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The Get Down / Blackish / 2016 ECA Winners





Eduardo Fierro (Operator, 2013, *Eleven: Twelve*)

ECA Winners Then and Now

We catch up with a handful of honorees to find out how/if/when the most unique award in Hollywood changed their lives.

By Pauline Rogers



Peter Villani (DP, 2012, *Carjack*)

It takes a lot of guts to step out of your comfort zone and follow your passion. Going it alone makes it even scarier. That's why, in the tradition of "we take care of our own," some 20 years ago, George Spiro Dibie, ASC, and Robert Kositchek came together to develop a Film Showcase as a forum for Guild members to get crucial exposure in this competitive industry.

That showcase has grown immensely. The Emerging Cinematographers Awards, as they are called today, has even gone international, with viewings at Camerimage and beyond. It reaches out to agents, producers, celebrated cinematographers and celebrities, all in the name of giving members a forum to grow their talents. "Many [honorees] have gone on to illustrious careers and many cite this award as a turning point," describes ECA Chairman and cinematographer Jimmy Matlosz (a former honoree himself).

ICG wanted to find out how winning an ECA really make a difference, and contacted 14 honorees for a "virtual roundtable." Everything from the decision to submit and the relationships they formed to where the honor took them is covered in this article. There's even some advice from old-school ECA winners, like Cynthia Pusheck, ASC, whose advice for those who want to jump out of their comfort zone is, "Yell 'Geronimo!'"



Cameron Duncan (DP, 2007, *Year of the Dog*; 2010, *Mr. Marceau*)



Todd Dos Reis (DP, 1999, *Fortunate Son*; 2005, *Ugly*)

The Very First Time...

Cameron Duncan (DP, 2007, *Year of the Dog*; 2010, *Mr. Marceau*): I had read about the ECA submission in *ICG Magazine*. I had been shooting tons of freebies and specs, and the results were not panning out. So, I submitted with the thoughts, "What's the worst that can happen?" and "You never know until you try." The pivotal point in my path was laid, and I assumed I'd get an agent from the recognition. Instead, I was served a glass of reality [laughs]. However, the experience was great. Dana Gonzales was one of the first individuals to congratulate me, and shortly after, he offered me my first Union operating gig.



Kyle Klütz (DP, 2013, *Vessel*; 2014, *Sequence*): The first time I submitted a short film for ECA consideration was in 2007 with the Dodge College of Film and Media Arts: my senior thesis film, *Eater*, directed by Matt and Ross Duffer. Unfortunately, it didn't make the cut. I submitted another student film from the same college a year later. When my friend and mentor, Peter Villani, was honored in 2012, that prompted me to try again. In 2013 I was selected, and the following year, selected again.

Frank Buono (DP, 2014, *1982*): I submitted the film because I have always been a big fan of the program. I have attended the show since its inception. Of course, we all love Hollywood blockbusters, but these little shorts are the foundation of our industry. The big movies who we go to now would never happen without the filmmakers that use the little stage of short filmmaking.



James Matlosz (DP, 2005, *Oedipus*): I submitted a couple of films over the years, including the first Imax student film. I finally won with a stop-motion short. We had already premiered *Oedipus* at Sundance, so the film had legs for a good 18 months. My biggest concern, after

submitting live-action films but winning for a stop-motion piece, was that I would get pigeonholed. (I did get one more stop-motion gig after that – an episode of *My Name is Earl*, titled *Robbed A Stoner Blind*). And recently I worked with a studio in Shreveport to shoot stop-motion plates for a project in cooperation with Dolby Vision.

The Big Night



Cynthia Pusheck, ASC (DP, 1999, *One Hand, Left*; 2002, *Ezekiel*): Bob Primes gave me some lovely advice before the screening when I said something about all the flaws being on the screen for everyone to see. He said, "I hope there are flaws! That shows that you tried something and pushed yourself."



Michael Nie (2nd AC, 2011, *Not Your Time*; 2015, *Dust*): The most satisfying moment that night was the opportunity to call out Jay Kamen, writer/director for *Not Your Time*, during a speech following the screening at the DGA (one of the finest venues for a film to screen). His colorful life story had just unfolded in front of a full house. I have the ICG to thank for helping to make this happen.

Hilda Mercado, AMC (Operator, 2006, *A Piece of Earth*; 2007, *Primavera*): My mom was in town. I will always remember how she said to someone, "I feel grande-grande right now." That would translate as feeling so proud and happy that you feel like a giant. She felt like a giant when I was the only woman (that year) awarded.



Alison Kelly (DP, 2011, *The Spring of Sorrow*): It was both exhilarating and intimidating, speaking before that huge crowd. The highlight was being presented the award by John Bailey, ASC, whose intellect and career I've always admired. [Bailey] had taken the time to research my work, and he gave a very personal introduction. I was so touched – it made the entire evening for me! Also, I am still grateful to Rosco for the great light kit I won. I use it all the time.



Partners in Crime

James Matlosz: I am still good friends with the director of *Oedipus*. We've done a few projects together. His career changed and morphed, to that point where he was the guy who put *TED* online. He still aspires to be a filmmaker and director, and I hope to be there with him when that happens.

Eduardo Fierro (Operator, 2013, *Eleven: Twelve*): The connection with my ECA 'hood continues. Michael Lloyd and I have worked on many projects, from launching Apple Music's Keynote to making content for them. We just finished our first movie together [*Sun Dogs*], where Kyle Klütz covered for me the first two days as operator and TJ Williams did Steadicam on the first day. We are all united – add Andrew Shulkind and Rob Givens in that group of fellow honorees as well.

Cameron Duncan: Kevin Lau and I had met on another project (a freebie). We hit it off, and he approached me with *Year of the Dog*. Since then we've collaborated on half a dozen projects and continue working together to this day.

Peter Villani (DP, 2012, *Carjack*): Director Jeremiah Jones and I were on a commercial roll for years. He had done a few small shorts in school, but always wanted to do something grander. The goal of the film was to get him some narrative recognition. The film not only got into the ECA's, but it won a decent amount of festivals. We have done another short together since and a few more commercials. He is planning to do a feature next year and is pushing a few scripts. I am going to shoot whichever one goes.

“I was worried about flaws for everyone to see and Bob Primes said: ‘I hope there are flaws! That shows that you pushed yourself.’”

{ Cynthia Pusheck, ASC (1999, 2002 honoree) }

Shot Zone

Darren Genet (DP, 2005, *Raveling*; 2007, *The Death Strip*): For *Raveling*, the biggest technological challenge was the fact that we shot the film in reverse, literally running the film through the camera in reverse. The premise is that a man destroys his apartment, and since we shot in reverse, we had to be very careful about our takes, as we were breaking props without doubles for retakes. That, and the fact that we only had 800 feet of film – it got a little tense at the end as we literally rolled out on the last take of the last shot!



James Matlosz: We were pioneering uncharted territory with *Oedipus* in stop motion. We shot with Canon DSLR cameras D30 and 60D in stills RAW mode. This had never been done before; at that time no one had a clue what to do with a RAW file. Director Jason Wishnow had a friend at ILM, and through a bunch of meetings and begging, Jason got ILM to do our post (while they were finishing up *Star Wars: Episode 1*). Rumor has it we were using up to two terabytes of ILM space to render our little eight-minute film.

Frank Buono: For *1982*, with director Jeremy Breslau, I thought it would be interesting to employ as many filmmaking techniques as possible. So, with the help of a few vendors, we put a plan into place. The flashback scene began with a sophisticated remote rig provided by Doggiecam. [The same one used in *Children of Men*.] This gave us the ability to dolly in and out, right and left, and it was also repeatable. We could easily transition from morning to afternoon and spring into summer. We then moved the camera by means of handheld, jib arms, sliders, underwater cameras and brilliant Steadicam work by fellow ICG member Santiago Yniguez.

Kyle Klütz: *Vessel* and *Sequence* were both full of challenges. For *Vessel*, creating a mid-flight hijacking of a commercial airliner by an alien spacecraft and having it look even somewhat believable involved the help of numerous talented artists heading up visual and practical effects. Using Clairmont's Image Shaker really sold the turbulence of the alien takeover. For *Sequence*, the challenge was putting the viewer in the headspace of a character who wakes up to a world that has turned against him for unknown reasons. The lighting in that film was more extreme/erratic than anything I had done before – and I'm glad audiences have responded positively to it.

The Morning After



Michael Alden Lloyd (DP, 2012, *Dawn*; 2013, *The Secret Number*): I shot my first union feature right after my second ECA (2012, 2013). That was right after I moved to L.A. and learned about the ECA at Local 600 orientation. The biggest thing is that the award introduced me to the town – agents, vendors,

rental houses, crews, etc. I'm really close with my 2013 ECA group – specifically Eduardo Fierro, Rob Givens, TJ Williams Jr. and Kyle Klütz. In fact, the union feature I wrapped recently [*Sun Dogs*] came to me as a recommendation from Rob Givens. Eduardo and Kyle were my camera operators, and TJ came out for some Steadicam.

Peter Villani: Winning the ECA helped me get an agent, but I feel like it got me peer respect, which got some of my peers to recognize that I was more than a camera operator. This led to some 2nd unit gigs – jobs from new directors who had stuff in the pipeline. Since my win, they have attached me to their projects.

Michael Nie: To a certain extent, success in any film career is about exposure. For me, this is the key benefit of participating in the ECA's. The event puts more eyes on you at a time when getting your name out there is particularly important as you transition out of your current role into that of a full-fledged cinematographer. I began to establish relationships with agents who were able to attend the event and was approached by several filmmakers.

Tim Bellen (DP, 2007, *Ed Meets His Maker*; 2010, *State of Grace*): The biggest boost I got back then was adding an "Awards Winner" detail to my IMDb page, which was a victory in the face of my IMDb "known for" being stuck on *Flubber* and *7th Heaven*. The ECA

experience turned out to be an important yardstick for my confidence. Having my peers see my work and respond so positively was a major boost. I can chart a straight line from the ECAs to my experience on *Californication*, *About a Boy*, *Masters of Sex* and more, as I lean on those same instincts.



Todd Dos Reis (DP, 1999, *Fortunate Son*; 2005, *Ugly*): The [ECAs] gave me confidence. I was being selected for my work as a DP in a competition with my peers while I was working as a 1st AC and camera operator. While operating on *Entourage*, I won my second for *Ugly* – and shortly after that I shot my first episode of *Entourage*. I am still close with fellow ECA winners – Jim Matlosz, David Waldman and Ken Glassing. I have been judging the awards for many years. It's my way of giving back to the organization that has given me so much in my career.

The Next Generation (and Beyond)

Peter Villani: [I tell every honoree to] go to Camerimage and any festival of importance to enjoy the celebration of your film. This was an honor to have won, and if anything, it proves that you are good enough and on your way. But that said – push harder than ever.

Darren Genet: If I had the opportunity to speak with the nominees before the ECAs, I would tell them to make the most of the experience and not to take it lightly. It is rare to be honored by your peers and heroes at such an early stage in your career. Put your best foot forward in terms of showing your work and continue to submit, even if you've already won.

Kyle Klütz: Be inspired by others' work and let that inspiration help you find your own voice. Take any job that will allow you to hone your craft. Mistakes are made for a reason. Lastly – endure.

Tim Bellen: Remember, no one cares about what you care about – they are busy pursuing their own interests – so it helps to be a convincing white-washer of fences. In other words, get good at enrolling people in your plan or vision. Don't be afraid of hard work, and be willing to ask people around you for help.

Hilda Mercado, AMC: Persistence is a big one. I would like to encourage more camerawomen to submit – and keep trying. It's a great platform for your work to be exposed and will help your career.

Frank Buono: I urge every aspiring filmmaker to follow his or her passion. When you make a movie, you must be honest to the script. You have to tell the story properly. Awards are wonderful, but a picture should never be made with winning an award as its goal.

Todd Dos Reis: Don't let the industry pigeonhole you into thinking you are just a utility, 1st AC, 2nd AC or camera operator. Do what drives your soul.

Cynthia Pusheck, ASC: Try to look further down the road, especially during your early DP career, and be brave enough to not always take the path that's right in front of you. Ask yourself, "Is this path heading in a direction I really want to go?" It can be frightening but it's better to take a jump (and say, "Geronimo!") than to have regrets later that you didn't push yourself.

Eduardo Fierro: It's fun. Make sure you build friends and not competition. That's not the idea. The idea is to build a great team. 🍀