

Camera operator
Tony Keene on
the UKIP bus

Ballot Monkeys

... it's all about choosing the right people

Many GTC members were involved in covering unfolding dramas ahead of the 2015 UK General Election, but not many will have had as much fun as the team behind *Ballot Monkeys*, Channel 4's election-themed topical comedy. The GTC's very own **Martin Hawkins**, winner of this year's TiCA, was (as so often) right at the heart of this innovative show and explains how it all worked.

When Andy Hamilton or Guy Jenkin phone to talk about their next project, you know it's going to be: a) exciting; b) interesting; c) different; and d) funny ... and, in the case of their latest offering, it was certainly all four! Think *Drop the Dead Donkey* meets *Outnumbered*.

Ballot Monkeys comprised 5x half-hour comedies for Channel 4, entirely shot on four coaches 'dressed' as the 'Battle Buses' of the four main political parties as they jostled for votes in the run-up to the UK General Election in May.

get the right people. Mo Holden was the designer and started by ripping out as many seats as possible to create space for us to move around in and areas where the actors could perform and yet we could still get the cameras onto good eyelines.

We shot the whole series in a car park at Pinewood because of ease of access to the established post-production centre. Editing was going to happen right up to the transmission time and all the lines to Channel 4 were already in place there.

As it was to be shot all handheld, my first decision was what cameras to shoot with. Lack of room in the coaches meant I didn't want to go with heavy large-format cameras. For most comedies I like to keep things simple and the numbers down so I wanted the camera operators to do their own focus, just as we did on all the *Outnumbered* series. I've always been a big fan of the pictures from Panasonic cameras and so the AJ-HPX 3700 camera was the chosen one, along with eight operators who were competent to do steady handheld camerawork and their own focusing.

The crew

As I've said, finding the right people was key – and this meant a crew who could work fast and not panic under pressure. My priority was to get three other DoPs who I knew and whose work I liked. Fortunately, Peter Edwards, John Walker and Trevelyan Oliver were not only available but jumped at the job. We talked about how the lighting on our buses might reflect the respective different parties. We all felt that the lighting should be as natural as possible and, as in most comedies,

“

The first question was: "Is it possible to film with two cameras, plus all the actors, on a bus and not get in everyone's way?"

The set-up

The show was to be as topical as possible and often the script would be led from real news events of the day. So, the plan was to shoot just over half of the shows a few days prior to transmission and the rest on the day they would air. Sounds simple... but the four buses would need to be shot simultaneously, so this meant four directors, four DoPs, four camera operators (each bus would be shot with two cameras), four ADs etc, etc – in fact, four complete shooting crews, four edit suites, four editors... and so on. My role as the main DoP was to co-ordinate the camera and lighting departments and establish a consistent 'look' for the series across the four buses.

Guy and Andy's first question was: "Is it possible to film with two cameras, plus all the actors, on a bus?" But as we know, anything is possible if you



Partisan clapperboards: even these were marked up with the different party colours

should not draw attention to it. There were no night scenes so everything was really led from the daylight. As there was only one spark per bus (with a couple more floating between the buses) we couldn't flood the outside with numerous HMIs so 1'x1' Lite-panels, Rota Lights and some Encapsulites were the main lights used inside to create the natural soft look.

As Peter, John and Trevelyan were to pick their own second camera operators, this just left me to find an operator to work with me on the UKIP bus. So my next call was to my old friend Tony Keene. TK and I have known each other since we worked together at LWT in the mid 70s and, not only do I love working with him, we have remained good friends – and even after spending 10 days on a bus practically sitting on his knee, and/or sticking my elbow in his ribs, this is still the case!

The shoot

On the days when we recorded 'non-topical' scenes we worked from 8am to 6pm with a short lunchbreak; this allowed the directors to nip to the edit at the end of the day and go through the scenes we had just shot. The next day they would fine-cut and show the scenes to Andy and Guy.

On transmission days, Andy and Guy would meet up with the other writers at 7am to write topical material until 11am. The scripts would then be printed, rushed to the car park onto the buses and we would set about shooting them. More often than not, these would not comprise complete scenes but perhaps a few lines to add into a scene we'd shot another day. This of course meant we had to match the shots and set-ups so that the new material would slip in seamlessly. On these mornings the atmosphere around the buses was amazing: the large crew would be standing around chatting to people they hadn't seen for a while, catching up on stories, when suddenly a 3rd AD would run in, script in hand, and we were off to our respective buses for the day's work.

Trevelyan Oliver was the DoP on the Conservative bus and takes up the story... Needless to say the Conservative bus was a little more opulent than the others but sadly no *Tardis* and the constraints of shooting on a coach were quickly apparent. We banged our heads so many times on the overhead lockers we lost count!

We didn't embark on this unprepared though and the cameras were ideally suited to these conditions. The Panasonic 3700s were stripped down as much as possible; as we were using a Lee No1 Soft FX Diffusion filter behind the lens we were able to go with just a rubber hood at the front, so the cameras fitted into all sorts of tiny gaps.

With myself, the B cam, two ACs, two boom ops, the director, 1st AD, art department standby, actors and any number of extras on board, we had to be very well organised.

Sometimes it was difficult to find appropriate spaces to light from. The bus had an external wrap on the outside, which took out about 2½ stops, and a multitude of posters etc on the windows, so I couldn't rely on much natural ambience.

The workhorse proved to be Encapsulite fluorescent tubes, which you could hide up and down the windows depending on your angle. These give out a lovely soft punch, which mixed well with the coach's own LED lights. There was just enough illumination to work to a stop of about f2.8.

This was such a great shoot, led brilliantly by director Guy Jenkin. The atmosphere was lovely, the cast brilliant, and it felt like one close team striving against a bus to create something special!

John Walker was the DoP on the Labour bus: This shoot was unique: a comedy involving two cameras in very cramped conditions (like *Outnumbered*) as well as the challenge of shooting freshly written topical material on the day of transmission (as in *Drop the Dead Donkey*).

The camera choice was important. Sony F5s were considered but in the end P2 Panasonic VariCams were selected – definitely the right choice given the cramped conditions and tight deadlines. Changing lenses would have slowed things up and the larger format cameras wouldn't have permitted the same lens to be used for pretty much everything. Designed 15 years ago to replace Super 16mm film, the VariCams have always delivered great pictures. At f2 (equivalent to f5.6 on the Sony F5) the depth of field of the 2/3" format camera is a good compromise. OnSight, who supplied the cameras, oversaw the set-up and the match was excellent. This was crucial because grading was limited to exposure tweaking only in the online suite, just prior to transmission.



John Walker's charge: the Labour bus with external wrap and a 2.5k HMI

“

The Panasonic 3700s were stripped down as much as possible; as we were using a Lee No1 Soft FX Diffusion filter behind the lens we were able to go with just a rubber hood at the front, so the cameras fitted into all sorts of tiny gaps.



The complete camera team

Camera crew

Conservative bus

Director: Guy Jenkin
DoP: Trevelyan Oliver
2nd Camera: Jono Tomes

Lib Dem bus

Director: Jimmy Mulville
DoP: Peter Edwards
2nd Camera: Rob Mansfield

Labour bus

Director: Andy Hamilton
DoP: John Walker
2nd Camera: Rob Sergeant

UKIP bus

Director: Paul Schlesinger
DoP: Martin Hawkins
2nd Camera: Tony Keene

From the lighting standpoint I wanted it to look natural, so it was important to me that it always looked brighter outside than in. During a particularly heavy storm, which we worked straight through, I needed to run the cameras at +3dB gain with the lens wide open and the clear filter, just to make it look bright enough outside. I left the bus practicals off, partly due to continuity issues with the light levels varying and partly not to run the bus batteries down.

The super-cool attitude of my crew and director Andy Hamilton, contributed to Ballot Monkeys being one of those exceptionally memorable shoots.

Pete Edwards was on the Lib Dem bus: *Things were a bit tight for us as, being the Lib Dems, we didn't have such a luxury coach as the other three! Just getting six crew, three cast and up to nine supporting artists onto the bus in the right order was challenging enough, let alone filming them!*

Initially, the design dressing for the Lib Dems was very yellow and close to flesh-tone brightness, especially when the sun hit it, so we decided to thin out as much of the yellow as possible. The staging and shooting made the most of the shapes of the coach and became our best approach.

With Jimmy Mulville directing and a great cast and crew, this was a very happy bus and it all made for a very enjoyable couple of weeks.

The edit

The speedy edit required was quite a process! The P2 cards containing AVC-Intra media from the VariCams was backed up by the DIT team at the car park where the buses were situated and then rushed to 'Outpost', the post-production centre at Pinewood, copied to the shared storage, sub clipped and synced by the edit assistants.

The shared storage enabled the edit department to access all the rushes simultaneously, so that the editors could begin editing while shooting continued. It also enabled them to share each others' sequences. This process did require discipline though to ensure that the correct and latest version of each sequence was being viewed, changed and edited into the final show.

Ahead of the day of transmission, the already shot scenes were assembled into two versions of the same show by Trevor Alsworth, the very calm online

“

OnSight, who supplied the cameras, oversaw the set-up and the match was excellent. This was crucial because grading was limited to exposure tweaking only in the online suite.



The eight Panasonic 3700 cameras supplied by GTC sponsor OnSight

editor. As Channel 4 had insisted on a standby tape, the first version became the emergency standby with extra, non-topical scenes to make up the half-hour show. The other version was about half the show with gaps left for topical material to be added in later.

On the day of transmission, the online edit would start to update from about 3pm and add in the new topical scenes for that evening's show as they came in from the four edit suites. At around 5.30pm a viewing of this assembly by Andy, Guy and the Channel Four Commissioners would take place, while the online continued with a rough grade.

Following that viewing, there would be a final edit pass with Andy and Guy in the online suite to ensure that the show was at the correct duration and with the right bits in the right order. At 8pm a 'first pass' would be laid to tape and taken to the Pinewood transmission facility. This became the new standby version. We then had about another half an hour to do final fixes and tweaks and to marry up the final audio that had been worked on in a separate edit suite with the sound supervisor. Usually by 9.45pm we had laid off the final topical version to tape, ready for transmission at 10pm.

Each night I would walk back past the four buses to my car and reflect on everything that had gone on there just a few hours before...

Fact File

Lead DoP on *Ballot Monkeys* Martin Hawkins has been a GTC member since the 1970s and was recently honoured with the GTC's highest Award, the Television Cameraman's Award (TICA).

See more about Martin's work at: www.martinhawkins.com or contact him on: mjhawk@btinternet.com

