

One of Oscar nominated actress Joan Cusack's requests for doing an ongoing television sitcom was that the show be shot in her hometown, Chicago. She wanted to be close to her attorney husband and two children, one being a newborn.

Not that difficult to fill, for Executive Producer James L. Brooks (who directed Cusack in *Broadcast News*) and his partners, Richard Sakai and Co-Executive Producer David Richardson. Brooks and Cusack found a script about three Chicago teachers, their lives and loves, written by Cusack's high school friend Gwen Macsai (NPR essayist). They put a cast together that includes *Early Edition* alumni Kyle Chandler (as Cusack's love interest) as well as Tony Award winner Donna Murphy, Jessica Hecht, Wally Langham (*Veronica's Closet*), and Kellie Williams (*Family Matters*).

The production was set up at Chicago Studio City, previously the home of *Early Edition*. Job one for Emmy winning cinematographer Alan Walker (*John Larroquette Show*, *The Mommies*, *Martin*, *Blossom*, *Empty Nest*, *Rosanne*, *Full House*, *The Golden Girls*, Emmy winner for *Cosby*, *Benson*, *Soap*) was to help convert a "single camera" oriented facility to a "multi-camera" studio facility, capable of accommodating a four to five times a week set turnaround, an audience of 278, a full wall to wall lighting rig and the power to service it. The studio had never been required to internally supply 2400 amps without the re-enforcement of generators. Fortunately, when Walker and owner John Credidio traced the electric back, they found the studio had the potential for such a set up.

"We have 'sets' standing on the stage – but they aren't 'standing sets,'" Walker explains. "We have had semi-designated set areas, that change constantly. One day one area may be Joan's apartment, the next her boy friend's, or the school office, a classroom, and anything else that we might need to shoot a script. That makes it interesting for the crew – and for camera choreography."

Next step for Walker was to assemble



that camera crew, a lighting crew, and a grip crew. "The depth of professional ability runs very deep in Chicago," says Walker. "Initially, I made a little speech to my operators, asking them to keep their 'feature' mentality close to their hearts, but to set it aside in this venue. We needed to become one entity – one organism. That we were going to do a 'play' for an audience – live – and that they would also be part of the entertainment. For, like them, the audience would have never experienced anything like this either.

"The big moment came when everyone realized that 'three takes and we are done,'" Walker adds. "I can't say enough about the expertise and adaptability of the Chicago crews.

In the beginning, it was proposed that the project utilize High Definition equipment, not film. However, Gracie Films and Sony decided that the optical elements of the process were not ready yet and that it would be more comfortable to stay with the film style. What production didn't know was what camera equipment was available in Chicago.

"Sitcoms routinely shoot 3-perf (for cost savings) with four fairly matched systems," Walker explains. "Ped configured systems were definitely not in Chicago and had to be brought in from Los Angeles. Long story short, we had to swap equipment between Los Angeles and Chicago.

Walker chose Vision 5279 stock, using a 'fixed' aperture of a T2.8/4 split at 24 frames. Because of subject matter, a Tiffen Soft-EFX1 is used to establish a

"home" look, a necessary continuity requirement for this format. The "shake down" camera compliment ended up as two Ped configurations, each with a Primo 11:1, two conventional Fisher 9 (although Walker would rather have 10s) dolly systems, one Panavision X and one Panavision Gold, each with 6:1 lenses.

"These systems, however, change radically, depending on the needs of the moment and the script," says Walker. He always has Primes standing by. And, Panavision also knows to keep a "light-weight" available at a moment's notice.

"To keep the Los Angeles production offices in the loop, run-thrus are fed back closed circuit (conference call style) on an Internet T1 line," Walker interjects. "We use what we call 'EdCam' to show the folks in Los Angeles the scene and get their notes, and notes, and notes, and notes. This process eats massive holes in time set for lighting the show – but is necessary."

Lighting these often changing situations is a challenge and Walker counts on what he calls a "dream" lighting crew. "Again, the depth of experience is astounding," he says. "They may not have done something on as big a scope as this show before, but they've adapted – to the lighting job, the 'audience in' deadline. Not to mention 25 lighting changes in one performance.

"They were scratching their heads, perplexed that I was lighting the scene totally ahead of seeing any blocking," he adds. "That's kinda backward," was gaffer Chris Carey's [a Chicago local] comment,

Opposite: Joan Cusack stars as a slightly neurotic teacher in the series *What About Joan?* shot by Alan Walker with a Chicago camera crew. Walker utilizes a Tiffen Soft-EFX1 filter to establish a "home" look. Above: Joan shares an antic-filled dinner with her boyfriend (Kyle Chandler).