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Al Gough: *Smallville's* Man Of Steel

By Sarah Stanfield

Not too long ago, Warner Bros. Television approached longtime writing and producing duo Al Gough and Miles Millar about doing a new Superman show. Unlike previous incarnations of the comic strip, the new series was to focus primarily on the Man of Steel's adolescence. Gough and Millar accepted the challenge and helped develop the series, which was named *Smallville*. Along with a team of three other executive producers (see sidebar), they have made it one of the biggest hits of last season. Here's how they did it.

Terrible Beauty

The first thing you notice about *Smallville* is how much it looks like a comic book. Even

though the show is shot in 35mm, not 24p, the setting and characters seem to almost burst out of the screen in a shower of bright, clear colors. "It's hyperreal," said Gough, who is one of the show's executive producers. The town where Clark Kent grows up in the series, *Smallville* (hence the show's title), has a very 1950s, picturesque quality to it, similar to that seen in the town in which the 1998 movie *Pleasantville* is set.

The quaint look and feel of *Smallville* is meant to contrast with the very seamy side of its nature—a byproduct of the meteor shower that coincided with Clark's arrival on Earth (and



(Above) A teenage Clark Kent saves the day on the WB Network's hit show, *Smallville*. Al Gough (inset) is one of the show's executive producers.

(Left) Setting up for the season finale, which features Kansas-style twisters.

buried chunks of Kryptonite all over town). "There's a real romance to the place," said Gough. "But then there are these things going on beneath the surface, so when it's scary, it's really scary. You go from these scenes with Clark and Lana in the barn, set against these beautiful sunsets, to a bug boy peeling his skin off. It's sort of like Norman Rockwell on the surface and *Blue Velvet* underneath."

Gough and Millar chose to film in Vancouver, British Columbia, because it added to this look.



"What we found," said Gough, "was that a little outside of Vancouver it looked very Midwest, very Kansas. We found our farm, and we found the small town we were looking for."

Making It Happen

Television production runs on a grueling schedule, and *Smallville* is no exception. "It's a constant freight train rolling down the tracks," said Gough. Production season runs from mid-July through mid-April, with a two-week break at Christmas. The cast and crew work Monday through Friday from, as Gough put it, "dawn to dusk."

A typical week on *Smallville* begins with a production meeting, where Gough, Millar, and the heads of different areas of production will review a script for an upcoming episode. "In the production meeting," said Gough, "you go through each scene, and you make sure all of the

production heads, from costumes to props, to special effects, to makeup, all know what they have to do for each scene. So there's no assuming or second guessing once you get on the set. Assuming is the worst thing you can do in production."

Indeed, Gough said one of the toughest parts of his job is trying to convey what he is looking for to his staff members: "It was very hard in the beginning. You're trying to explain something in your head, and we only had the pilot at first. That was helpful, but there were certain things from the pilot we were not going to use week-to-week." Another frustration is being located off-site from the production (Gough and Millar work out of Los Angeles). "With videoconferencing, you can't always communicate what you want. You know, things will show up on the dailies, where you said one

thing, and they [the staff members] heard it as something else. That's why we take frequent trips to Vancouver. Miles or myself will go up."

In addition to the production meetings, Gough and Millar hold what are called "tone" meetings, where they go through the script line-by-line with the director of a particular episode to convey the intent and meaning of each scene.

At any given time, when one show is in production, the script for the next or future episodes must be written, rewritten, and approved by the network. Budgets for future episodes must be negotiated. Any other issues, disasters, and/or problems must be dealt with promptly. In addition, each episode is shot in eight days. The week before that is a seven-day preparation period. Because of the constant state of production, one show is always being



prepped while another is shot.

In order to keep a handle on *Smallville*'s constant round of activities, Gough and Millar rely on a team of producers to take care of the day-to-day activities in Vancouver. Greg Beeman is the co-executive producer in charge of the day-to-day production of the show. He has also directed several episodes. He preps the directors, oversees the casting in Los Angeles and Vancouver, and deals with any issues that come up with the actors. Ken Horton is the co-executive producer in charge of post production, while Bob Hargrove serves as one of the show's producers. He is in charge of making sure each production is running on budget.

Most of *Smallville*'s episodes have a different director. When hiring a new director, one of the first things Gough looks for is whether or not the applicant has worked on a show with a similar style. "You want to get a sense of visual style," he said. "You also want to talk to people at other shows that he's worked on to try and get recommendations." On a show that produces such spectacular (and expensive) special effects, finding a director who has "made his days," i.e. came in on budget on a particular production, is an equally important consideration. Gough follows similar principles when hiring directors of photography and other top staff members.

Celluloid TV And X-Ray Vision

Gough said what sets *Smallville* apart from other primetime fare is that it has more of a movie than a television look. "One thing I think certain shows, especially *The X-Files*, did in terms of redefining the look of TV is they looked like movies," he said. "I think this is important in competing in the digital age. Nowadays, you are competing with cable—most people can turn on any HBO channel and watch a movie." Gough said *Smallville* is even in competition with the silver screen itself. "Especially shows like this, when you are doing sort of an action/adventure/superhero show, you want it to look like a movie, because in some ways, you are competing with *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*." Gough has some experience in this area. He and Millar penned the script of *Shanghi Noon* and are also writing the sequel to *Spider-Man*.

Smallville gets a film look mainly through the employment of certain camera angles and special effects. "We're very much a show of scope and intimacy," said Gough. "We like big masters, and then very tight close-ups, because we have a very beautiful cast. And we don't like medium shots. Medium shots feel very TV." Not that *Smallville* doesn't use them occasionally: "They're not bad to have. Obviously, you look at our show and we've



Lana Lang, one of *Smallville*'s lead characters, surveys the twisters created for the show's season finale by design house R!OT.

got some of them in there, but I think the other shots have more of an effect on the viewer."

The special effects for the show are roughly divided into two categories. The first are *Smallville*'s signature effects, such as when Clark speed races to save a person in distress. The second type are specific to an episode, such as the first season finale, in which one of the main characters, Lana Lang, is swept up by a tornado. Since the program uses little stock footage, Gough and Millar leave the special effects up to Bill Millar, who was the visual effects supervisor on the first season.

"Bill will farm out the visual effects to whatever vendor he knows does the strongest work," said Gough. "So if somebody does the X-Ray visions really well, he'll do that. If somebody does a different special effect well, he'll go with them. That way, we are not stuck with one house."

Although effects are a large part of the show, Gough feels it is important to use them efficiently: "I think we have the largest visual effects budget on television, and we're able to do some pretty incredible stuff, but you can't just throw money at these things. You have to think smart and think how you can do it better and more cost-effectively. The key is not so much to do so many [effects] that you spread yourself thin in an episode, but to pick your moment and say, this is where we are going to commit the resources to having a great visual effect."

Krypt-o-mite!

Smallville has thus far completed its first season—22 episodes (at press time, Gough was about to start production on the second season). For its demographic, it is a bona fide hit, scoring the number 1 spot for its time (Tuesdays at 9 p.m. ET) among persons ages 12-34. Its young stars look to be headed the way of Sarah Michelle Gellar and the cast of

Friends—fame and fortune.

But, like any good artist, Gough is not about to rest on his laurels. "You've got to keep challenging yourself and challenging the show and not get complacent. And now, as we move into the second season, the challenge is going to be taking it to the next level so audiences don't feel like, 'I just saw this last season.'" Not to worry, Al. With bug boys and fat-sucking girls, that's not going to happen anytime soon.

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Other *Smallville* Superheroes

It takes a lot of hardworking, dedicated people to put together a hit show like *Smallville*. In addition to Al Gough and Miles Millar, Joe Davola, Brian Robbins, and Mike Tollin are also the show's executive producers. Davola, who gained fame as the inspiration for the "Crazy Joe Davola" character on *Seinfeld*, is also the executive producer of the upcoming *Birds of Prey* and *What I Like About You* shows, on the WB Network. Robbins and Tollin are the faces behind Tollin/Robbins Productions (TRP), which produces *Smallville*, along with Warner Bros. Television. It is also producing, along with Davola, *Birds of Prey* and *What I Like About You*. Previous TRP productions include the movies *Big Fat Liar*, *Summer Catch*, and *Varsity Blues*.