

SOLVENTDREAMS AT THE INTERSECTION OF
HIGH DEFINITION AND BOUTIQUE POST PRODUCTION

BY JOHN FEINS

Solventdreams is an award-winning boutique post production house that creates innovative visual effects, including everything from rotoscoping to green screen to monsters jumping out of closets to explosions, as well as main titles, color, and offline/online edits for a large variety of broadcast and film clients. The company recently added an HD/DI Color Suite to its Silver Lake studios. The addition makes professional, affordable, real-time color grading available for features originating on HD or film.

Solventdreams' new suite will handle multiple HD features simultaneously. Monitoring is performed via an HDSDI output from a Blackmagic HD link to a 23" Apple Cinema Display, a Sony 23" evaluation monitor, and a Sony Artisan for film evaluation. The suite outputs to any HD deck, including the Panasonic D-5, for online mastering at the highest resolution.

The company is also building a second suite and will add a full-resolution HD projector in the near future.

Solventdreams established its cutting-edge reputation on the development of their own unique process designed to make video look like film based on Magic Bullet™. The same process is integrated into their new suite to enhance video-originated products further, which enables filmmakers to color-correct and generate film looks in a real-time environment. Doing so will provide filmmakers with all the accoutrements provided in an expensive DaVinci session but at a much more affordable rate.

We spoke with David Davidson, Solventdreams' Producer/Creative Director

Please tell us about Solventdreams and how you got involved with high definition media.

David Davidson: *Solventdreams was started in a bedroom of my house in Echo Park and within a couple of years, because of digital video, turned into a full-fledged boutique with all kinds of capabilities you'd expect of a creative post house. As filmmakers who are expatriates from the commercial and production world, our experience in post is close to the ground.*

In terms of HD, it occurred to us that this was going on in the marketplace and we needed to become HD-capable. With the new offerings from AJA and Blackmagic, it's been very affordable and easier for us to get into HD, especially after mastering the same capabilities going through standard definition, which used to be completely out of the realm of small houses like ourselves unless there was some kind of large financing. So my company was actually financed out of personal savings over a period of three years, with no Avids, no heavy equipment, all with the available desktop technologies—the robust offerings of which have been extraordinary over the last five years.

What are the HD challenges for a boutique? Is there a boundary of what you can offer compared to the big houses? How do you position yourself, especially in a developing area like HD, in a place like Los Angeles?

David Davidson: *That's actually a really good question because we focus so much on the work that we don't really have marketing department or an IT department or a machine room or any of those things that are generally associated with even medium-sized post houses. For the most part, HD is one of those things that is implemented because we need to have it for creative reasons.*

So a lot of what we get is word of mouth from filmmakers that are independents or distributors that need a place to send their material that is either limited theatrical releases or direct to video, those

kinds of things. We don't actively position ourselves in the marketplace per se, as we believe our work will speak for itself. So that is kind of a hard question to answer—we don't really have a positioning plan in the traditional sense of the idea, it's more instinct.

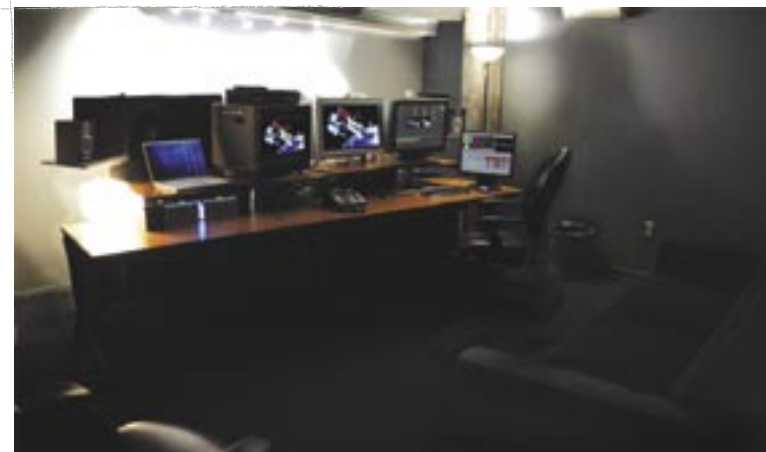
So do you find clients request things that create technical issues or force you to develop your equipment and capabilities?

David Davidson: *Actually that is true. A good quarter of my time, which is a lot, is spent doing research, following the technology. We try to stay ahead of the curve of some things that are really bleeding edge, in order to provide the highest level of service for the least cost. For instance there are RAID's that you can buy that are upwards of \$20,000. We make our own proprietary systems that do the same job for a fraction of that cost.*

So we don't pass big overhead—or what a friend calls cappuccinos and carpets—on to the client. Because the overhead is extremely low, the important aspect emerges: creativity. I think that's the new post house model; because this technology is so widely available and some of it you can put together yourself as long as you understand how it works in the HD spec world and the film world—if you know what the end delivery product is and what those requirements are, i.e. what's expected—it can be done.

With the technology becoming so affordable, HD editing coming onto the desktop, might you get squeezed on the low end, with more and more people working in their own bedrooms?

David Davidson: *Yes, this is what happened with DV. You see even on message boards, like Craigslist—infamous in Los Angeles—and Mandy's as well. When I started this business out of my bedroom and moved to a small office downtown, I put out a call for resumes for assistant editors who were proficient in Final Cut Pro, which was on version 1.0 then, and you wouldn't imagine the flood of material that I got in. Kind of freaked me and my partner out, thinking everybody's doing this. He said, 'You know you should sell all of your equipment and get out now, because everybody's going to be doing it, everybody has a system that they can make at home, so why bother. The marketplace is flooded with talent to do this, flooded with equipment that is available, and there's no chance that a boutique could flourish.'*



Solventdreams High Definition suite.

We struggle with that every day, but what I found is that clients want people who are specialists dedicated to doing this—and that's the industrial system we have here in the U.S., as you know. They want people that have comprehensive experience, talented experts, who spend day and night figuring this stuff out and that focus on it.

So in a way we provide two things: we provide dedicated technical services and we provide the creative talent to interface with that, in a comfortable environment that cultivates a personal relationship with our clients. We know clients personally and we're friends—and we're friends of their friends. It's a familiar environment; not a cold, corporate environment. I think that's the difference with the older models where you have this faceless company with hundreds of people who have the same skills. One of the appeals of the boutiques is you have that personal relationship with clients and you care about them, and that is a rare commodity in Los Angeles.

So we provide that, as one of my European friends says, it's a 'USP'—a unique selling point, that we actually care about the content and HD a better, bigger way of delivering it, and it's wonderful way of delivering it, it's amazing.

The aesthetic principle is you can always throw things away—only if you have them first. You're going to do that anyway. You're going to get rid of things. Kind of that Hollywood rule of three: three breakaway bottles, three shirts for the actor, three explosions. HD is kind of that way. There's so much detail, there's so much information.

In the '90s, I was set decorating an NHK Japan project which was acquired in HD. They had brought this HD truck which connected to the camera with a very long umbilical cord and it was remarkable how much technology was needed to support the HD signal then. You needed a whole van to control the signal, and now it's all on board a camera. Pretty soon: a wrist watch!

So for us it's a 'necessary evil,' we have to do it. It's a wonderful format, even though there a couple different flavors of it.

That was what I wanted to ask next: because of all the different standards and formats and the general lack of HD convergence, a post house has to be all things to all people—a serious expense even for a larger house. Currently, how does this play out currently at a boutique?

[David Davidson:](#) *The same for us. We have to provide that. We have to provide HD CAM, HD CAM SR, every variant of DVC-Pro, 100 or 50—and all of that actually we can do with the technologies from Blackmagic and AJA. It can be done here.*

So it's not a budget nightmare?

[David Davidson:](#) *It is for a small company, and we have to be very careful with our resources, but it can be done and I would encourage other people to do it.*

Are there workflow challenges?

[David Davidson:](#) *Indeed. Every project has a different workflow. For instance, we beta tested Silicon Color's Final Touch HD and Final Touch 2K, which is groundbreaking real-time software from the fruits of the Socratta research. These are real-time desktop color correcting tools for HD and for 2K, which two years ago would be unheard of and now it's being done in real-time to a HD specs.*

So when we were doing this beta testing we had to come up with very intricate and controlled workflows, including how to move data back and forth, change frame rates accurately, render downconverts for SD, upconverts for film outs—all with software and hardware that you could

pretty much buy off the shelf. So for us it's a great thing that all of this technology is available because we don't have to pass the costs onto the client. We get to figure out, at the most basic level, how this stuff works from the ground up. There's also a great deal of community support, such as Web boards and the like—a lot of sharing of knowledge.

What are the differences between film and broadcast?

[David Davidson:](#) *Film is more demanding and an entirely different culture than the digital world of HD. In our experience, interfacing with the older, established, tried and true film world creates some primary challenges. On one hand, a singular threshold between the newer digital and older analog world is mastering equivalencies to safely traverse both environs—environs where there have been fought religious wars to divine those equivalencies. On the other hand, those who have divined the secrets in the older analog world have often been less forthcoming, which appears diametrically opposed to the more open, democratizing digital world.*

We're seeing the two cultures clash on a current claymation project, which is all RGB, all digital, and to be printed to film. It's a very ambitious project that is happening concurrently with Tim Burton's project, all shot at 3K and it's all being mastered to HD resolution at 4:4:4.

What's coming up in the future for you?

[David Davidson:](#) *As filmmakers we're interested in working on feature films and realizing projects with imaginative vision, even if they're shorts. The technical stuff is just a necessary part of the equation. HD is wonderful because we can get it very close to looking like film with new technologies. So our hope is to take on multiple creative features here, providing everything from visual effects to main titles to creative editing to color to prep and output on film—film being handled by a lab—to take on the entire creature at a boutique level and nurture a project into being in the post environment.*

That was the dream of the company. That's why it is called Solventdreams—to make possible or provide a creative solution for filmmakers to realize their vision. Even if it's at the five million dollar level, sometimes they're not aware that there are cost savings or less complex ways of achieving their work. They've been told or believe they need a flame® or an inferno® or these expensive, heavy lifters, but it can actually be done very cheaply at the same quality level, same speed, if not more, which allows for more options. That was why we created the company: to make it viable for people who couldn't afford the \$1,000 an hour type of environment.

So the full resolution HD projector that you are planning to install would obviously be a part of that full realization.

[David Davidson:](#) *Yes, and the technology has actually become cheaper during this interview.*

High Def 611