

# An Interview with Nick Dance BSC

Director of Photography Nick Dance had a great year in 2014. He was busy throughout: firstly shooting the well-received BBC 1 series *Our Girl* (nominated for a GTC Award for Excellence), then a feature, *Dartmoor Killing*, a psychological thriller set in Devon – and lastly a couple of episodes of the forthcoming BBC1 crime series *The Interceptor*. The icing on the cake was the richly deserved news that Nick has been accepted into the BSC. Zerb Managing Editor Alison Chapman chatted to him about his recent work and approach to shooting drama.

## What is your current preferred camera for shooting?

I generally go for the ALEXA; I haven't used the AMIRA yet. We were offered one by Films at 59 in Bristol, who did the pre and post-production on *Dartmoor Killing*, but only having one day off between *Our Girl* and starting the film, there wasn't time to do tests, so I didn't feel comfortable using it at that time.

For *Our Girl* we had a couple of ALEXAs from Take 2 in Cape Town with Cooke primes and Angénieux Optimo lightweight zooms. On *The Interceptor* I used the RED Dragon. I didn't initiate that series; there were four DoPs doing two blocks each and I did the last block of two episodes. The first DoP and director chose to use the RED. They wanted to go for a different look, which included shooting in 2:40 ratio (unusual for a BBC 1 show), so it will transmit in a letterbox format. We shot 5K on the RED, but ultimately it'll be down-converted to 1080 for broadcast.

I find the viewfinder on the ALEXA far better for lighting through than the RED; it's bigger and a more true image. On *The Interceptor* that wasn't an issue as I had an operator, so I could use a monitor, but on *Our Girl* I operated A camera,

mostly handheld, plus we had a B camera mainly on Steadicam, so I needed to be able to gauge the lighting and exposure through the viewfinder, often for both cameras simultaneously. With the ALEXA, you can monitor the B camera by switching feeds in the viewfinder and we did this wirelessly, a very useful feature – I'm not sure what I would have done without it.

I also prefer the ALEXA for handheld. With the RED you need a rig and it's hard to get everything in quite the right place. Although the ARRI is heavier, by the time you've bolted everything onto the Dragon, it actually becomes heavier and can be a bit unwieldy. Nevertheless, the pictures from the RED were very impressive – especially the dynamic range, which was proven in the grade.

## Shooting *Our Girl*

The story is set partly in Afghanistan, partly in the UK. The Afghanistan scenes were shot in South Africa. Some days we were working in 40+ degree heat, which was very tough on the actors in army uniforms. We couldn't keep them in the gear in that heat for long, so it was almost like doing a period drama – always waiting while they got in and out of costume!

*Our Girl* was shot very much in a documentary-style. The first director, Anthony Philipson, like me, had come from documentaries and he wanted to shoot it that way. In prep we watched several Afghanistan war documentaries, including award-winning *Hell and Back Again*. This was made by a photojournalist who was out there to take stills but decided to shoot some video on his DSLR. There was some great footage, with lots of shots taken at sunrise and sunset with wonderful golden light. This is what we wanted to try to achieve. I mentioned this to our ex Army military advisor and he explained: "The reason the light's so good is that the Taliban don't go out in the midday sun. It's far too hot to fight – early morning and late afternoon are much more comfortable!"

## Did you try to reproduce the sunset and sunrise look?

It's hard when you're on a schedule. I've had this situation on documentaries in places like the Sahara when the director says: "We're going to get up early for the sunrise, shoot for a couple of hours and then go back to the hotel. We'll have a break and go out again to catch the evening light." In practice, there's never time for the hotel break and you end up still shooting at midday!

Actually, for *Our Girl*, we found the harsh midday light helped. Normally you would silk it down and try to soften it when shooting actors, but we actually wanted the harshness to show the heat of Afghanistan, so we shot right through the day. We would schedule scenes that were supposed to be early morning or late afternoon at the beginning or end of the day, and there were some pre-dawn scenes so we'd get to location at 4:00 or 5:00am, well before sunrise. Most of the time the actors had helmets on, which would shade their faces, so you didn't have the harsh light directly on the face but still felt the heat; that was the look we wanted.

## How did the ALEXA fare in the heat?

The ALEXA was incredible. It got very, very hot – you couldn't touch the camera at one point; it was like touching an iron – but it just kept going. We would try to shade it but it wasn't really practical when we were handheld. We never had an issue with the cameras going down.

Another problem was shooting scenes involving helicopters because of sand blowing around. You couldn't put any covers on the cameras because they would just get blown off. At one point we could hear sand rattling around in the fan – not great for the camera – but again it just soldiered on. The only real casualty was a filter; we had an optical flat that turned a very heavy Pro-Mist because it was literally sandblasted. It was like frosted glass in the end.



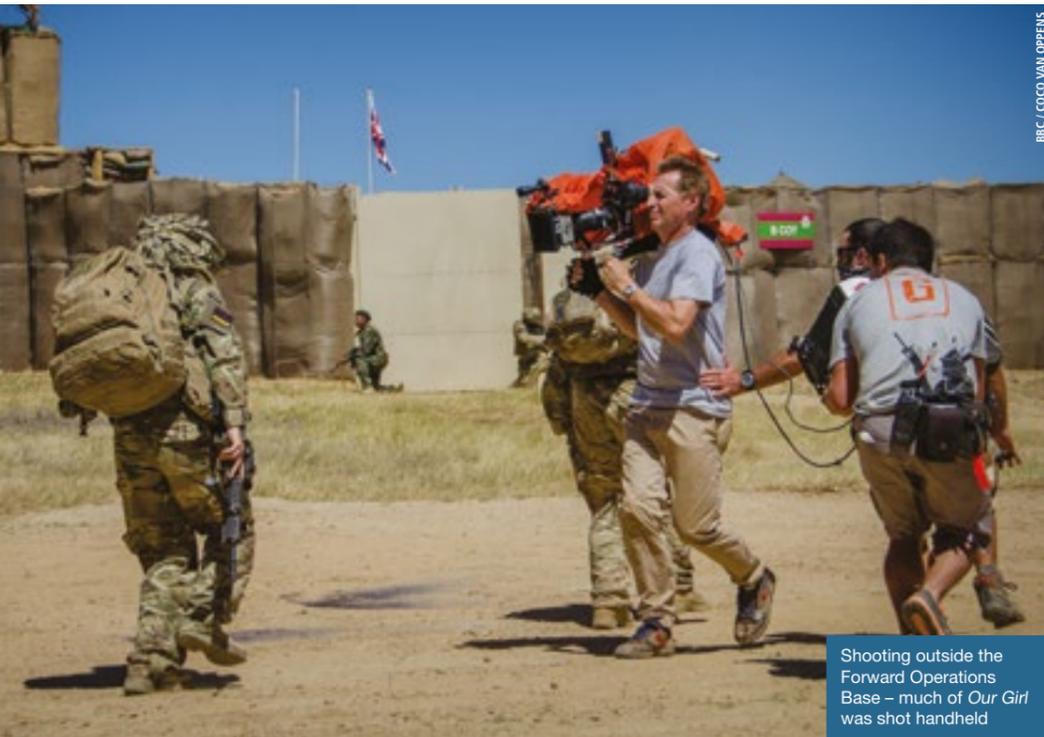
On *Our Girl* I operated A camera, mostly handheld, plus we had a B camera mainly on Steadicam, so I needed to be able to gauge the lighting and exposure through the viewfinder, often for both cameras simultaneously; with the ALEXA, you can wirelessly monitor the B camera, switching feeds in the viewfinder.

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Feeling the heat in the Med tent on *Our Girl*

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Shooting outside the Forward Operations Base – much of *Our Girl* was shot handheld

depth of field, to help focus the audience's attention and allow them to be more intimate with the characters, so letting the background fall away. We also often used longer lenses, so I really don't know how Justin did it – the focus was always absolutely spot on. He would often get a big hug from the director!

The grips were great too; nothing was too much trouble. Here, we struggle sometimes if we want to get out a 12x12 or especially a 20x20 silk. To be fair to grips here, it's often because of the lack of manpower, but in South Africa it never seemed to be an issue. The gaffer would say, "Do you want the 20x20?" and I'd reply, "I'd love it but it's far too windy isn't it?" "Don't worry, it's fine," he'd say. They're just used to working in those conditions!

### Tell us about your approach to lighting

My approach for the lighting on *Our Girl*, as with the shooting style, was based on the documentary aesthetic of naturalism. This means when you go into a location you look to see where the main source of light comes from – maybe the windows or practical lights. It's this that motivates my lighting sources and makes the drama feel real. If you're doing fantasy, you can do what you want as it's not meant to be real, but for *Our Girl* we wanted realism.

Even for *Dartmoor Killing*, which is a psychological thriller that gets darker and darker, I still tended to base the lighting on natural sources because we wanted the audience to believe what they are seeing. This approach not only feels real but can be quite a simple way of doing it. In 10 years of shooting drama, I've learnt that simpler is often better. The more lights you use, the more shadows you get and it generally takes longer without necessarily getting better.

I did several series of *Skins*, which involved a lot of inexperienced actors, who were still in sixth form. Because of that they learnt very fast and were soon very film-set savvy, but nevertheless we wanted freedom for them to move around and not to have to hit exact marks. I don't like too much clutter on the set, so the actors have more freedom to move around. It's always a compromise; you want to do as good as you can photographically, but at the end of the day it's really about the script and the performances. It doesn't matter how beautiful it looks if it's badly acted and the script is poor.

Script and performance are king and I don't think any department should distract from that. As soon as the audience notices something – maybe the design or a costume isn't right, or the lighting jars – it can take them out of the moment and you lose them.

Some directors (like Kay Mellor whom I worked with on *The Syndicate*) don't like to rehearse; she likes the actors to have free rein and to catch the resulting variations in performance, maybe capturing something new and surprising each time.

At the other end of the scale, other directors like lots of rehearsals and do precise set-ups, which is what we did on *The Interceptor*.

Some directors are more theatre-orientated so they're primarily interested in the performance and leave me to do the camera blocking. Others are more technical and know exactly what lens they want and precisely where the camera is to go. I enjoy the variety – that's the fun of it – but really I like directors who give you that little bit of freedom.

I always like to be on the set for the director's rehearsal if possible. I usually sit quietly in the corner but I'm watching and thinking about how the scene is playing out, how we are going to cover it, where I am going to put my lights, etc. To come in at the crew rehearsal stage is far too late; I can do a much better job when I've had that thinking time and can be ahead of the game. In TV, the schedules are so tight this is very important.

The experience I've gained since moving into drama has helped greatly. Perhaps to begin with I overcomplicated things – I had a truck full of lights so I felt I had to use them! Outwardly I might seem quite calm on set, but internally, especially when the clock is ticking, I'm thinking "How are we going to do this in the time and make it look good?" Previously, I might have panicked, but with experience I find I can relax and anticipate how it will work.

Faster cameras help to a certain extent. Where you might have needed an 18K lamp, it might now be a 2.5K because you don't need as much light to get an exposure – but you still need to convey the mood of the scene, give it interest and make it feel real with lighting. If you base it on reality, the audience will believe it. We can shoot in pretty much any light condition now, but it's not just about getting an exposure, it's about how you enhance the emotion of the scene through composition and lighting.

### The changing skies played a bit part in the *Dartmoor Killing* shoot?

Yes, many scenes were filmed up on Sharp Tor. We had to climb up and down the Tor for 10 evenings because the finale of the film takes place there. Originally these scenes were scripted as night, but I pointed out to the director and good friend BAFTA-award winner Peter Nicholson: "That's going to be quite a challenge shooting on the Tor for night. If you light it for night, you're only going to be able to light a small area, especially on our budget. If you do light a small area there's no point in going up the Tor because you'll see nothing



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Nick and crew on one of the many trips up Sharp Tor

around it, and the whole reason we're there is to see Dartmoor beyond. It's an important character in itself. Otherwise you may as well shoot in a studio against a black cyc. Even Spielberg can't afford to light an entire valley!" I came up with the idea of setting it at deep dusk so it looks very dark but you can still see the landscape behind the actors.

Night is always tricky to get right. When I first used the ALEXA, we did tests in Leeds for *Sirens*, a series about paramedics. The results were amazing just with street lighting and the lens wasn't even wide open. Previously those streets would have had to be lit, with cherry pickers up etc. In an urban environment, I like all that natural light of varying colour temperatures you get from street lights and shop windows, especially if it's raining or you have a wet down – you get wonderful colours and reflections.

But once you go out of an urban environment, where's the motivation for your light source? Well, of course, it's the moon – and it's always a full moon in the movies! It's often too blue and overdone, and can look stagey and theatrical. It's difficult, especially somewhere like a forest. I did another army series a few years ago where we put up a number of Airstar balloons, which worked pretty well because you could shoot 360 degrees and move fairly quickly. It gives a nice soft top light.

We shot *Dartmoor Killing* in June, over the time of the longest day. This gave us maximum twilight for the 'night' scenes, but even then we would be lucky

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We definitely got shots with the octocopter we couldn't have achieved any other way. We did one shot where we started virtually on the ground, revealed two actors running down a hill, went up to see a guy walk across a farmhouse courtyard and then kept on rising to see the Tor beyond.

to shoot a minute of screen time per evening and we had about 15 minutes of 'night' to cover. The main problem with shooting a scene over 10 nights is weather continuity; it might be dry one day and wet the next. We had planned to shoot in May but I couldn't in the end because I was still on *Our Girl*. However, the production moved the dates and they thanked me in the end because in May we had terrible weather (which actually worked in our favour for the UK scenes for *Our Girl* as it was a good contrast to the sun of Afghanistan). Otherwise we'd still be in Dartmoor shooting now! We were blessed with fine, mainly sunny weather for the whole shoot. Each evening we would start on the shadow side of the Tor so the sun didn't spoil the illusion of twilight. Ironically, if it was a cloudy evening we could start earlier

because there weren't any sun issues. Another challenge was that one of our main actors needed to use a torch and we had a car stunt with the headlights on. We had to shoot those scenes at the very end of the twilight, otherwise they wouldn't show up, so we had to move fast before the light completely vanished.

That's where the ALEXA is amazing – it sees into the twilight and I only had to up the ISO once. Although the final footage needed to appear dark, I didn't want to underexpose, especially when there was plenty of light early in the evening (we started with NDs and pulled them as the light dropped). I exposed normally because I didn't want to lose any information by stopping down. The final light levels and colour temperature were set in the controlled environment of the grade, which was done in the Films at 59 grading theatre by colourist Tony Osborne, who did a great job.

We also shot time-lapses on a Nikon D800 over two or three days, mostly sunrises and sunsets. That worked very well. We were able to catch some wonderful moody skies, adding another dimension to the film.

**You used an octocopter for some shots?**

The octocopter was fantastic. We used Gifford Hooper of HoverCam in Plymouth. He has won Academy awards for innovation. I used them on *Time Team* years ago when it was a substantially bigger remote helicopter that could take a film camera. Now it's much easier with smaller cameras and drones. In South Africa we'd used a drone for a fairly straightforward shot just rising up, but for *Dartmoor Killing* Peter wanted to try more movement. However, we soon realised they are better going in straight lines, especially when you're trying to choreograph something with actors and moving vehicles. Doing 360s was quite tricky. Obviously the first thing is you've got to hide the pilot who flies the

'copter and the camera operator, not to mention the rest of the crew. This is not really possible because the pilot needs to have visual contact with the aircraft at all times, so he can't hide under a bush! There are a lot of elements to get right, especially if you're cueing actors who have to run ahead of a Land Rover driving – but it actually all worked very well in the end.

We definitely got shots we couldn't have achieved any other way. We did one shot where we started virtually on the ground, revealed two actors running down a hill, went up to see a guy walk across a farmhouse courtyard and then kept on rising to see the Tor beyond. You couldn't have used a conventional helicopter for that because it couldn't have started low enough and it would have been too close to the actors; it would have blown them away and been dangerous.

I see drones used more and more on documentaries as well as drama these days. They really are a great tool and you can get shots that would otherwise be impossible – say, starting inside a house and flying out through a window – but I think there's a danger of them being overused and losing the impact. We used it sparingly on *Dartmoor Killing*. There were three or four big shots that lift it out of the ordinary without being gimmicky and it was perfect to show the incredibly cinematic landscape of Dartmoor.

The other issue is weight of course. You can't put an ALEXA up on an octocopter. So we used a Panasonic Lumix GH4 in 4K. We hadn't tested it, there just wasn't time, but it cut into the ALEXA footage really well. I could slightly see the difference, but considering it's a budget camera, it was incredible. At the end of the day, it's a £1,000 camera compared with a £50,000 camera, so the dynamic range isn't as good, but then the ALEXA is something that's hard to beat for dynamic range.

**Do you use filters much these days?**

With the previous generation of HD cameras, the dynamic range was so limited I really don't know how we used to cope with the limited contrast range, especially on sunny daylight exteriors. That's the great thing about cameras like the ALEXA and RED; it's so liberating, not only because of the fast ISO but also the amazing dynamic range. Where in the past we had to use grad filters to keep sky detail, now with RAW and



Nick and focus-puller Ben Oliver shooting on Dartmoor

RIC BACON



Photo courtesy of Johann Perry, cinematographer on Firecracker Films' shoot for the Vodafone Firsts campaign

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Shooting scenes at 'Camp Bastion' on an ALEXA from Take 2 in Cape Town

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even Log C, all the sky and foreground detail is captured without grads. So I'm using fewer ND and colour grads than I used to. Although it's great to do things in camera, we have all these tools available to us now in post and sometimes it can be quicker and more precise to do it in the grade.

I do use straight NDs to reduce the depth of field and diffusion though. On *Our Girl* I used a White Pro-Mist to reduce the contrast, lift the shadow detail and slightly soften the image. With HD, whether it's 2K, 4K or beyond, we've got all this resolution and that's great for documentaries and wildlife where you want to see all the detail – the feathers on a bird or scales on a snake etc – but you don't necessarily want that level of detail to show up the warts and all on an actor's face! We DoPs often live or die on how we light actors. I did the pilot last year for the forthcoming Lionsgate show *The Royals* with Elizabeth Hurley. We did screen tests with Elizabeth, not just for lighting but also to see which diffusion worked best and we liked the Hollywood Black Magic. It's an in-focus diffusion, in other words it softens the skin but doesn't make the entire image look soft. Elizabeth is amazing – she's nearly 50 and has great skin – so we were lucky, but it's not always the case and we have to be very conscious of how we shoot actors, especially if we want to work with them again!

The irony with HD is we often end up degrading the image, especially on close-ups, by adding filters to make the image softer and more filmic. Maybe for wides and landscapes I'll shoot clean. I recently saw a test using a new 4K camera with brand new lenses; when it was projected my eyes were practically bleeding it was so sharp! I'm not a Luddite, but I don't think 4K is necessary for everything; it very much depends on the subject matter.

**Have you ever owned a camera and would you now?**

I once owned a 16mm ARRI SR and an Aaton XTR, but HD video and the BBC killed off 16mm film for television. I wish I'd kept them though as I have a collection of old cameras at home, including an ARRI ST and some 8mm, 9.5mm and other 16mm cameras, so they would have ended up in my display cabinets for a bit of nostalgia! When I worked in documentary you would generally be hired with kit, so that's why I had my own. I did also own a Beta SP camcorder – the workhorse Sony BVW400 – and I used that for the first and subsequent *Time Team* programmes for about eight years, an amazing long life for a video camera.

I don't own equipment now because in drama today it seems de rigour to have a pantechnicon full of camera bodies, lenses and a plethora of accessories. It's a vast investment and also with technology changing so fast, I don't think it's worth it. Also, the rental companies are doing such good deals for production, I really couldn't compete.

I also don't want the responsibility if equipment fails. I've been in that position before and it's a nightmare. Now I can just pick up the phone and someone else deals with it. I have enough on my plate just getting the show in the can. So for me, it's peace of mind. It's fine if people want to buy their own equipment but, for me, I've been there and done that and this way I can always have the very latest kit.

What I don't really understand these days is the economics; we seem to have less money for rental then we had when it was just a 16mm camera kit in the back of an estate car but now we have about 20 times more kit in a vast truck!

**Nick, thank you for sharing your experiences with Zerb.**

**Fact File**



Nick shooting *The Royals* at Blenheim Palace

PAUL BLUNDWELL

Nick Dance BSC started his career in documentaries, shooting in over 60 countries, from the deserts of the Sahara and Atacama to the pyramids and Great Wall of China, including flying with the Red Arrows to diving into the ocean on nuclear submarines. He made documentaries for BBC's *QED* strand about: Falklands War hero Simon Weston; Monty Roberts, the horse whisperer; the Elephant Man and many others. He was part of the team that created the C4 series *Time Team* and went on to shoot many of the early episodes.

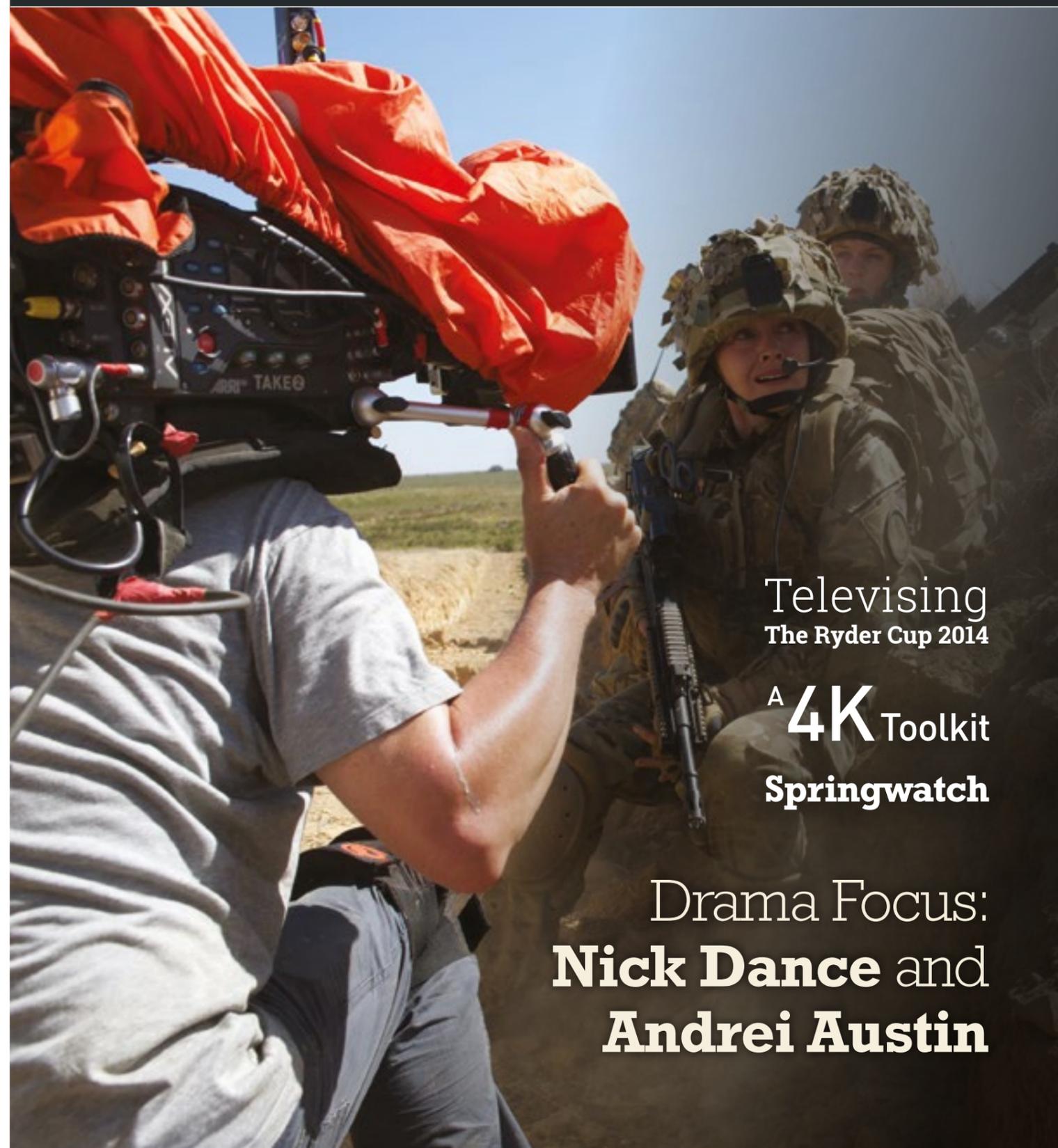
He has shot commercials for Saatchi & Saatchi and promos for Ridley Scott Associates, including Jamie T's *Sheila* with Bob Hoskins, and visuals for the concerts used in *The Chemical Brothers: Don't Think* feature film. His recent drama productions include the feature film *Dartmoor Killing* and *The Interceptor*, a new series for BBC 1.

Nick has worked on many BAFTA and RTS-award winning programmes including: *Bodies*; *Pompeii – The Last Day*, Terry Pratchett's *Johnny and the Bomb*; *Nuremberg*; *Goering's Last Stand*, *Call The Midwife* and *Skins* – for which he was personally nominated for a BAFTA and RTS award for Photography and Lighting, as well as awarded a GTC Award for Excellence. Other credits include: *Mansfield Park*, *The Body Farm*, *Death In Paradise*, *The Syndicate*, *The Paradise* and *Our Girl*.

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Guild of Television Cameramen

Issue 81 Spring 2015



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