothers, Paul and Chris Holman. Paul – outwardly successful with all of the material possessions needed for the good life – is virtually estranged from his family. He visits his terminally ill father only to present him with inappropriate gifts such as an electronic organizer. He scorns his brother, criticizing Chris’s lifestyle.

What so irks Paul is that Chris wastes away his life in front of the television drinking beer and eating cereal. But when Paul’s life starts to fall apart, he’s forced to move in with Chris. The tension increases when Tara, Chris’s daughter, leaves her mother and moves in with Chris, too.

Will Paul and Chris pull themselves together, or is it that sometimes bad days never end?

Although *Bad Days*, produced by Paul Blagden, is 16-year-old Lewis’s directorial debut, he has already achieved a great deal for someone so young. By the age of 14, he already had a published novel, *Never Say Always*, under his belt. Since then he has produced several video shorts, which led him to write a feature-length screenplay. With encouragement from his family and the active participa-



**CUBICLE CAM:** Wiry DOP Gregor Hagey squeezes under a desk cabinet to get a shot of actor Rob Alexander for the independent feature *Bad Days*.

tion of his father, young Lewis decided to produce the script.

First hired were production manager Vincent Langlois and line producer Christine Brandt, whose work proved invaluable even though she was committed to another project and had to leave before principal photography began.

With the production team in place, it was time to recruit a director of photography. A perusal of the *CSC Directory* turned up several prospects and, after viewing reels and interviewing candidates, the producers chose Hagey, a CSC member since 1994 who has been prominent on the Toronto independent film scene for the last few years. He has shot 20 short dramas, 20 music videos and commercials, and eight short documentaries. *Bad Days* was his first full-length feature film.

In the independent film community, Hagey has learned to squeeze the most out of minimal equipment. This time, he had to shoot a five-week feature working out of a cube van that contained all of the lighting, grip and camera gear, a small-budget package from Complete Film and Equipment Rentals that was augmented by Hagey's own grip and electric gear and a few items supplied by other members of the crew.

*Bad Days* was shot primarily with Fuji 250 tungsten and Fuji

64 daylight 16mm film stocks. Fuji offered the best deal, but money was not the only consideration for Hagey.

"I had to keep the grain under control because we were blowing up the Super 16 negative to 35mm," the DOP said, "but I was restricted by the lights we had – our largest light was 5K. I wanted a medium-speed film for tighter grain and a heavier stop to keep things sharp. I hoped to keep the interiors at T4, but in practice we usually ended up with a T2.8. We couldn't shoot interiors with a stock below 200 ASA, but I wanted to overexpose my negative by a third of a stop to help keep the contrast in the blowup. The F-250 presented itself as the logical choice.

"We shot tests with F-250, F-500 and Kodak Vision 500. The F-250's grain and colour rendition were excellent, but I wasn't happy with the grain of the F-500 so we went with Vision 500 for our night exteriors on *Bad Days*."

The camera was an Arri SR-III, with a set of primes and a Canon 7-to-63mm zoom. Since it can take all of the standard accessories and has plenty of built-in features, Hagey said the SR-III was a great camera

## A look that went from nice and flattering to gritty and revealing

for this sort of shoot. Its programmable speeds and variable shutter came in handy for shooting the many scenes where

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**READY FOR ACTION:** The camera crew of *Bad Days* (from left to right): 1st AC Phil McGregor, DOP Gregor Hagey, 2nd AC Amanda Walker, and trainee Jenna Maghirang.

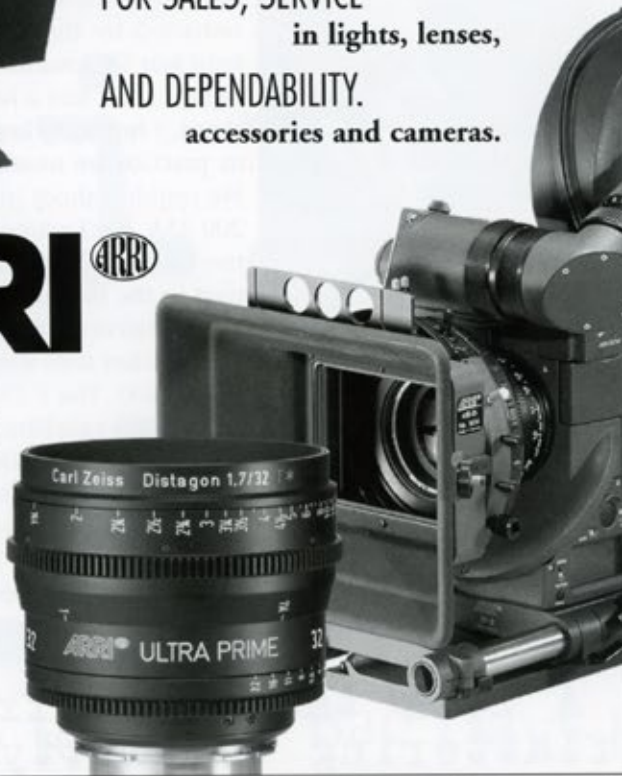


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a monitor was visible. It was a money saver for the production since a speed control was not needed.

The SR-III's movable eyepiece also proved useful. In one of the night scenes, Lewis wanted Hagey to follow in front of a character as he runs out of an alley. The entire alley would be seen, so the shot had to be done handheld. But with the eyepiece in the standard position, Hagey would have to run backwards through a debris-strewn alley. To allow him to run forward with the camera, the eyepiece was flipped to the right side of the camera and rotated.

Hagey elaborated: "Tilt up and down were reversed so it required some thought to maintain the proper headroom. By the last take I was feeling pretty nauseous. My brain couldn't handle my body saying that I was running forward, while my eyes said I was running backwards."

There were other challenges. Since the whole film was shot at various locations, camera setups sometimes proved tricky. One particularly cramped space was an office, which, the fortunately wiry-framed Hagey stated, "was more confined than would have been ideal. In one part of a scene we had to shoot the reverse of cubicles. They were immovable, and we couldn't cheat the angle. So we placed the camera on a sandbag and I had to squeeze between the desk and a shelf. I don't think many other camera operators could physically do that."

The production spent more than two weeks shooting interiors in the house that was used for character Chris's home. Most of the rooms were used for sets at one time or another, even the attic – another cramped space that came with its own set dressing of bric-à-brac and dust. The tight confines restricted camera positions and lighting, but the DOP figured that "shots in a small attic force you to be more creative in how you block, and to maximize this by clever light and camera placement."

Most of the action in the house took place in the living room or kitchen, which were covered extensively. Extensive use of dolly shots and

complicated blocking avoid static shooting that could get boring.

"There was a shot where Paul comes home to his brother Chris's house with some groceries and he walks around the main floor," Hagey explained. "We dollyed back slightly and panned 180 degrees counter-clockwise to follow him from the front door to the kitchen counter, where he spills some groceries on the floor. Enraged, he throws a jar of peanut butter against the wall and storms past the camera into the living room, where we pushed back in along a curved track to follow him and panned back 180 degrees clockwise."

"There was no appropriate place to hide lights inside the house, so Sean Hearn (the gaffer) placed the lights outside the windows hidden from the view of the camera."

Hagey wanted the film to have a look that went from nice and flattering to gritty and revealing when Paul's life is falling apart and his illusions disappear.

The cinematographer included a lot of mixed lighting sources and light levels, warm orange sources with a green spike mixed with a cooler blue. For instance, the night scenes where Paul goes in search of a drug dealer were shot to simulate a sodium vapour lamp mixed with moonlight. This colour palate was retained for later fight sequences.

Hagey used whiter and warmer lighting for the Holman house – an inviting place which is Paul's last refuge. But when Paul starts to have nightmares about the drug dealer chasing him into the basement, the DOP had key grip Joe Turner "enclose the house in black duvetyne to give the scene a more abstract, suffocating feel, cutting the interior off from any exterior features that would be lit in a normal night-time scene. Next, the colour contrast was increased by adding an extra layer of CTB to the television light, and 1/4 and 1/2 CTO to the key lights in the kitchen."

"A cool white fluorescent in the hall closet lent a green cast to the drug dealer as he ran through the hall. Finally, we changed the shutter angle to 90 degrees to give a slightly surreal feel to the actor's movements, which

isn't too noticeable until the drug dealer starts swinging a bat around. The basement was lit primarily with cool white, warm white and Optima 32 fluorescent lamps. A cool white circline fixture was mounted on to the camera around the lens to lend some fill light to Paul as he ran down the stairs and through the basement."

*Bad Days* was shot last April and May, with a day of pickups in

September. The final cut of the film has been made and Neil Lewis planned to have a crew screening this month.

(The co-authors of this article, Phillip McGregor and Amanda Walker, were 1st and 2nd assistant, respectively, on *Bad Days*. Jenna Maghirang was trainee assistant, Sean Hearn and Matt Brookes did the lighting, and Joe Turner and Wendel Collier were the grips.) ●



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