

I Haven't Yet Preached in Malawi

Bill Dudman looks back on life as a film cameraman for television



With the personal Aaton camera that I loved. (All photographs courtesy of the author.)

I had been fascinated by pictures and sound from an early age. While I was studying A-level physics and mathematics at Haywards Heath Grammar School, Sussex, in 1965, the BBC was one of many employers present at a careers event.

I enquired about becoming a TV cameraman and, after sitting my exams, I was invited to an interview by the BBC. However, as I had passed my A levels, I would have to train as a junior engineer. (If I had failed my exams, they would have accepted me on the camera operation side!). Although this wasn't my choice of career, I accepted the offer to get my foot in the door.

After eighteen months of working in TV Outside Broadcasts in the Radio Links area, I noticed an internal advertisement for the post of trainee assistant cameraman based at Ealing Studios. I did not know at the time that the BBC had owned the studios since the 1950s. I quickly applied and after three interviews became one of eleven new trainees. This was not the "camera job" I'd originally applied for but it would prove to be much better.

I remember turning up on my first day at Ealing Studios when *Doctor Dolittle* was being filmed on one of the stages. There were so many different animals and their handlers milling about that I thought, "It's going to be very different from TV Studio work." This certainly proved to be the case. In my first year as a trainee, I worked on *The Year of the Sex Olympics* by Nigel Kneale (35mm colour), *Dr. Who – Fury From the Deep* (16mm b&w, now a lost episode remade) and *Man in the Iron Mask* (16mm b&w – the last children's serial to be shot in monochrome, starring Sir Roger Livesey and Roger Delgado).



A couple of weeks after my Red Arrow flight for Jim'll Fix It, the producer gave me this water colour painting by Flight Officer Bruce Rigelsford, entitled "We don't think Jim fixed it." A treasured possession. According to the Red Arrows website, Bruce Rigelsford was at the time the only official "artist" officer in the RAF.

I had my first experience of helicopter filming on *Bird's Eye View of Britain – Stately Homes*. We had landed at Berkeley Castle after shooting a hunting sequence and Lady Berkeley's butler came down to invite us to take sherry. Lady Berkeley was very keen to show off her new colour television to us and, of course, we found fault with it in some way or other. The result was that Lady Berkeley telephoned her dealer – poor man! – to say that there were eleven gentlemen with her from the BBC who didn't think the TV was all it should be.

In 1975 a young boy asked the *Jim'll Fix It* programme if he could fly with the Red Arrows. I was the assistant cameraman on the shoot. The cameraman I was working with didn't want to go up with them so it fell to me to film the flight. I used a relatively lightweight camera, a Canon Scoopic, and was installed into the rear seat of one of the Gnat jets they were using at the time and the boy was seated in another Gnat. Two complications arose in that the G force on take off prevented me from lifting the camera off my lap and when we levelled off I found I could not look into the viewfinder due to the flying helmet I was wearing. I managed to lift the Scoopic and point it at the other Gnat in the hope I could get some form of "blind" wide shot and after a minute or so I had a go at zooming in to get a shot of the boy in the cockpit. To my amazement, it all worked and I said to the pilot that I needed to change the 100ft. spool of film for a new one to carry on filming. I managed to install the new roll but, in doing so, the take up spool fell out of the camera into the



Margot Fonteyn signed this photo for me after the Monte Carlo shoot for *The Magic of Dance* (1979).



Early sequence at Alnwick Castle with Rowan Atkinson.

works of the aircraft. I immediately informed the pilot who replied, "Let's try a bit of negative G to try and shift it." This was all very exciting but the spool was not dislodged from its hiding place so we had to land. Fortunately, I had managed to get sufficient footage for the programme.

The following years as a qualified assistant film cameraman were taken up by a lot of foreign travel, some of it rather exciting, especially flying to Bahrain and back in a private, fully crewed VC10 aircraft to film song numbers for the 1975 *Shirley Bassey Christmas Show*. We had been due to fly and film on a Concorde but the chairman of British Airways said there were technical difficulties. We did film a song on the Concorde while it was on the ground at Filton near Bristol.

The cameraman on this shoot was Peter Hall,

who had been the focus puller on David Lean's 1948 *Oliver Twist*. Peter was the cameraman I most liked working with and we spent a few years together as a team working on *The Two Ronnies – Phantom Raspberry of Old London Town*; *Ripping Yarns* with Mike Palin; *Rebecca*, starring Anna Massey, Joanna David and Jeremy Brett; as well as *The Magic of Dance*, presented by Margot Fonteyn, with Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov. While we were filming a part of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* at the Monte Carlo Opera House I took Margot's photo with my new 110 reflex camera and she was kind enough to sign it for me.

Another drama series I worked on with Peter was *Marie Curie*, starring Nigel Hawthorne and Jane Lapotaire. Peter allowed me to operate the camera during some sequences. A rather tricky



Getting ready for a night shoot at Alnwick Castle on *The Black Adder* (1983). My gaffer John Barrott in a blizzard. Patrick Allen as *The Black Seal*.

shot entailed multiple contra tracks and difficult technical dialogue for the actors. After about six takes, Jane and Nigel got it right but the grips and I forgot one of the multiple tracks. The atmosphere was rather tense until Jane, as Marie, said to Nigel, as Pierre, with both of them covered in make up radiation burns, "Pierre, I suppose a f*** is out of the question." After that, we all succeeded in a good take.

The next morning at rushes I was fully expecting harsh words from the director, John Glenister, but it turned out that my lack of a contra track meant he could get out of the shot early and I, of course, agreed!

In 1978 I had a most memorable musical experience with another cameraman, Gene

Carr. He was asked to go to Vienna and film the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and André Previn performing the *Alpine Symphony* by Richard Strauss in the Musikverein. It was going to be a multi-camera film shoot and Gene asked if I would like to operate on one of them. However, when the producer, Ian Englemann, heard about this, he reasonably had some reservations as I had not been involved in similar projects. Upon hearing about his concern, I quickly bought an LP of the work, read the sleeve notes and then called him with, at least, some knowledge of the symphony. The upshot was that I was able to operate on the film but, to make sure I was familiar with the work, I was to accompany Gene on all his recces. The meant a very interesting fortnight in Vienna.

When Gene and I were listening to a rehearsal in the Musikverein I whispered to him that I thought it was "bloody loud" as it was a 120-piece orchestra in a relatively small venue. Gene disagreed but when we met André coming off the stage, his first words actually were "That was bloody loud".

1976 was the year I had to have two passports, due to visiting Israel and Iraq/Syria within weeks of each other to film *Archaeology of the Bible Lands* with Magnus Magnusson. We were flying to Tel Aviv on an ELAL flight before driving up to Jerusalem and staying at the famous American Colony Hotel that was to be our base for the duration. Getting through the tight security was tedious and took about three hours but, when we were finally cleared, we all were upgraded to



The Black Adder (1983). One must have the correct make-up on to be burnt by. Preparing to burn Rowan, Tony Robinson and Tim McInerney at the stake. BBC electricians John Barrott and Eric Fever plus two from Lee North try to make a convincing flame effect.



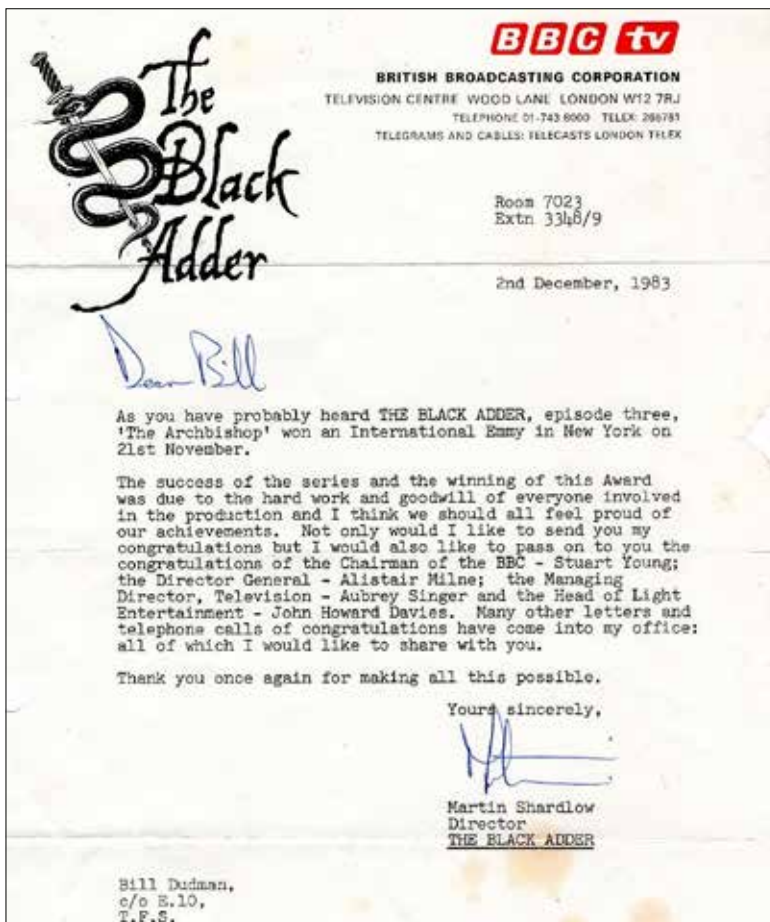
Brian Blessed as Richard IV in fine form giving a sermon in *The Black Adder* (1983).



Frank Finlay as Witchsmeller Pursuivant about to shoot an FX sequence for an episode of *The Black Adder* (1983).



Me, Martin Shardlow and Ian Buckley tracking some galloping horses on *The Black Adder* (1983).



Letter after *The Black Adder* won an Emmy. Rowan as the Archbishop of Canterbury taking his vows in the winning episode

first class (I think the Israel government was keen for us to go). In those days, first class passengers could pass the time in the cocktail bar on the top floor. It was there we met the Archbishop of Malawi who was also going to Jerusalem but had little cash for his trip, so we gave him a lift after we had picked up our hire cars.

Once we had settled into the hotel, sound recordist Ron Brown took possession of all our duty free booze and converted part of his room into "Bar Gladys", as he liked to call it. It was normal for the Archbishop to pop in for a few drinks in the evening and many rather inebriated theological discussions took place. When it was finally time for him to return home, I remember him holding both my hands and saying, "You must come and preach in Malawi" – an offer I have yet to take up.

I was promoted to film cameraman (DoP today) in 1981 and after a mandatory spell working in current affairs, which was not for me, I managed to return to working in Light Entertainment and Variety.

In 1982, I and my team were sent to the Czech Republic to cover Barbra Streisand both directing and starring in her motion picture *Yentl*. Before we left, our producer contacted the feature unit to ask if they needed anything taken out to the location – they replied that they needed cauliflowers and Tampax so these were duly packed with the rest of the gear.

Early on in the filming, I managed to have a chat with David Watkin, the feature's DoP, during a coffee break. I mentioned that I had never seen his massive "Wendy light" being used. The luminaire was made up of banks of Dino lights and

I think it took about 2000 amps at 110 volts to power it. The only time I remember it being used in a BBC film was during *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* with Alec Guinness when it allowed DoP Tony Pierce-Roberts to light a fair chunk of London on a night shoot. (By the way my wife Kay was heavily involved in sorting out the film crewing and equipment for *Tinker*.) To my surprise, David said he'd use it on the next sequence which was set in a beautifully designed Jewish bakery. The first shot was a day interior where a 2.5 HMI would have sufficed. David, however, had the Wendy light built outside the bakery and ten minutes after it was turned on, the shop front started to melt. I imagine the designer was not too pleased with this outcome.

Early in 1983 I was asked to go to Alnwick Castle in Northumberland to film a new comedy drama entitled *The Black Adder* (later *Blackadder*), written by Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson, and starring Atkinson with Peter Cook, Brian Blessed, Elspeth Gray, Tony Robinson and Frank Finlay. Apart from being both demanding and great fun to work on, it turned out to be one of the coldest location shoots I remember and, if you ever watch the first series, please note that all the snow and blizzards are real!

Later that year, I began my first of two years with *The Two Ronnies* – so much more fun than serious drama, and the budgets were often bigger. I remember being asked during the first production meeting how many generators would I need because some of the night shots involved lighting a long street, so having a generator at each end made sense.

The director/producer in both years was



Filming *Doctor Who* special effects on 35mm film in 1987.



Burning Jim Broadbent at the stake in Ben Elton's *Happy Families*.



Checking exposure on *Happy Families* shoot with Rik Mayall in 1985.



Training my Aaton camera the *Woodhouse* way.

Marcus Plantin and most of the time we made the 15-minute mini-feature films shown near the end of each show. These proved to be valuable experiences for me as the subject matter was so varied. "Tinker Tailor Smiley Doyle" was a MIS/police parody; "Snivelling and Grudge", a Robin Hood-era fantasy; "Sunshine Boulevard", *Sunset Boulevard* era shot in b&w;

"Raiders of the Last Auk", spoof of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*;

"Murder Is Served", Hercule Poirot murder mystery, with Pat Routledge; "Campers", saucy silent movie; and "Mileaway", fantasy "Middle Ages".

"Mileaway" was the first time I had to light a large set on stage two at Ealing Studios and the camera manager was concerned if I could cope as I had never lit anything so large before. As it was to be lit as a day exterior, I – with the valuable help of my gaffer John Barrott and his team – stuck up three 6K HMI lamps to act as sunshine, making sure they never overlapped to prevent

double shadows, followed by lots of 6K tungsten spacelights to be the clouds. We then had to light a massive "cyc" with all the background detail painted on it. After that, I treated it as a Day Exterior using just a small amount of soft fill for the artistes who, apart from the two Ronnies, included Patrick Troughton (who had been the Doctor Who in *Fury from the Deep*). All went to plan and I was later told by the camera manager that a drama producer had asked where the location was!

Before I filmed for the 1984 season of *The Two Ronnies* I worked on the second and final series of *The Young Ones* with producer Paul Jackson, and the final sequence was memorable. The episode was called "Summer Holiday" and it culminated in a five film camera shoot of a London Routemaster bus being driven over a cliff into a quarry near Rochester, Kent. The destruction of the bus was meant to show the demise of the Young Ones but when the bus finally landed it was upright and in fairly good condition so Paul Jackson, the special effects supervisor and I went into a huddle to

work out how to kill them all off and the decision was to blow the bus up! The final end credits were displayed in alphabetical order with all the technicians, actors and production staff mixed together. This was with the approval of all who had worked on the programme. It was disapproved of by the BBC management but that didn't stop it going out!

This year also brought some programme awards: the "Archbishop" episode of *Blackadder* won an international EMMY award, a first for the BBC, and series two of *The Young Ones* was given a BAFTA, another first.

At the start of 1985 I awoke in a hotel in Cardiff and found half of my face had become numb and immovable. My assistant kindly rushed me back to Ealing and a visit to my GP resulted in a diagnosis of Bell's Palsy – something one can't say when one is suffering from it! I had to have many months off on sick leave as I could not close my left eye or speak normally. However, I did recover most of my facial muscle movement, after which producer Paul Jackson offered me an eight-week film shoot on a new comedy drama written by Ben Elton entitled *Happy Families*, to star Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Adrian Edmondson, Rik Mayall, Lenny Henry, Sandy Toksvig, Stephen Fry and Jim Broadbent. The production was based in the area around Alton, Staffordshire, and part of the episode with Jim involved burning him at the stake, but this was a doddle as I had filmed Rowan Atkinson, Tony Robinson and Tim McInerney almost receiving the same fate two years previously.

This was one of those longer shoots, so that when it came to an end it left a strange, almost lonely feeling; but it had been great fun.

Although most of TV filming used 16mm Kodak and Fuji film, 1987 proved to be a 35mm year for me. I was involved in a long and complex model/special effects shoot directed by SPFX Supervisor Mike Kelt, who later went on to form the Artem SPFX Company based in Perivale, Middlesex. The show was called *Star Cops* and, despite the success of the filming, I was not credited on the final show as, apparently, the producer did not want a film credit on a TV studio production. This I found bizarre and left me somewhat miffed.

On the lighter side, one of the other programmes I worked on was *Training Dogs The Woodhouse Way*. Barbara Woodhouse could be



Trying to impress Pat Routledge with "Riders in the Sky" on the set of *Keeping Up Appearances*. Me being made up to take Pat Routledge's part during an exterior car sequence.



Filming titles for Channel 4 in 1996 with Stanley Baxter.

exasperating to work with at times but I took her advice and used it to train my Aaton Film Camera to be more obedient!

Through the Dragon's Eye (1989) was the most expensive drama that BBC Schools Television had ever undertaken. Shot entirely on the stage at Ealing Studios using Betacam SP cameras, the budget was little short of £1,000,000 for ten 20-minute episodes. Nearly all the filming involved extensive use of blue and green screen technology and it was the first time I had to decide on camera and lighting positions three months prior to shooting so that the scenic artists could get perspectives correct in the background images.

The writers had a lucky break early on in the production as some of the characters were Ewok-like creatures which they called "Widgers". One of the young actresses mentioned that "widger" was Jamaican slang for "penis" so the writers changed the name to "Widgets"!

My last decade in the Film Department included filming the title sequences for the 1992 (35mm) and 1997 (Betacam SP) General Elections. The 1997 shoot resulted in a rare complaint about my work when the graphic designer, who had been co-directing, reported that the helicopter shot flying over Beachy Head lighthouse was over exposed, despite the fact that we had all approved the shots soon after landing. I was thereby summoned to the edit suite at Television Centre, to be shown the offending shot and be generally admonished. The VT editor overheard the conversation and butted in by slightly reducing the lift on his monitor and quietly said, "Is that what you wanted?" The shot was then accepted, again, and I left for Ealing. The graphic designer's complaint cost her budget the day rate for a film cameraman.

In the early 1990s I was involved in filming all four series of *Keeping Up Appearances*, starring Pat Routledge and Clive Swift, who worked so well together. I was responsible for the photography of all sequences not recorded at TV Centre. As I was working with an excellent camera operator, Chris Kochanowicz, most of my day was involved with lighting and, on a couple of occasions, when there was little or no lighting to be done, I donned a costume and stood in for Pat – non-speaking, of course!

During the filming of *Newman and Baddiel in Pieces*, starring Rob Newman and David Baddiel, I was involved in a night shoot in a joke shop, a location that I found after the original shop had pulled out. Typically, everyone was thinking on their feet and I wasn't given any guidance as to the required look in the joke shop. Left to my



Me playing the part of an American DoP in an episode of *As Time Goes By*.

own devices, I decided to use every coloured gel that was on the lighting van and splash many hues all over the place. Nothing was mentioned during shooting but after we had wrapped, Rob Newman said to me, "That was the most inappropriate lighting I've ever seen. It was perfect". That's going on my tombstone, I thought...

One of the more unusual locations was a two-week session on board the QE2 to film the 1993 *Christmas Special*. We took a lot of kit on board, including two Betacam SP cameras, a Steadicam operated by Adrian Smith, and portable lighting. Being on board was a strange experience and not one I would have paid for.

In 1995, I was asked to play the part of an American cameraman as part of a storyline in *As Time Goes By*, starring (not me but) Judi Dench and produced by Syd Lotterby. The actual lighting director on the video shoot was Graham Rimmington whom I knew as we both belong to the same lighting society (STLD). The grips and myself were the extent of the "real" film crew portrayed in the scene and I was using one of our old Mitchell cameras as a prop – I knew this camera well and had used it on past SPFX shoots.

During the coffee break, the actress playing the production assistant asked me if I was a proper cameraman or an actor. I replied that if I was an actor I would not have got away with slugging off the lighting all morning!

The period from 1991 brought many unfortunate changes to the BBC when John Birt became Director General. The BBC Film Department was hit hard with "Producer Choice", where productions

were allowed to hire freelancers at will or even shoot it themselves. This resulted in two rounds of redundancies which I survived and amazingly allowed me to be hired, as a member of BBC staff, to film sequences for *The Stanley Baxter Christmas Special*, transmitted on Channel Four in December 1996. I expect working on *The Two Ronnies* helped me get this job and it was a pleasure to work with Stanley and producer Tom Gutteridge of Mentorn Productions. I had first worked with Tom on *BBC Nationwide* on a piece about the building industry and the reporter was Richard Stilgoe. How things change!

As the Film Department at Ealing had to become more commercial, I undertook an MBA module at Bradford University on marketing and helped the new marketing manager to promote our facilities. I was also part of the BBC smart new technology team looking at new ways of working and training production staff.

As luck would have it, I got to know the account managers at both Panasonic and Sony and when I took an early retirement deal, leaving on Halloween 1997, I had been offered a job with Sony UK as a production advisor to "talk tecchie to luvvies". This lasted until 2001 when I went freelance, not as a cameraman but as a consultant/trainer. I mainly worked with cinematography students at the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield, many of whom found work in the film industry. ■



My first go at remote camera during filming of the 1997 General Election.