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HistoryDirector in the *House*

Greg Yaitanes has directed 30 episodes of *House M.D.*, more than anyone else. Along the way he has streamlined shooting and come up with creative solutions to production problems—right up until what might be his last show.

By David Kronke

Greg Yaitanes, *House M.D.*'s director-producer for the past three seasons, is helming his 30th show of the series. It's the most of any director who has worked on the show. Depending on the show's fate after this season, it could be his last. And he's determined to make the most of it. "This episode is my favorite, especially being here so long, with it potentially being the end of the series and my last episode," says Yaitanes a bit wistfully. "If it were the last thing I ever directed in my career, I'd be fully satisfied. This is why I love directing television."



Director Greg Yaitanes  
Photo: Courtesy Adam Taylor/Fox

en reckless process of diagnosing patients is put on trial. One of his glibber stunts has resulted in tragedy, and now he's being investigated by Dr. Walter Cofield, played by guest star Jeffrey Wright, who has not worked in television since 2005. Yaitanes wanted Wright for the role when he first heard the story outline, and Wright signed on before the script was finished based on his viewing of a few Yaitanes-helmed episodes. A key scene features Cofield interrogating House and his staff. Though Cofield's questions are thorough and linear, the responses aren't—each is answered by a different member of the team.

The sequence could've easily been shot in a montage of exchanges between Wright and the show's cast, but Yaitanes came up with a more ingenious and far trickier idea. "I thought this would be a great opportunity very early on to establish the vocabulary of the episode," Yaitanes explains. "I told [the writers], make sure this scene is exactly how you want it, because it's going to be one take, in-camera." Yaitanes had an elaborate set built and placed a circle track around the desk at which Cofield interrogates the team. The camera circled the track, swiveling from Wright to Odette Annable, angling back to Wright then swinging to Charlyne Yi, now in Annable's chair, answering the latest question, then circling back to Wright only to find Peter Jacobson in the hot seat. Finally, Laurie was seen being querulously queried.

This game of television musical chairs was accomplished as Yi and Jacobson crouched under the table while the camera was moving, then popping up and taking their new positions while the camera was on Wright. Propmasters indicated the passage of time by darting from behind the circling camera, adding and subtracting coffee cups and table lamps to or from the desk. The staging itself was comical, like a Rube Goldberg invention come to life, but the end result was dazzling and dramatic.

Feature stories about the craft and challenges of directors and their teams in episodic television, movies for television, daytime drama, reality, sports, news, variety, childrens, commercials and other television genres.



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Yaitanes (2nd from right) with 1st AD Robert Scott (3rd from right) devised a tricky tracking shot to circle a desk. It was Yaitanes' favorite episode of the show.

"I knew in the end if we pulled it off," Yaitanes explains, "everyone would say, 'God, the CG was amazing,'" even though no computer enhancement was necessary. Yaitanes takes great pride in the fact that he works very economically. "You could see a movie spending an entire day on that scene," he says, noting that it only took a couple of hours to capture it. As that audacious shot suggests, Yaitanes has strived to keep the tone and look of *House* fresh, even as it's midway through its eighth season.

Many series that deep into their run have simply run out of gas, yet he insists, "I think we're doing some of our best work this season." Allen Marshall Palmer, who has been with the show since season one and is currently the co-producer in charge of postproduction, concurs. "I don't know how many other shows in their eighth season would attempt something like this," he marvels. Before working full time on *House*, Yaitanes was a freelance director, working on episodes of *Lost*, *Heroes*, *Damages*, and *Bones* (for which he directed the pilot). He directed the fifth episode of season one of *House*, and won an Emmy for his work on season four's "House's Head," a surreal episode in which *House*, having survived a bus crash and fighting off hallucinations, tried to recall the identity of a fellow passenger displaying potentially fatal symptoms. When he was hired as *House*'s director-producer at the beginning of season six, Yaitanes set about cleaning, well, House.

The show had a reputation for working brutally long hours, and he was determined to fix that. "I came in sort of *Brubaker*-style," Yaitanes says, referring to the 1980 film starring Robert Redford as a new prison warden who reforms the system. "I was noticing that in places there was that complacency of, 'We're on a hit show, we can coast.'" He found crew members sitting around, working on crossword puzzles and jettisoned a quarter of the staff. "I think I came here unpopular," he says, "but once people realized, 'Oh, we're going home at normal hours; It's Friday night and we're going home at dinnertime instead of working until Saturday at 2 a.m.'—we really started to glue it together." Yaitanes also instructed the production design department to create wing sets with wild walls that could be moved more easily to accommodate shots from different angles, usually by airlifting them via chain motors on the stage ceiling. Overhead lights were attached to chain motors, as well, to hasten lighting setups.

Robert Scott, Yaitanes' 1st AD, notes, "He's brought the shooting day down to a 12-hour day, if not less. All of that keeps the cast and crew happy and healthy and rested up and able to give their best performances. Greg is very exacting and demanding, but he's also very supportive of those he has around him. In being so demanding, he helps you step up your game to his level." Yuko Ogata, Yaitanes' 2nd AD, adds, "From very early on in the prep process, Greg conveyed his concepts and thoughts to all departments involved. There were very few, if any, surprises on Greg's episodes. He understands the levels of complexity and the coordination that need to happen both on and off of production to achieve each episode, each day, each shot. So he gives us the information we need in order to coordinate ahead of time so we're not scrambling at the last minute."

Gradually, Yaitanes was able to cut time off the schedule. "We kept honing it—we kept a log of the time and attacked the day. Where could we shave five minutes, two minutes, one minute? We ended up finishing season six 18 days faster than any season that had been done before." The director credits Scott and Ogata (both of whom he had previously worked with on *Drive* and *Heroes*) with exemplifying the brisk efficiency he brought to the production.



For one episode, Yaitanes created a Fosse-esque musical sequence when House (Hugh Laurie) has a bizarre dream. Photo: Adam Taylor/FOX

"I try to keep a very calm set, and Robert carries that torch," he says. "He's very good at solving puzzles, which is important on a show about solving puzzles. He and Yuko are a one-two punch. They really have each other's backs. They have my trust, and that's hard to sustain. They don't make mistakes. If a mistake occurred in my AD



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department [which also includes 1st AD Vince Duque and 2nd AD Gary Cotti], I would assume it was my fault.

"I often compare TV to that great scene in *Apollo 13* where Ed Harris comes in and dumps the box of junk on the table in front of everyone and says, 'Here's what they've got. How do we get them down?' " he continues. "Television is such a great collaborative medium and I really thrive off that." Yaitanes also prides himself on the amount of support and creative freedom he gives visiting directors while they work on their episodes.

"One of the frustrations I've experienced as a freelance director, particularly on a show that had been on for many years, was the mindset that 'We don't do that here,' " he recalls. "I've always found that's where the show was going to die, because it was resisting growth. Here we give the directors a lot of room. It will always be a *House* episode; we've got the hospital and we've got Hugh. But we want them to approach each episode as if it's their movie. In the case of Matt Shakman, who's directing a Dr. Chase-centric episode, his instructions from me were, 'Treat this episode as a Chase pilot.' There is a default *House* look you could go with, but if they're letting the script speak to them and coming at this as a filmmaker, then they really bring their A game."



Yaitanes communicates with 1st AD Robert Scott and DP Gale Tattersall so there are no surprises on set. Photo: Adam Taylor/FOX.

Yaitanes and co-producer Palmer came up with an innovative plan allowing visiting directors to be part of the postproduction process beyond the director's cut, tweaking the editing, music, and color corrections.

Some can't because of assignments elsewhere, but Yaitanes estimates that 25 percent have taken him up on the offer. "We always make sure the guest director gets a copy of the studio or the network cut, even if they've moved on to their next project," Palmer says. "I really think empowering the visiting directors has been important. It's great that we can draw on their energy and outside experience. They work on all these other shows and can bring that back to us."

Yaitanes is also proud of the fact that although the show eschews action mayhem in favor of more hushed moments, *House* has won the sound-mixing Emmy twice in the past three years. Sound is mixed on-site in a space the size of a large living room, rather than in a massive recording studio. "We mix in a smaller space that's more representative of what people's living rooms are like," Palmer explains.



For a disaster scene, Yaitanes shot the show with a small digital camera to capture the experience of claustrophobia. Photo: Adam Taylor/FOX

Yaitanes' organizational skills inspired another innovation. "He's created what's called a creatives meeting," Scott reports, "We get all the creative departments together—director of photography, costumers, set decorators—and discuss how the lighting will affect the wardrobe, how props will comment on the characters, and so on. That's something I've never seen on a television show, and one element that takes *House* to another level."

One area in which Yaitanes does not appear to be quite as intense is in directing performances. "My style with actors is the same whether I've worked with them a long time or not—I mostly bump the sides; I give them small adjustments," he says. "Mostly, [the performance] is done in the casting." He approves casting for each episode, but credits the casting department for finding the right actors. "Our casting team brings us riches each time."

Of course, directing actors can be pretty easy when your star is Hugh Laurie. "I compare Hugh Laurie to Babe Ruth," Yaitanes smiles. "He'll go up to the plate, point to where he wants it to go, and will always knock it out of the park. He's the actor I've worked with the most, so we have a real shorthand." Though Yaitanes insists, "I don't like flash for flash's sake," the episodes he mentions as favorites are all ambitious enterprises. Besides "*House's* Head" and his current episode (titled

"Nobody's Fault"), he cites season seven's "Bombshells" and the season six finale, "Help Me."

In "Bombshells," *House's* colleague Dr. Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein) has a health scare, and she and then-beau *House* experience bizarre dreams while awaiting her prognosis. The dreams come in the form of sitcoms, zombie flicks, the climax of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, even a Bob Fosse-esque musical number (a poster for Fosse's *All That Jazz* is one of the few pieces of non-*House* art on the walls of Yaitanes' office).

"I was able to touch on genres that I could go a lifetime and not do," he enthuses. "It was a great showcase of the talent on the show. If you think about the costuming and production design teams that made that as a normal episode of this show—the shot-for-shot re-creation of the end of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, creating a Fosse-esque musical, [transforming] *House's* apartment into a sitcom version of that set. It's a really cool episode."

"Help Me" was a far more wrenching exercise. In it, *House* and Cuddy attempt to rescue desperate victims trapped inside a collapsed building. Yaitanes had the chaos depicted on a massive set that effectively conveyed the carnage and claustrophobia, but created tight quarters that would not allow for the show's usual cameras and lights.

Consequently, the episode was shot with a Canon 5D, a commercially available digital camera. As DP Gale Tattersall recalls, "We were the first people to shoot a network TV show with DSLRs (digital single-lens reflex) and it opened a lot of eyes in terms of the future."

"That, unbeknownst to us, would change the game," Yaitanes agrees. "We came into it looking for a solution to tell that story. When we looked at that, we wanted an organic experience for the cast so that they felt trapped. We didn't want to build sets to accommodate the camera. We were able to have a real intimacy."

Yaitanes credits being able to take outré risks on such episodes to his close working relationship with staff writers Garrett Lerner and Russel Friend, who co-wrote "House's Head," "Help Me," and "Nobody's Fault." Most directors and writers compare notes about eight days before production commences, but even when Yaitanes was freelancing on "*House's* Head," he was in contact with them weeks in advance.

For "Help Me," Lerner recalls, "He found all these photographs from various rescue sites and collapsed buildings, and wallpapered the entire production office with them as reference points. All this is going on before there's even a script, which is definitely abnormal. The collapsed-building set for 'Help Me' was hands-down the most incredible set I've been around in television."

Friend says the same thing happened with the current episode. "He's been excited about that [interrogation scene] for weeks now. It was this really intricate ballet, with Hugh hiding under the table, and Peter and Odette and Charlyne all basically hiding behind anything they could hide behind. I thought, 'Thank God we have Greg directing this episode.'"

And now, all this innovative storytelling may be coming to an end. "Best work" or no, ratings for *House* are down, as usually happens with a show of its age, and Laurie's contract expires at the end of the season.

When asked why he didn't expect to direct the season finale this year (as he has for the past three seasons), Yaitanes, who normally speaks in highly articulate, staccato bursts, takes a long, emotional pause before explaining that it would only be appropriate for series creator-executive producer David Shore (who directed the season two finale) to take *House* out on his own terms.

He grows reflective, adding, "I never would have expected, when I did episode five of this series, that this would become one of the most important things I've done in my career. To win the Emmy was an enormous honor. To see other people win Emmys and other awards under my watch was an enormous honor. This team operates at a thoroughbred level. There's a bitter-sweetness that this may be the last one. It's been a big part of my life, and has creatively been a place where I've done everything I've ever wanted to do."

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