

Location, Location, Location

Will Strauss speaks to three location sound recordists/mixers to find out what it takes to make it in the world of TV drama production.



ADRIAN BELL

Selected TV drama credits: *Merlin, The Seventh Hour*
Kit: Zaxcom, Lectrosonics, DPA, Schoeps

As the production sound mixer on all five series of the BBC's *Merlin*, Adrian Bell knows how important audio is to a TV drama, and the magic it can add.

"Sometimes sound is overlooked in the way it can change the way a scene plays out," he says. "I like to be able to contribute to a project in many ways, not just recording the dialogue and effects, but also coming up with ideas for how a scene can be put together."

And that doesn't have to mean adding sound. In fact, less can be more. "*Gravity* has a really exciting use of just silence," adds the RTS Award nominee.

A former documentary sound recordist, Bell has now moved into drama and features, working on, among other things, Stephen Poliakoff's *The Seventh Hour* for BBC2 and, most recently, *Everest*, the Working Title movie about a 1996 climbing tragedy.

He says that he tries to bring a bit of his factual filmmaking experience to the TV drama world: being mobile, using a small sound

recording kit, and working quickly.

"I can use it [to adopt] a very instinctive way of recording," he says. "I will always look at a script or a scene and plan it as effectively as possible but generally shots will be created on the hoof and a scene will play out very differently to how it was planned."

Bell's kit list is made up of a Zaxcom Deva 16-track recorder and Mix-12 mixer plus Lectrosonics radio mics and DPA personal microphones. His boom mics are Schoeps CMITs with Schoeps CCM 41 small cardioid mics used for planting onto the film set.

To come up with the perfect blend of kit "has taken quite a few years", he says, not least because manufacturers are constantly improving their products but also because of the increasing numbers of recorded tracks needed these days.

When it comes to dealing with background noise, like all recordists, Bell has his own methods.

"On a lot of TV drama there seems to be a great move away from sound stages and studios," he explains. "So a lot of our work involves minimising background noise, location atmospheres, and filming between aircraft passes and sirens."

Dealing with harsh environments, as he did during the *Everest* shoot, is another challenge, he says. "In Nepal and Italy, where we worked at 10,000ft with an ambient daytime temperature of -20, to keep the kit working correctly, without holding up production, was a huge effort. The trick was to keep the sound rig as lightweight and small as possible."



BARRY O'SULLIVAN

Selected TV drama credits: *Foyle's War, Kidnap and Ransom, Primeval*
Kit: Fostex, Sennheiser, Lectrosonics, Sanken, Da-Cappo, Voice Technology

With a CV that includes *Foyle's War*, *Kidnap and Ransom*, and *Primeval* – not to mention the movie remake of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E* – production sound mixer Barry O'Sullivan knows a thing or two about recording audio on location.

Starting out as a humble cable man before becoming a boom op and then a production sound mixer he has experienced most drama scenarios and is well placed to pass on the secrets of his craft.

"Patience and perseverance are important," he says when asked what it takes to excel in this field. "Often we come against a general air of 'we'll have to loop this' from other members of the crew or cast but often problems can be solved and difficult situations overcome with a bit of thought and hard work."

"Sound is a collaborative thing," he explains. "I will always communicate with the director during a shoot, and with my team. We always discuss scenes and the best way to cover them and there

has been more than one occasion when one of my guys will point out something that I haven't spotted."

O'Sullivan's current location setup is based around Fostex recorders with Sennheiser mics on booms, and then Lectrosonics radio mics with a combination of lavalier microphones from Sanken, Da-Cappo, and Voice Technology.

"All of this equipment sounds good, which is the most important thing, and has also proved to be very reliable," he explains.

When working on a TV drama O'Sullivan is very aware of his place in the team dynamic. As such he makes it his business to speak with the sound editor in advance of the shoot – if time permits – and during post production and constantly observe where the story is going.

"I am always aware of what the shot is and what lens is being used," he says. "The sound needs to match the picture, or should that be the other way around? Also, knowing what is happening visually means that you can be prepared in case [you suddenly] need a second boom or require a microphone to be planted on the set."

In an ever-busier world, it will come as no surprise to learn that background noise is the biggest challenge for a production sound mixer. But it can be overcome.

"Physics is a hard thing to beat," he says. "In interior locations it might mean making sure doors and windows are closed. Or, if they need to be open when we shoot, for cable access, we will block up as much of the gap as possible."



GRANT BRIDGEMAN

Selected TV drama credits: *Mr Selfridge, Bert and Dickie, The Accused*
Kit: Sound Devices, Sennheiser, Schoeps, Sanken, Lectrosonics

For BAFTA-nominated sound recordist Grant Bridgeman, there is one defining factor when it comes to location audio.

"Primarily it is about getting clean dialogue," he says. "Trying to get other sounds can become a distraction. In my opinion it is far better to spend that time stopping a chair squeaking, quieting a door, or perfecting wireless reception."

It is a manifesto that has served

him well on TV dramas such as *Mr Selfridge, Bert and Dickie*, and *The Accused* (series 2) for which he was up for a sound BAFTA.

When it comes to additional audio, there is some creative collaboration, he says, but it's often down to the sound crew.

"The director may ask for specific wildtracks," says Bridgeman. "But more often it is left to the sound recordist. We will try to get specific things on location that may be hard to replicate in post production such as period cars or atmospheres in characteristic locations. We try to get room tones to help with dialogue editing too but getting the actor's dialogue is of primary importance."

As far as kit is concerned, Bridgeman is a Sound Devices man, using a 788T recorder with the CL8 fader panel and CL9 controller. His mic manufacturer of choice is Sennheiser with the MKH60 being used for exteriors and the MKH50 for interiors "purely because of their robust nature".

A Schoeps CCM41 is also called upon for interior scenes while a Sanken CUB-01 boundary layer mic is "one of the most invaluable microphones" for on-location work. His radio mics are from Lectrosonics.

When it comes to being a great recordist though, you need more than great kit.

"Clearly you have to be focused on the audio elements of every shot," he suggests. "But often the bigger role is that of being a diplomat and negotiator. Working with the other departments is absolutely crucial: everyone from locations, through costume to the camera team. All of them can help you if you ask in the right way and at the right time."

Does it matter to the sound crew how many cameras there are? Absolutely, says Bridgeman.

"Multiple camera shoots completely change the way you work," he stresses. "Two cameras on extremely different lenses – for example, a wide and a tight shot –

mean that it's not possible to get the tight sound on a boom mic without compromising the wide shot. I always request that we don't shoot wide and tight at the same time, but that we shoot similar frame sizes. That means we can get the same sound perspective for each image and hopefully get it on the boom mics."

Preparation can be key, he says, which is why it is important to be involved in recce, but his biggest piece of advice, aimed squarely at the next generation of sound recordists, is "don't work for free".

"When starting out, you may feel that a lack of experience means that you can offer a production very little but this is rarely the case," he says passionately. "Value your worth and all things you bring to the production. [Working for free] doesn't just undercut more experienced recordists, you undercut yourself because in a few years time when people ask you to do it again, they will want you to do it again for free."

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