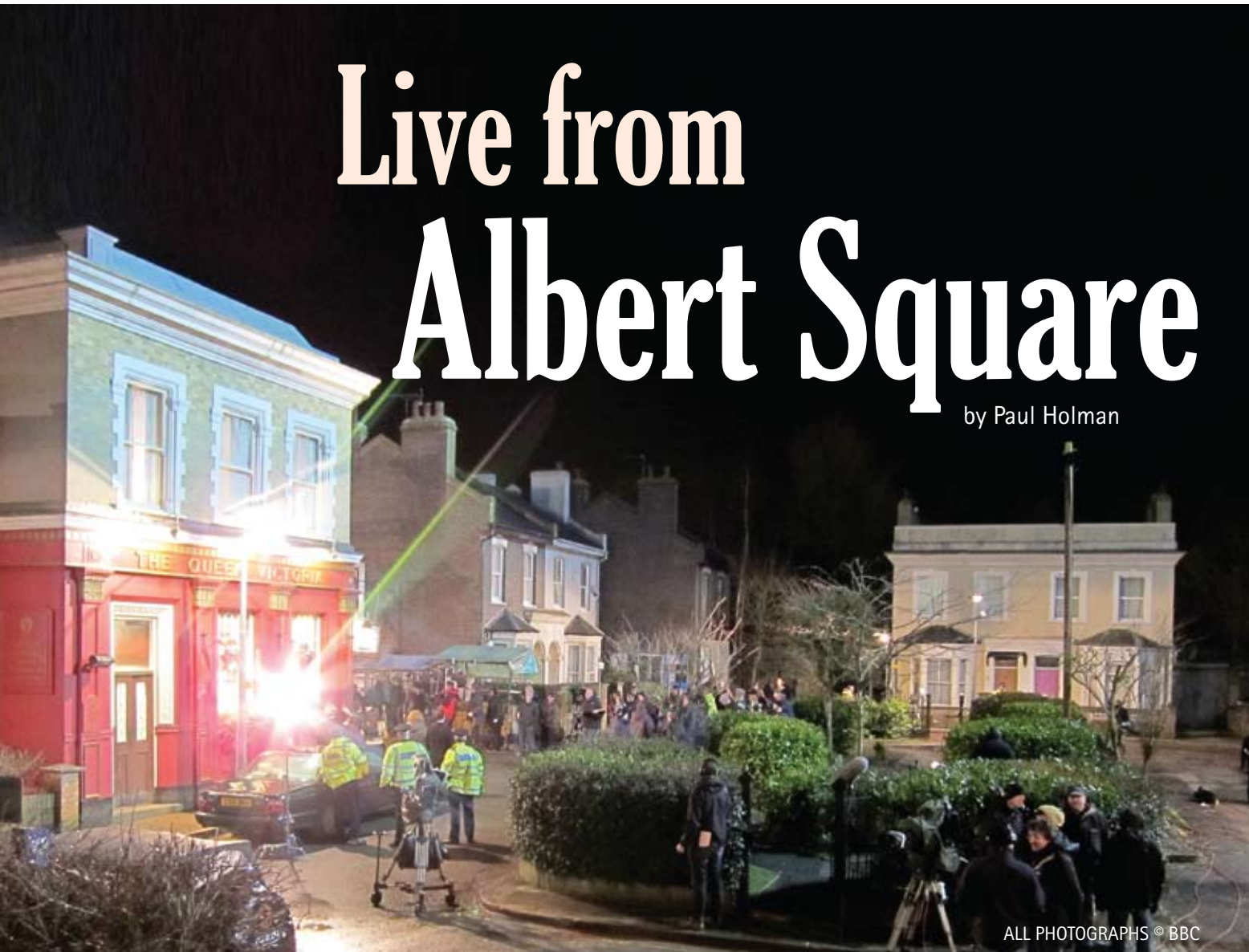


Live from Albert Square

by Paul Holman



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▲ Duncan Unsworth and Chris Goor rehearsing a possible ending



▲ The cast were allowed to rehearse in warm clothing

Shock news

"That won't look good on the live show" had long been a standing joke on the set of *EastEnders* whenever an artist forgot their lines or some action went wrong. So, the announcement last September that the show's 25th anniversary, on 19 February 2010, was to be marked with a live episode came as quite a shock to all of us who work regularly on the show. If this wasn't challenging enough already, it was also to include a major 'shock' plot development that would be kept secret from both cast and crew until during the live broadcast.

Initially, the only thing we knew for certain was that Clive Arnold would direct. Clive is one of the most respected directors at *EastEnders* with a reputation for working fast but calmly, and with a fantastic ability to co-ordinate multicamera. He's also very well liked by the cast as he gives them wonderful flexibility in rehearsals. However, he hadn't

directed live television before and none of the normal production team had experience of working live either. Fortunately though, the regular camera staff on *EastEnders* all learnt their craft at BBC Television Centre where live work was nothing unusual, and it came as no surprise when Duncan Unsworth, who regularly works with Clive, was chosen as overall camera supervisor.

Then we learnt that the writer, Simon Ashdown, was to be given no special restrictions and that this was expected to be a 'normal' *EastEnders* episode with the usual fast-paced action including both interior and exterior scenes. A question for us was whether the technical requirements could be met from within the existing infrastructure, or whether an outside broadcast unit would have to be drafted in to provide more facilities. Very significantly for a live show, the *EastEnders*' studios and sets are spread over a large area, so a character

walking out of the Queen Vic Pub onto Albert Square in reality entails a three-minute walk between sets.

As the New Year brought the transmission date ever nearer, more details began to emerge. The shock revelation was to be 'who killed Archie', the character whose death had been the climax of the Christmas Day show. It looked like all the studios would be needed, as well as the lot, so this would imply a minimum of 15 cameras. Plus, we'd need more cameras than usual if a stunt was to be involved – and our tame stunt arranger had already been spotted receiving the roof of the Queen Vic.

As none of the existing studios had big enough vision-mixing or sound desks, SIS LIVE would be providing outside broadcast facilities, with a large scanner, the DMCCR, for the main network vision coverage. Another separate audio-mixing truck would handle the complex sound mix and live dub.

With just six days to go, the final requirements were settled. There were to be 40 full-sized cameras and a couple of small effects cameras, to be operated by 32 cameramen, some of whom would be moving from the studios to the lot during the show, plus further camera moves from location to location on the lot as well.

The normal *EastEnders* cameras would be used, supplemented by additional Sony BVP950 cameras supplied by SIS and run directly into their scanner, plus some extra hired in Philips cameras compatible with the existing infrastructure. To avoid any mismatching, the Philips cameras were to be used in the studios while the SIS cameras would be out on the lot.

Day 1 Tx -3

I was to work with camera supervisor Kevin Coe's crew in Studio B, then move to the lot to operate a second camera. We gathered just before the

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call time to be greeted by our resource manager with 'welcome packs' – almost half a ream of paperwork to sift through in 15 minutes. And they wondered why we hadn't read it all and kept asking what was happening next!

Our studio was the first to start rehearsing, with Clive and the cast blocking through the positions and action. As we started to move the peds to their first positions it became clear that preparations weren't quite as thorough as they might have been. My camera position was blocked by a wall. The scene crew managed to strike the offending flat pretty fast, but had to leave a pillar until later which made lining up shots less than ideal.

Then, almost before we felt we'd

started, Clive moved on to another studio. Meanwhile, our crew spent half an hour sorting out problems with the set, negotiating with the lighting department and rerouting cabling. We choreographed amongst ourselves, and with the sound crew, how we could move from set to set and back again in the time available and then those of us who needed to move outside to the lot set off to our next location.

On your marks...

My first position looked dry at least. It was inside the Argee Bhajee restaurant set shooting outwards through the door to a taxi. If the taxi failed to stop in position, there'd be no shot. Suddenly, the whirlwind of director,

Day to day life in Walford

EastEnders, one of the UK's most popular serial dramas, is in production 50 weeks of the year, making two hours of drama a week to fill a 52-week schedule.

Two crews work in 9-day blocks – six days in the studios, each with four cameras, and three days outside on the exterior set, the lot, with three cameras and two assistants for rigging and grip work.

At the time of writing, we work with Phillips LDK 100 cameras with triax backs. There is a multicamera recorded version, cut live by a vision-mixer and usually there are extra recorders on each camera's output for additional options in the final edit.

Location shooting away from the main site is also done regularly with smaller teams shooting with DVC Pro recorder backs on the normal camera heads.

Shooting is usually six to eight weeks ahead of transmission.

In summer 2010 it is planned to move to HD acquisition.

actors, stuntmen, stunt arranger, first AD arrived to swiftly block out the action, refine shot sizes etc – and then they were gone, off to the next location. No one seemed to have put any marks down for the taxi, but that would all be sorted in the next rehearsal... wouldn't it?

The next position for my camera was outside where the stunt sequence would start. This involved dropping the cable to be re-rigged, and carrying the camera and head through the back of the set, down a dark alleyway to a second preset tripod about 50m away, all without distracting the artists



▲ Some of the kit waiting to be rigged



▲ Steve Roach rehearsing with Perry Fenwick and Steve MacFadden



▼ Duncan briefing the crew in Studio A



▲ Shooting out through the Argee Bhajee doorway



▲ Kevin Coe trying to warm up!

“with 42 cameras, of two different types, spread over four different areas and working via different galleries into a scanner, the end result was delays to some of the cue lights”

playing another scene and, of course, avoiding walking through the back of shot.

The first proper rehearsal started mid-afternoon with the floor manager shouting, in all seriousness, “Quiet in the studio, going live in two minutes.” Instead of this being met with a ripple of sniggers, the atmosphere became quite serious and silent. It was a surprise to find that instead of a normal stop-start rehearsal during which we could sort out problems with artist positions etc, this first rehearsal was being treated as a non-stop run.

Down the pub

So far, I hadn't seen much of the studio output, so it was interesting to see how everyone else was coping. The crew in Stage 1 with the Queen Vic interior set was having the toughest job. The live episode was a continuation from the previous one which had involved a boisterous wedding party and been shot some weeks earlier. With a cast of nearly 50 principals and supporting artists,

just seeing the character who was talking was a challenge. The scene started well enough, but as the action moved upstage, one of the artists failed to clear as the camera tracked in, causing a hiatus while the crew tried to recover from not being able to hit the correct mark. Artists started to cross shots trying to move to new positions and very soon the rehearsal ground to a halt. This was never going to be an easy scene...

We breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't us who had stopped the rehearsal, whilst sympathising with Peter Woodley's crew who were really up against it. The action was hard enough to follow in the packed set, but there was another problem as well. With 42 cameras, of two different types, spread over four different areas and working via different galleries into a scanner, the end result was delays to some of the cue lights, a nightmare when different-sized shots are coming thick and fast and lens changes have to happen immediately one is off shot.

The rehearsal continued, eventually reaching Studio B and our part of

the show. As soon as our scene had finished, we grabbed our outdoor kit and moved to our second positions. Joy of joys, it had started to rain. Nothing terrible, just steady drenching drizzle. Our first scene worked surprisingly well with the taxi hitting its (non-existent) marks perfectly. Everything rolled on but we could see that the Queen Vic scenes still weren't going well. As the temperature dropped and the rain became increasingly heavy, our interest in watching the other crew sort their problems out started to wane!

The big stunt

Soon, everyone was back on the lot to look at the complex final stunt scenes. Our shots seemed straightforward enough but the real difficulties lay in the logistics of the stunt sequence. The main character, Bradley, was to run from the police, climb a drainpipe onto a roof, jump from roof to roof edge, shout to his wife, then overbalance and fall off. There was also some in-vision car movement as more police arrived on the scene.

This would require careful timing and accurate shot sizes to avoid seeing Charlie Clements, who played Bradley, swapping with the stunt man who would climb the drain pipe. Charlie needed to move quickly off the lot and up onto a specially built scaffold

tower to enable a close-up of him shouting, shot from below. Meanwhile, a big inflatable fall bag had to be positioned under the stunt and removed immediately the stunt man had hit it, all disguised with sound and lighting effects of a passing train to cover the inevitable din of the bag's removal. Charlie would then run back to take up the fallen hero's position for the final few shots. The crew needed to be positioned so that they wouldn't obstruct the mechanics of the stunt, while the rest of the cast would be moving into position so that they could come out of the Queen Vic or their various houses for end reactions.

The icing on the cake of complexity was that the final big reveal of 'who killed Archie' was still a secret. We were to rehearse ten endings as the rain started to turn to sleet and flakes of snow. Albert Square's reputation for being a hideously cold place to work wasn't dented that night.

Day 2 Tx -2

Following the difficulties of the previous night's rehearsal, we started the day with a full facilities check, including tests to establish what sort of delay there was with the cue lights. While this was happening, Duncan visited each studio to chat about any problems we'd experienced, to check we'd got all the director's notes from

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the previous night, and to pass on a few of his own. It was clear he hadn't missed a thing, also that he wasn't happy at not being let in on the secret ending.

We continued rehearsing the ending in daylight ready for a full speed non-stop rehearsal as soon as it got fully dark at 6 pm. There was an amazing atmosphere as the rehearsal started. “Standby studio, going live... on air”. In Studio B we were glued to the mixed feed watching the other studio's output as the show progressed towards us. As the cast started to deliver their proper performances in costume, everyone seemed to rise to the challenge. Soon the cast burst into our studio. There was a definite and determined air about them; they were really going for it.

Our second scene was one of the most quiet and intimate scenes of the episode, between Bradley and Stacey. Lacey Turner, who plays Stacey, was simply stunning, far beyond what one would normally expect in rehearsal. This was starting to turn into something really special. Unfortunately, things weren't quite so slick in Stage 1, and the Queen Vic

scenes still looked a bit chaotic.

Those of us who needed to move, grabbed our coats and headed for our next camera positions as we could hear on talkback that things were still charging on without a pause. Our first outside scene went well enough and then it was off to our final location. Things were starting to look a bit rougher now, the cues weren't quite as slick and there were some problems with the action – but the stunt worked well and a possible ending was rehearsed.

As we waited to hear whether we would rerun the end sequence, rehearse some more endings or go back to the start again, we were staggered to hear a wrap called – over two hours early. The timings were showing that the programme was significantly over-running, so the executive producer, director and scriptwriter had to trim things down to time.

Day 3 Tx -1

Word was spreading like wildfire that Lacey had completely lost her voice and been told by her doctor not to go

Sound background

One curiosity of the normal *EastEnders* cameras is that they aren't fitted with sound and communication boards, so don't have normal talkback options. This specification decision was made to save costs as everyone was routinely using radio talkback when the cameras were ordered.

In recent years, the old radio talkback system has been upgraded to the excellent Drake free speak system that allows users to customise their own talkback mix between production talkback, lighting (engineering) talkback, production sound and inter-camera talkback. This has proved a fantastic system with great clear digital sound and robust build quality, and the ability for the different technical crews to talk within their own disciplines has been hugely useful and productive.

Unfortunately, though, there weren't enough sets to go round on the live show and the complication of so many users trying to use a single system across many areas was so worrying that it was decided to put all the camera crew on a simplex Motorola analogue set-up and leave the Drake free speak system for production staff only.

out in the cold or to talk at all. With a lot of detail still to nail down, cuts to be made and a final dress rehearsal to be shot and recorded as emergency back-up for Friday, this was a serious problem for the production team.

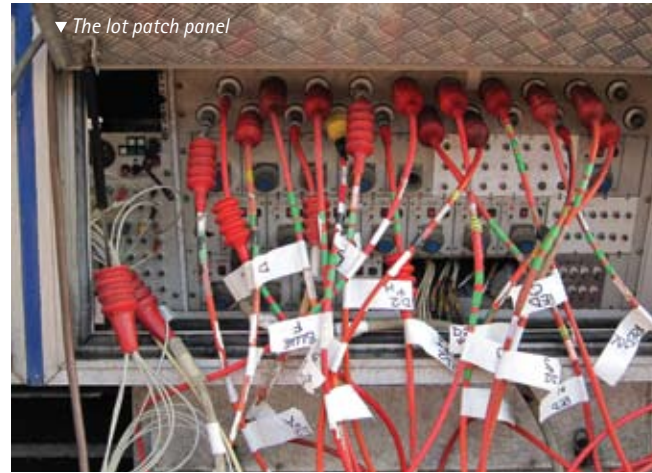
The executive producer explained the situation and how the existing plans for the day would be reorganised, plus the cuts that had been made to the script. As soon as it got dark, we started a full rehearsal with a runner standing in for Lacey, and worked our way steadily through the show solving all the outstanding problems.

The stunt sequence was again run at almost full speed. There was a reminder of the risks involved when a fast-moving police car clipped a

metal market stall moving it a few inches, much to the consternation of a cameraman standing right next to it. After the rehearsal he let the stunt arranger know in no uncertain terms what he thought of that stunt driver's abilities. By the end, we were left with a feeling that we were now in a much better position to make the professional job of the show that everyone wanted so much. But much to the frustration of Duncan and lighting director John Carberry, still nobody on the crew knew which ending would be used. Clive tried to reassure them that it would all be fine, but I think they'd both have been much happier if they'd been let in on the secret.



▲ The first positioning of the fall bag for the stunt



▼ The lot patch panel

“there was a reminder of the risks involved when a fast-moving police car clipped a metal market stall moving it a few inches, much to the consternation of a cameraman standing right next to it”

Day 4 Tx

Eventually the big day dawned, with the weather forecast good and everybody in determined mood to get the job done well. The good news was that Lacey would be well enough to be in the show.

Each day the schedule had changed, and with a full dress rehearsal still to be recorded as the back-up, this day was taking on an unusual pattern. It started with another facilities check, a crew photo for everyone on the production, then a long break. At 6pm we began the full recorded dress run. Everything went well, maybe a few shots not quite as perfectly framed as we'd like, but acceptable. The externals went well, as did the stunt and, with less than three minutes left, Clive shouted out which ending was to be recorded. Everything had gone remarkably well and we were now left with resetting and waiting for the transmission time to tick round.

Waiting to go on air on a big live production like this is always an odd feeling. I get no rush of adrenaline, no great excitement, just a sense of calm and concern to get it right. That there could be more than ten million people switching on didn't seem overly important, the real concern was delivering the shots in front of one's peers. The camerawork itself not being particularly demanding actually added to the pressure – there were simply no excuses for failure. As the clock counted down, the same quiet we had experienced all week descended on Studio B.

Transmission

The show started well although a stumbled line early on caused a jitter in the scanner, then one scene went a bit wrong as an actress opened up with her lines from her following scene. You'd have to have known the script to spot the mistake, and everyone covered well, but it did make the next scene a bit odd when it started with a line that had already been used – hardly a disaster though. Thankfully, the tricky scenes in the Vic were going OK, with all the artists hitting their marks and clearing in time for camera moves, while still retaining the feel of a packed, lively pub.

Once the action moved outside, my taxi hit its non-existent mark, yet again. But, as the artists moved off, the action became a bit faster paced than in rehearsal. A shot was dropped leaving not enough time for a fast shot change and, coupled with the delayed cue light, meant someone was caught with an on-air lens change. The crash zoom finished perfectly framed, but that's not a style *EastEnders* uses.

Just before the climactic end scenes, Clive announced to all: "Stacey is the killer" – an ending none of us had expected.

The stunt scene started, the shots were perfectly timed and we all saw everything we should but nothing else. The big fall went well and we found the reaction shots while Charlie rushed back round to his final position on the ground. At first, the news that he was safely in position on The Square wasn't heard, and a couple of extra reaction

shots were taken, which looked a bit flat. But then it was straight into the final scenes of grief at the fate of the hero. One hand-held shot got jugged when an actor stood on its cable, then there was just time for an emotional end confession, before the familiar 'doof doof...' kicked in and the end credits rolled. A cheer went up across The Square and all that was left to do was to de-rig and pack away all the kit before heading off to the 25th anniversary party.

The day after: Tx +1

Eight o'clock in the morning and I was back at Elstree to re-rig any kit that was needed for Monday when the production was due to shoot again. More than expected had been achieved the previous night and within a few hours everything was ready for the normal routine. The three of us booked in to sort things out sat down in one of the control rooms to see the audience comments and newspaper reviews.

A total of 16.6 million viewers had watched, a very good figure these days. Most newspapers and comments were very positive, and although there were a few mentions of the slip-ups, it appeared other hiccups weren't noticed at all. There was also much comment on how one actor had left a shop without paying for the goods she'd picked up!

Everyone from the runners upwards had done a superb job, but special mention should go to Sarah Giles-Harding our vision-mixer who managed to cut the show brilliantly every day from start to finish, and also the sound team lead by Pat Nunn and John Downes, who managed to keep on top of an amazingly complex script with great precision. Mixing a dub live is a skill rarely called upon these days, but was carried out superbly well.

Crew list

Camera supervisors

- Duncan Unsworth
- David Bowden
- Kevin Coe
- Matt Hart
- Peter Woodley

Cameramen

- Alison Banham
- Roy Bailey
- Phillip Carr
- John Corby
- James Cullen
- Keith Dawson
- Ian Dicker
- Liz Doy
- Peter Fox
- Chris Goor
- Mike Graham
- Lawrence Hall
- Colin Hazelwood
- Ian Head
- Claire Hedgecock
- Paul Holman
- Ian Keown
- Chris McCullough
- David Neill
- Joanne Nellis
- Sarah Lee
- Steve Roach
- David Sanders
- David Short
- Johanna Stinton
- Darrell Thornton
- David Whitaker

Fact file

Paul joined the BBC at Television Centre as a trainee cameraman in 1978, moving to BBC OBs in 1995, then going freelance in 2001. He specialises in multicamera work as a studio ped operator, and on OBs and location. www.paulholman.com

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