

Throwing some light on TV drama

GTC workshops really have gone from strength to strength in recent years, with the largest scale and best attended so far this year exploring drama lighting. This workshop was led by multi-award winning DoP **Nick Dance BSC** and staged at Dukes Island Studios. Nearly 90 GTC members showed up on Saturday 28 May for the event, which was part demo and part Q&A. A full drama camera crew, as well as DIT James Marsden, supported Nick in demonstrating the drama workflow. The day included such a wealth of valuable insights, user tips and technical information, that it is possible here only to give a flavour of the range of content covered. Next time be sure to attend in person and don't miss out!

WITH THANKS TO ALEXANDER M HOWE FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHS



CLIVE NORTH

Nick began by explaining his own route into lighting TV drama series and features, which was from a film and documentary background, both of which have shaped his approach to his drama work (in particular being able to work flexibly and react to changing situations, with a preference for 'naturalistic' lighting and wherever possible 'keeping it simple'). His film background engrained a reluctance to overshoot, which is still valuable today as it saves time and cost down the line in post.

He then showed a whistlestop powerpoint history of drama lighting, highlighting his own particular influences and cinematographer 'heroes' as well as referencing significant developments in camera and lighting technology that brought about new shooting styles (at first lighting was purely about getting an exposure rather than creating a mood, but the arrival of faster film stocks, handheld cameras, steadicam and HD video all enabled new styles).

Nick, along with many other top DoPs, is a keen student of the history of film lighting and regularly draws upon this knowledge for inspiration. At the start of each new project it is key to establish an appropriate 'look' in collaboration with the director, and often useful input into this decision-making can be gained from reference to former greats. Sometimes, of course, it is necessary to work within a style that has already been established by a previous DoP (when coming on board for later episodes in a multi-part series for instance) but the most fun is to be had when you can establish and build the look from scratch, designing a style that both reflects the script and enhances the work of other departments.

Demonstrating an unselfish approach to his role as DoP, which (along with his lighting talent and expertise of course) no doubt endears him to the many producers who choose to employ him, throughout the day Nick referred often to the importance of working collaboratively with others across the whole production – a key element you can't really learn from textbooks and may not pick up from a film school syllabus. This can include allowing actors the freedom to move as they wish (unrestricted by intrusive light fittings, clutter on the set, or camera moves and lighting setups so constrained that they have to hit and maintain marks with no margin for error); always being aware of the sensitivities, insecurities and comfort of the cast (so, diplomacy on set is key at all times and it is important, for instance, to consider how much heat lighting fixtures will throw on the actors, especially when in heavy period costume); and being aware of the work of other departments (such as not shooting so tight or with such a shallow depth of field that you never see the work of the set designer, or lighting in such a way that reveals wig laces, thereby giving the makeup department a problem).

The crew

Helping Nick on the day, and answering questions as appropriate, was a full drama camera crew, comprising 1st assistant camera (AC) Stephen Janes and camera assistant Matt Deeley (both GTC members), plus camera trainee James Woodbridge. Data imaging technician (DIT) James Marsden also played a big part, explaining the role of the DIT, contributing a great deal of useful information on different codecs and quirks of current camera models commonly used in the drama environment; explaining the importance of and correct way to record a grey scale test chart at the start of clips to provide a reference for the grade; and demonstrating both the edit and grading end of the drama workflow. Electricians Sam Madden and Clive Sait completed the complement of

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Working mainly in the corporate environment, often what clients see on Sunday night TV, they want in their next corporate on Monday, so my reason for attending was to pick up some tips and tricks from the drama world I could incorporate into what I do. We shoot a lot of 'scenarios' for training, so the example scene was perfect.

Graham Risdon



DoP Nick Dance BSC presenting to around 90 GTC members at Dukes Island Studios. A full drama spec ARRI ALEXA kit with ARRI Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses, filters, follow focus kit, plus all the accessories, was loaned for the day by GTC sponsors ARRI. Nick currently shoots most often with the ALEXA and both he and DIT James Marsden praised it for its latitude ('It's hard to screw up the exposure!') and the sophistication of the ARRI colour science



DIT James Marsden was on hand to demonstrate and explain his role. This involves not only the crucial responsibility of backing up the recorded cards; he also makes logs of the shots, opens clips and checks them in the appropriate editing platform for quality and keying etc, and will identify and quarantine any cards that may be causing concerns, feeding back all this information to the DoP as he works

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Always keen to learn more, even in areas of my craft where I am already very experienced and skilled, this was another workshop right up my street.

Ian McCann



Actresses Helen Kingston and Katrina Hawkins acted out a simple scene (mute to avoid the extra complication of sound) and patiently sat in to demonstrate the effects of different hard and soft light sources plus levels and methods of diffusion



DIT James Marsden demonstrated how the shots cut together and performed a simple grade to match the images. LCD screens were kindly provided and set up by GTC sponsor Presteigne Broadcast, who also supplied the PA system.



Nick prefers to operate himself as it keeps him connected with the action on set, plus he likes to see the image through the viewfinder; 1st AC Stephen Janes is focus pulling – often a tough job with the current fashion for shallow depth of field

crew members, and worked hard all day utilising the wide range of latest-generation tungsten and LED luminaires, plus accessories, that Panalux had kindly supplied.

Lighting demo

To illustrate the process of shooting a scene, a simple three-wall room-set, with door and window, had been commissioned; this was built by FreeForm Design and Construction. With actresses Katrina Hawkins and Helen Kingston, Nick had devised and blocked a short scene that comprised one actress entering through the door bearing some news, crossing the room to join the other girl, who was seated at a table, then cutting in tight to reveal reactions and the headline on the newspaper – a humorous moment as this turned out to be an in-joke featuring former GTC Chairman Keith Massey!

In drama terms it was a straightforward setup covered in wide shot, two-shot and a selection of increasingly tight close-ups, but was perfect for demonstrating the workflow of blocking, lighting, how to use and control depth of field, selection and adjustment of filters and diffusion shot by shot, and efficient shooting (going in tighter on a range of lenses on the same line before turning around to cover other angles). The decision had been taken to go without sound, but Nick pointed out the importance of working well with the sound department and the need to bear in mind when lighting where the booms will need to be so that shadow issues can be avoided. For TV drama, post-syncing is rarely an option so it is crucial to capture good sound on the day.

The scene was first lit for daylight, using 'sunlight' through the window (a 5K with 1/2 grid cloth for diffusion), Kinos for backlight and no need for much fill (the ALEXA 'sees into the shadows'). Nick explained that his preference is usually for soft but directional light sources, often controlled with an eggcrate. Some newer luminaires have built-in control, which is useful as it saves space on set, and nowadays these also sometimes include the ability to adjust colour temperature, saving time and cost on the need to add gels.

After lunch Nick also demonstrated a night setup, this time lighting from above (as if from a ceiling practical) using the new LED Bi-Colour Spring Ball just developed by Panalux. He pointed out that in this scenario an in-vision practical lamp would be nice (and these days, with the increased latitude of cameras such as the ALEXA, practicals are much easier to handle as they no longer 'burn out' in the image).

Blocking and prelighting

Nick explained that he likes to be on set for the block, usually tucked in the corner and not chipping in while the action is worked out between cast and director (unless something being rehearsed is looking uncinematic). He keeps the set free of 'clutter' for rehearsals to allow full freedom of movement.

Asked about prelighting, he explained that the bigger the set the more it is necessary to prelight. This is especially important for night shoots as there isn't time to wait for cherry-pickers etc to move, so it is important to establish as much as possible during the recce. It doesn't always work 100%, as the actors may do something different, but at least you are ready for different options and the turnaround. On a production like *Skins* it was important always to be ready because the actors were young and not professionals, so it was tricky to get them to repeat action. You get to know which actors are good at first takes and which will 'go off the boil'. Certain things can be busked but it is important to get the key fixtures in place. Obviously it is easier to prelight

Sample drama lighting kit kindly supplied by Panalux

Incandescent Fresnel lamps

1 x 5kw 2 x 650w
1 x 2kw 2 x 300w
1 x 1kw 1 x 150w

Rifa

500w Rifa light

Octadome

Tungsten with eggcrate etc.

Kino Flo (3200k tubes)

1 x 4ft 4 bank
1 x 2ft 4 bank

LEDs

1 x ARRI L7-C spotlight
1 x Celeb 200
1 x Velvet Thelight kit inc eggcrate
1 x 1x1 Litepanels Bi Colour lamp
1 Bi-colour Spring Ball
Rosco LED kit

Chimera

Chimera with eggcrate for 1 x 1 Litepanels (as above)
Medium Pancake with 500w lamp

Dimmers

1 x 5kw inline dimmer
6 x 2k inline dimmers

Accessories

Megaboom arm
C Stands and knuckles:

- 8 x Large
- 6 x med
- 2 x small (low boy)
- 4 x C stand long arms
- 2 x C stand short arms

8x8 Butterfly frame with 1/2 and full grids
1 x Net kit
2 x each BC/ES 40w, 60w, 100w pearl lightbulbs
1 x 36x36 Ulcer
2 x 2x2 and 4x4 poly/poly holders
Flag kit plus meat axe and 4x4 floppy
6 x magic arms
4 x Cardellinis
Sandbags
246 blocks
Croc clips
Gel cutter
Roll black gaffer
Blackwrap

Filters

4 x 4 frames with 1/2 grid, 252, 251, 250 and 216
3 x 3 frames with 1/2 grid, 250 and 216
Roll 251, 250 and 216
1/8 and 1/4 CTO, CTB, plus and minus green
188 cosmetic highlight



The GTC would like to thank Steve Giudici and the staff of Dukes Island Studios for all their help in providing such an excellent venue plus all the catering for the day.

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Hands up... I don't know anything about lighting for drama. The only bits I've dabbled with have been reconstructions as part of documentaries so, I was expecting to be blinded with 'drama science'! What I actually got from Nick's presentation was reassurance that what I am doing on a day-to-day basis is similar, just on a smaller scale, which I can easily upscale if I need to.

John Anderson



Camera kit kindly supplied by GTC sponsors ARRI

1 ARRI ALEXA PLUS High-Speed Camera Kit
1 ARRI ALEXA High Speed Accessory Kit
1 Sony US10 SxS Card Reader Kit
4 ARRI Media Lead Acid PELI 24v 17Ah Battery and charger kit
1 ARRI MB-20 Production Matte Box (19mm) Kit
1 ARRI FF3 19mm Follow Focus System Kit
1 ARRI/Zeiss Ultra Prime 16mm T1.9 Lens Kit (feet)
1 ARRI/Zeiss Ultra Prime LDS 24mm - 85mm T1.9 Lens Kit
1 ARRI/Zeiss Ultra Prime 100mm T1.9 Lens Kit (feet)
ARRI Zeiss Ultra Primes: 16, 24, 32, 50, 85, 100 mm
1 Tiffen 4x5.65" IRND Filter Set (3)
1 Tiffen 4x5.65" IRND 1.2 Filter
1 Schneider 4x5.65" Circular True Pola Filter
1 TV Logic HD LCD Waveform 7" Monitor Kit
1 TV Logic LCD HD 17" Monitor Kit
1 ARRI Media Monitor Stand Kit
3 BNC Cable Drum Kit
2 Mains Extension 40 meters Cable Drum Kit
2 ARRI Media Lead Acid 12v .38Ah Battery Kit
1 ARRI Media Lead Acid 12v .38Ah Battery Charger Kit
1 Boxx HD Microwave Transmitter and Receiver Kit

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Electricians Same Madden and Clive Sait had a busy day prelighting, adjusting lamps for two different lighting setups (daylight and night-time) plus demonstrating the effects of a range of different diffusion frames and other lighting control tools.

in a set than on location. Often on TV drama you only get 10 minutes to turn round, so having efficient sparks is key.

Nick finds that productions are using two cameras more often now as this is seen as a way of getting through the schedule but it can lead to compromising shots and even end up taking longer, so has to be used carefully. He tries to avoid cross-shooting because of the compromised eyelines but sometimes it is preferable (e.g. for shooting round tables with lots of people eating where continuity is tricky, or for performance reasons). In this situation he will often use an overhead light, e.g. a Chimera pancake, but then you have to avoid 'Godfather eyes' (referencing Gordon Willis' famous lighting) so may need to bring in eye lights as well.

Q&A

During the day there were many questions from the audience, answered fully by the most appropriate crew member. The question of monitoring images on set came up several times. Nick likes to work through the viewfinder backed up with a monitor that he is familiar with, mounted on the camera. Asked about 4K, Nick says it is often too 'harsh' for drama; the irony is that you end up adding filters and using retro lenses to 'degrade' the image. Also, as James added, post houses often don't have a full 4K pipeline, so even if a production is shot 4K, there will frequently be no full 4K end version. That said, Nick tested the new Panasonic V35 VariCam on a short feature *Swilly Girl* and really liked its images.

As stated in the introduction, it's impossible here to cover the full extent of the information imparted in this fascinating experience-based GTC workshop, but hopefully this article gives at least a taster of the range of great material covered.

Fact File

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 and ocean diving 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 others.

He has shot commercials for Saatchi & Saatchi and promos for Ridley Scott Associates, including Jamie T's *Sheila* with Bob Hoskins, and concert visuals for *The Chemical Brothers: Don't Think* feature.

Nick's drama work includes many BAFTA and RTS award-winning productions including: *Bodies*, *Pompeii – The Last Day*, Terry Pratchett's *Johnny and the Bomb*, *Shameless*, *Nuremberg: Goering's Last Stand*, *Call The Midwife* and *Skins*, for which he was personally nominated for BAFTA and RTS awards for Photography and Lighting, and awarded a GTC Award for Excellence. Other credits include: *The Syndicate*, *The Interceptor* and *Our Girl* (for which he received a second GTC Award for Excellence), *Mansfield Park*, *Mr Selfridge* and *The Paradise*.

Nick recently completed two feature films: *Dartmoor Killing*, winner of Best Thriller at The National Film Awards 2016 and *B&B* for Creative England, as well as a new ITV series, *Brief Encounters*, set in the 1980s. He is currently shooting *The Replacement*, a 3-part thriller for BBC1, with Dougray Scott, Vicky McClure and Morven Christie, before moving on to the next series of *Poldark*.