

## DOING IT LIVE!

### PLANNING AND PREPARING FOR A LIVE DRAMA EPISODE: A CASE STUDY OF *THE BILL* (ITV, 2005)

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**Abstract:** Over the last decade there has been a move towards live episodes of popular television dramas and soap operas in the UK being used to celebrate programme and channel anniversaries. This paper, written by a member of the production team is focused on the 'behind the scenes' preparation and subsequent broadcast of the live episode of British police drama *The Bill* on September 22nd 2005. This live episode became a landmark broadcast as it was the first time that dramatic stunt sequences had been performed live. This article will be supported with examples from the original planning documentation and rehearsal photographs and will examine the production culture in the planning and preparation of the episode. It will also reveal some of the trickery used to execute the stunts, will discuss the difficulties experienced during the live episode and how problems were overcome.

**Keywords:** Live Television, Live Drama, Soap Opera, Television Production Culture, ITV

## 1 Introduction

Over the last decade anniversaries of popular television dramas and soap operas in the UK have been celebrated with the broadcast of live episodes. The now axed police drama *The Bill* (1984 – 2010) has broadcast two live episodes, the first in 2003 to celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the second in 2005 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ITV. Soap operas *EastEnders* (1985 – present) broadcast a live episode in 2010 to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Coronation Street* (1960 – present) went live in 2000 and 2010 to commemorate its 40<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries and *Emmerdale* (1972- present) broadcast a live episode to celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012. The second live episode of *The Bill* (21:76) pushed the boundaries of the live drama genre by introducing live stunt sequences into the episode, which set the standard for subsequent live episodes of the soap operas. This article will focus on the 'behind the scenes' preparation and subsequent broadcast of that episode of *The Bill* which was broadcast live on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2005.

*The Bill* was a long-running British police drama, which was broadcast on the ITV network from 1984 until 2010. Set in the fictional London Metropolitan police station of Sun Hill it followed the lives and working procedures of the Police Officers and the crimes they investigated. Over the years the programme was in production it was broadcast in 55 countries including those across Europe, and Scandinavia.

The live episode of *The Bill* was unique in the field of live drama as the normal shooting practice of the programme was to utilise the single camera method, therefore employing only one camera to shoot all the required shots moving the camera from angle to angle, the shots were then edited together in post-production to form a coherent sequence and a linear story. However for the live episode to work and for multiple angles and shot sizes to be achieved it had to move over to the mode of production employed for shooting soap operas and use the multi-camera technique. In normal television terms the use of the multi-camera method is regarded as being a quicker production process, with a week's soap opera output of 4 episodes (approximately 2 hours) taking on average 9 days to shoot compared with 16-26 days for 2 hours of single camera drama on a regular set based continuing television drama. The multi-camera soap operas are also more cost effective taking less time in post-production than their single camera counterparts, therefore in normal TV drama terms multi-camera drama/soap opera is a quicker and cheaper production method. However when it came to the one hour live episode of *The Bill* this was far from true.

Planning started many months before transmission but went into full preproduction 6 weeks before the broadcast date, giving it a longer preproduction period than a regular single camera block of 2 episodes, which, at *The Bill* would usually have 2-3 weeks in prep. Writers on single camera dramas rarely visit the set and work remotely from the production team producing scripts which can be shot non-sequentially, any amendments and changes required are made via the team of script editors and the producer. As the live episode, by its very nature, had to run sequentially it was crucial that the writer became part of the planning team and created a script which could lend itself to the technicalities of producing the live episode, therefore at the outset of the intense preproduction period writer Graham Mitchell was walked round the sets by Director/Co-Producer Sylvie Boden. My role within the production was that of the Supervising First Assistant Director and with 6 weeks to go I, along with other members of the production team (the production manager and the production designer), started work on planning and preparing 'the live.' A number of production meetings were held so that all members of the team understood exactly what was being proposed and how it was to be executed on the night of the broadcast and the process of engaging the rest of the crew ensued.

## 2 Four Weeks and Counting

With 4 weeks until the transmission date the final script was issued, this was unusual as frequently final scripts are produced only days before the start of single camera drama shoots and soap operas. With the final shooting script ready heads of departments had a technical planning meeting to discuss the requirements of the script and to plan how the various stunts, which had been written into the script were to be executed. The main story of the episode was a hostage situation involving a grieving father, Jeff Clarke (Stuart Laing), and a police officer, DC Terry Perkins (Bruce Byron). The story culminated in the rescue of a teenage boy whom Jeff Clarke had kidnapped and locked in a car loaded with explosives. The stunts were to play a big part in the episode and were to set it apart from other previous live drama episodes by being the first production to include stunts which were usually only seen in carefully post produced single camera dramas. To ensure that the stunts stood up to the scrutiny of a sophisticated TV audience, experts in stunt arranging and coordinating, Nick Gillard, and visual effects design, Ed Smith and Neal Champion, were brought onto the team to begin the planning of these sequences.

## 3 Harking Back to Theatre Techniques

With 3 weeks to go regular production on *The Bill* ceased to make way for the extensive rehearsals, which were required. The rehearsals were conducted in a very different manner to the customary television drama rehearsals where scenes are rehearsed and recorded non-sequentially and one at a time. For the live episode director, Sylvie Boden, and the actors worked collaboratively and brought in theatre techniques with the opportunity to workshop and

explore the piece as a whole. The live episode became, for the actors, a one-hour play with each character having a story and emotional journey throughout the episode. My role within the dramatic development process also reverted to theatre rather than TV techniques and I became the stage manager during rehearsals making extensive notes on the blocking of each scene (which actor is where and when they move) for the director to refer to and to refresh the memories of the actors at each rehearsal, detailed notes were also made to pass to the design department. The live episode was a rare example of where theatre and television drama conventions met and shared practices, the prior theatre experience of the actors, Sylvie and myself were central to the way the rehearsals were conducted and ultimately how this episode was shaped and how the story was portrayed.

My rehearsal script (figure 1) demonstrates that meticulous notes were taken, these later aided Sylvie in preparing the camera script; these notes were used to ensure that camera positions and cutting points between cameras were placed according to the actor's moves and positions. Cue sheets for the assistant director's team who would run the set on the night of the transmission were prepared from the rehearsal script, all script changes were noted and fed these back to the production team, and my script at this point became the 'production bible.'

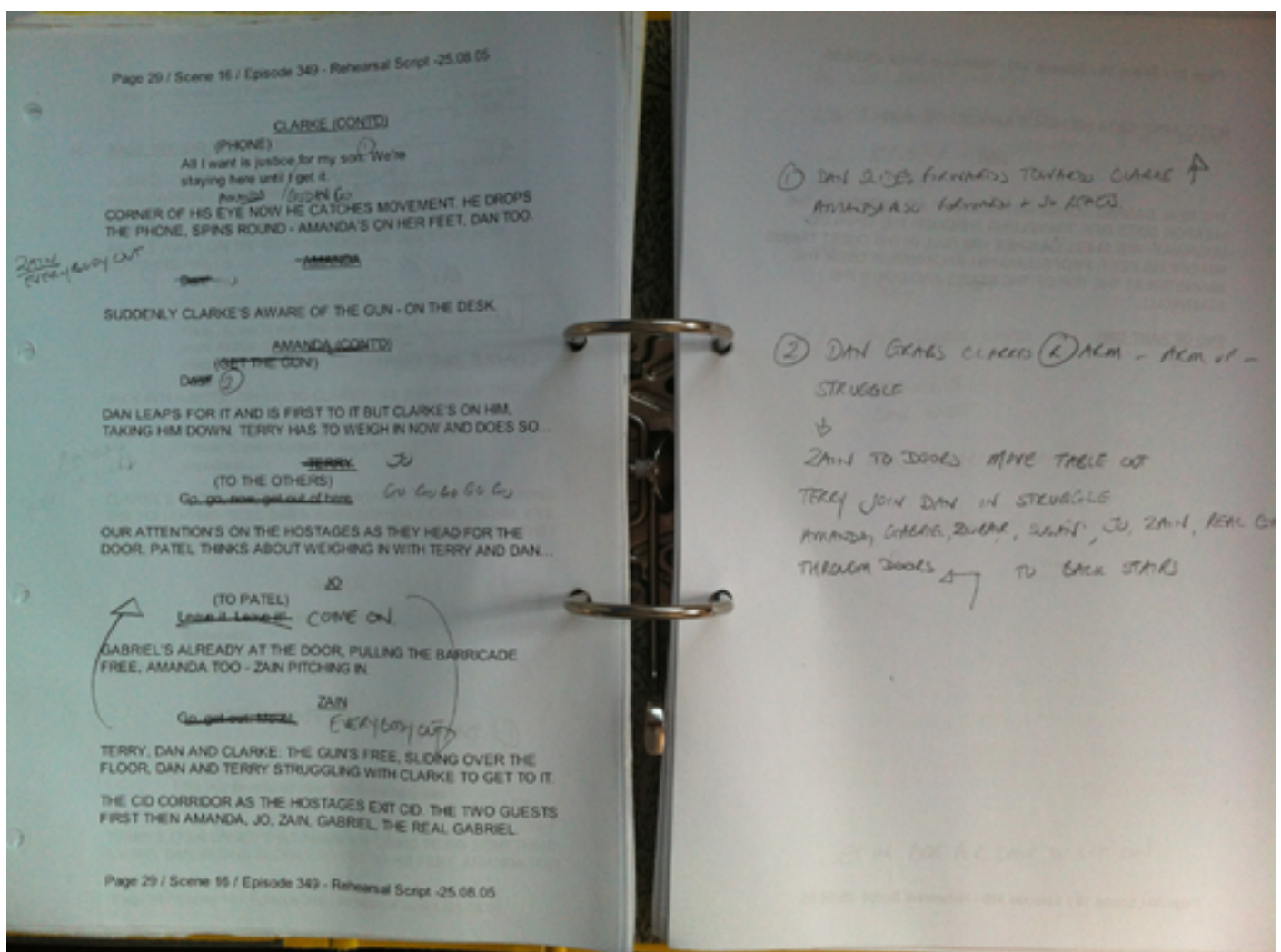


Figure 1: This shot taken from the rehearsal script shows dialogue changes which were made on set and agreed by the producer Donna Wiffen and Co-Producer/Director Sylvie Boden. The right hand page details the moves made by the characters and when they occur, it also shows the directions they move in. This type of notation is used by theatre stage managers during rehearsals for stage productions.





Figure 2: In this picture Co-producer/director Sylvie Boden is planning camera positions, shot sizes and camera moves that will capture the action and tell the story to the audience whilst ensuring that no other cameras or crew are seen in the background. Also pictured are Production Designer Eryl Ellis (Left), Stunt Coordinator Nick Gillard, Actor TJ Ramini (DC Zain Nadir) and Supervising First Assistant Director Joanna MacDonnell.

#### 4 Outside Broadcast (OB) Facilities

Whilst the rehearsals began in earnest the conversion of the set and studio complex from a single camera set to a multi-camera production environment started with the enormous task of laying hundreds of metres of camera cable to enable multiple cameras to be used across all the sets. The sets were spread across all the interior sets of *The Bill* and also the exterior space, which was previously part of the *Family Affairs* (1997 - 2005) set. As *The Bill* did not have the infrastructure for a multi-camera set-up already installed this all had to be brought in and outside broadcasting (OB) trucks were employed to create the production, sound and lighting galleries.



Figure 3: This picture shows the interior of the production gallery in the OB truck during rehearsals.

Additionally suitable places to hide cameras, commonly found on purpose built multi-camera sets, were missing and therefore the production design department created sets where cameras could be hidden, most notably within vehicles parked outside the front of the police station which were essential for the shots required for the concluding scene.



Figure 4: The police van was used as a 'camera hide' - to conceal the camera operators and the equipment and to ensure that no cameras were seen in any shots.

## 5 Camera Script

After the blocking had been completed through the rehearsals Sylvie then began the arduous task of creating a camera script where each shot was decided upon and assigned to a camera and noted in the script.

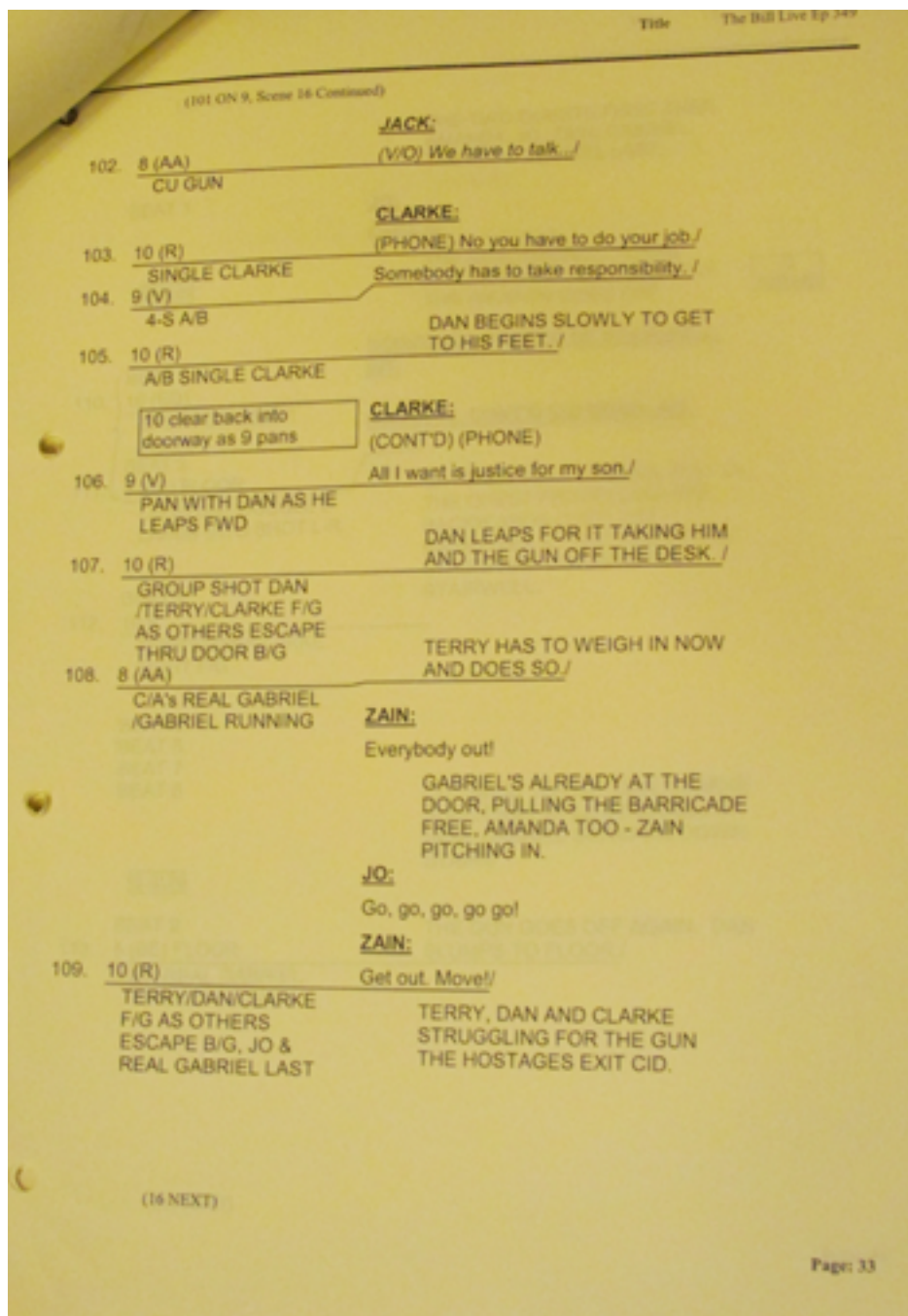


Figure 5: This image shows the camera script and how the information from the rehearsal script was then translated into how the action would be covered by the cameras. Each cutting point is shown by the horizontal line with an explanation of the shot on the left hand side. The information on the left also shows the shot number, camera number and camera position.



The various sets where the story was to unfold were divided up into areas, these were colour coded (figure 6) and careful calculations made to work out how many cameras would be required with how many operators and assistants.

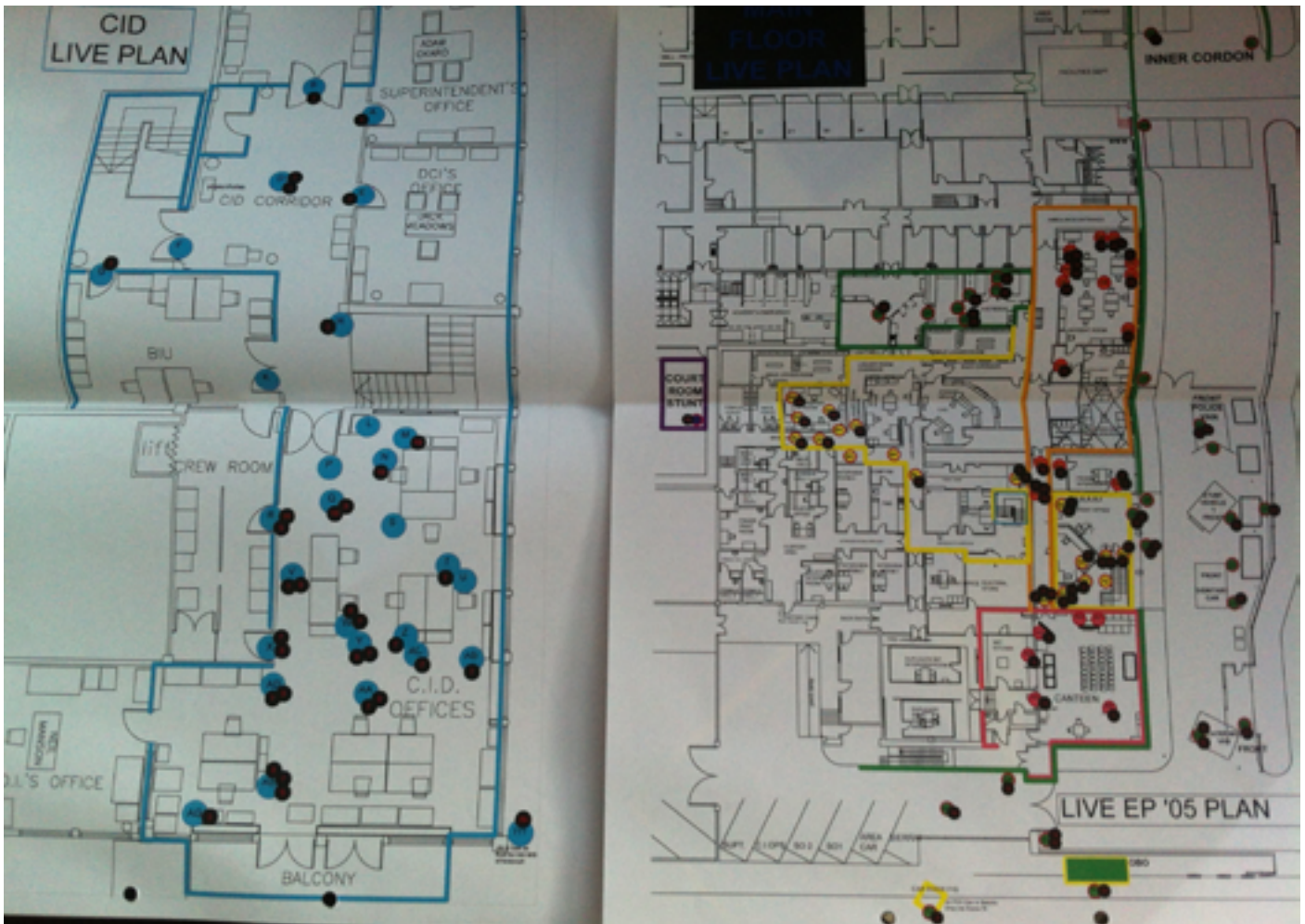


Figure 6: This image is a plan of the sets in the fictional Sun Hill Police Station with the areas for use in the Live Episode coloured. The plan of the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) office on the left of the picture was the principal set for the hostage situation with the other sets on the right hand side used for the other scenes – including the canteen, incident room, the hospital Accident & Emergency Unit, the front office, corridors and the briefing room. The black circles containing a number refer to the camera number and coloured circles indicate the position the camera needed to be in for the shot. This information was translated onto the camera script so along with a shot sequence number it was clear which camera was taking the shot and which position they needed to be in (see also figure 5).

As some sets were only used briefly camera operators needed to be able to move from one set to another. In total 15 camera operators were employed along with 7 camera assistants working across 26 different camera positions. Additionally a jimmy jib was also used (a camera on a short crane arm, with its own operator and assistant) and therefore a camera operator plot had to be carefully drawn up (figure 7) and the same done for sound (figure 9), which used microphones on fishing poles/booms, as would be employed on a conventional drama production.

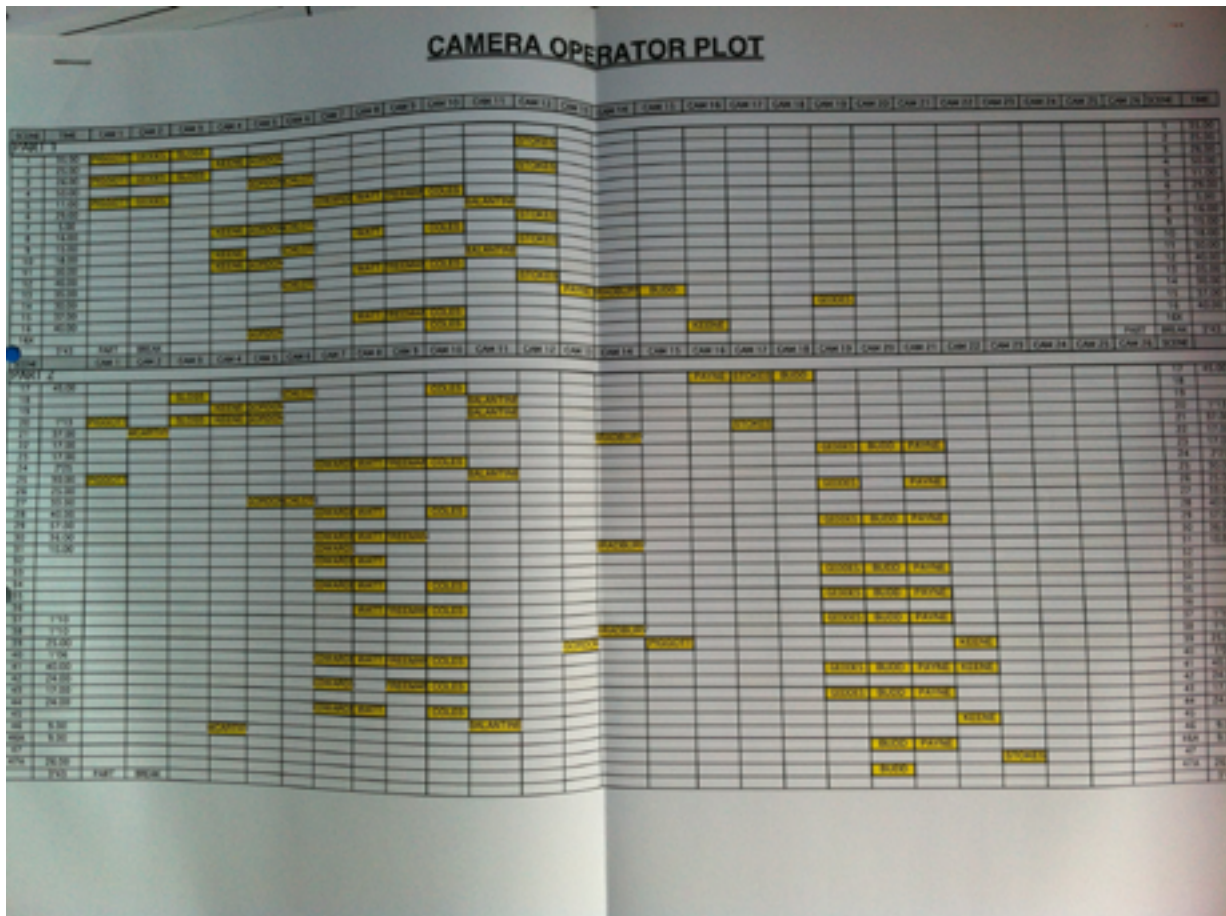


Figure 7: The chart in this picture shows how the camera operators were distributed amongst the cameras and moved from set to set. For example looking at camera supervisor (Graham) Geddes, he started the episode on camera 2 and then after scene 5 moved to camera 19 for scene 2.

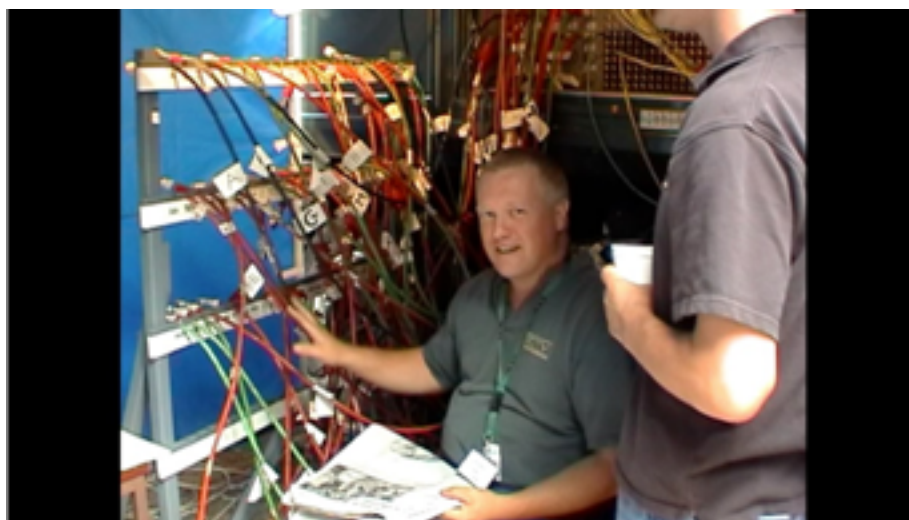


Figure 8: This picture show the multiple camera cables which had to be connected to the correct camera at the right time, as camera's and operators moved sets and re-connected to new cables.





Figure 9: This chart depicts the allocation of the boom/fish pole operators with the colours used to correspond with the colours used on the set plans (figure 6). As with the camera operator the boom operators also had to cover multiple sets with operators on pole 4 and 5 moving between each scene in part 1. The plot shows how long each scene was estimated to be so that the operators knew how quickly they had to move and set up at the next set.

## 6 Two Weeks to Go

With two weeks to go, shooting for the regular episodes of *The Bill* resumed and the rehearsals for the live episode were scheduled to take place whenever the actors and sets were available. A complex rehearsal schedule was drawn up to ensure that each section of the live episode had been sufficiently rehearsed. During this week Sylvie continued to work on the camera script, fine tuning it and ensuring all the action was covered and that the hand-held shooting style and cutting pace of *The Bill* were maintained throughout the live episode. A day dedicated to the stunt sequences was also scheduled so that time could be devoted to working out the precise choreography, cue-ing and vision mixing and the relationship between stunts and visual effects.

Live television is always risky by its very nature as there is always a chance that something will go wrong in front of a large television audience. What was being planned and shaped for the live *Bill* was particularly risky with the numbers of stunts which were to be included and the vast area of set, which was to be covered. Therefore it was decided to have a contingency scene running throughout the hour long episode with actors and supporting artists continuing an improvisation within one set which could be cut to at any point within the episode at only two seconds notice. A designated rehearsal was also held for these actors and walk on artists to ensure that they could sustain the improvisation throughout the hour.

## 7 Stunts

The stunt sequences were the element, which set this live episode apart from previous live episodes of *The Bill* and *Coronation Street*. The dangerous and dramatic stunts needed to be carefully choreographed and rehearsed by stunt coordinator Nick Gillard so the audience could not spot the trickery used to execute the stunts safely. The first major stunt in the episode was the 'escape' where a member of the public is shot and falls over the balcony in the police station onto the floor below. This sequence required the visual effects supervisors to create the gunshot wound with a squib pack (see below) and two stunt performers to perform the fall with a replica set created in a separate studio area. One stunt performer executing the high fall with a second performing a fall to the floor, the stunt performer then had to be replaced by the actor for the final shot of the sequence which was the shot before going into the first commercial break (figure 10). The rehearsal of this sequence can be viewed [here](#) and the full sequence from the live episode [here](#).



Figure 10: This picture show Stunt Double/Performer Tom Aiken rehearsing the high fall from a replica set, cued by Supervising First Assistant Director Joanna MacDonnell.

This sequence was reliant on precise cue-ing from Sylvie, the Assistant Director, the vision mixer and the camera operators and required extensive rehearsals to perfect the sequence as it was executed between two different sets. Two squib packs were used in the live episode for the two gunshot wounds. A squib pack is a visual effects device, which is strapped to the actor's body at the point where the gunshot wound is to occur. As it is a small explosive device the actors wear a protective 'plate' between their bodies and the pack. When the squib pack is activated it simulates a gunshot wound by causing a small directional explosion which goes through the costume and gives the appearance that **the actor has been shot**, as it is detonated it simultaneously fires theatrical blood through the gunshot wound (figures 10 and 11). On regular single camera drama's the squib packs are placed on the actors shortly before the 'take' in which they are to be used and then are detonated by the visual effects team using a remote control. The edit between the gunshot and the impact shot (the squib being detonated) is to be fine tuned for realism in post-production. However on the *Live Bill* it was decided that the actors would trigger the devices themselves for more precision timing and the actors would also need to wear the squibs for considerably longer than is usual in single camera circumstances and also carry the trigger for the device.



Figure 11 and 12: In these screen grabs from the closing sequence of the Live Bill the squib pack can clearly be seen detonating and firing blood through the wound.

The second visual effect was a gunshot to a window and glass raining down onto a police officer followed by another gunshot shattering the rear window of a car as it was driven away. The car then became part of the major stunt sequence in which the car, driven by two police officers, crashes and overturns. This sequence became the most complicated as it involved three vehicles to create the illusion. All three had to be identical with identical number plates to maintain continuity (figure 13). The first car was driven by the actors with the rear windscreen rigged for the rear window to shatter; the second car was rigged with a roll cage for the stunt performer (Ray De-Haan) to overturn using the pipe roll technique. A pipe-roll is where the wheels on one side of the car are driven at speed up a pipe, which then elevates the car and flips the car over onto its roof. The pipe was dressed and disguised as road works by the art department so it was not obvious to the audience that it was there. The third car was dressed and pre-rigged by the art department already on its roof for the two actors to climb into during the commercial break and continue the post crash action. This sequence had to be rehearsed making many assumptions as crashing a car numerous times during rehearsals wasn't possible. The only rehearsals, which were accomplished were the fine tuning of the cueing between the two shots of the two different vehicles so that the audience would not be aware that it was a different vehicle. The post-crash action was carefully choreographed in the pre-rigged car; the actual crash of the vehicle became one of the few unknown quantities of the episode.





Figure 13: This image shows two of the three cars for the car stunt, the car preset on its roof is identical in colour and number plate to the car seen behind which has been rigged for use in the car stunt with a roll cage. The road works on the left hand rear of the picture are disguising the pipe for the pipe roll.

The third major stunt was the blowing up of another car following the rescue of the teenage boy. This again required identical cars and sets to be provided by the art department so that the stunt could be executed safely. One car was the vehicle the actors used for the action rescuing the boy with the second car prepared with visual effect explosives, which would be detonated only when the actors were a safe distance away. The actors had to have a precise path to move along to allow the shots and cuts to lead the audience to believe it was the same car, again precise rehearsals and cue-ing was required (figure 14). Again this sequence could not be rehearsed with the explosion until the dress rehearsal.



Figure 14: This image shows the car prepared by visual effects for the explosion, it shows the duplicate set which has been prepared to match the action vehicle, both vehicles can be seen [here](#).

I completed the lengthy risk assessment for the programme following the planning of the stunts and visual effects, but before any rehearsals had taken place. The stunt coordinator and visual effects designers also had to complete risk assessments for their own aspects of the production as did all the heads of departments. It was then down to me as the Supervising First Assistant Director to ensure that all the precautions which had been detailed on the risk assessments were in place and carried out to ensure that the hazards that existed by the nature of what we were doing were as low risk and as unlikely to happen as possible.



## 8 One Week...

The final week of rehearsal began with a full run through for all the various departments to see the action in its entirety. Further rehearsals were tightly scheduled around the regular shooting units and interspersed with planning meetings. Technically the week was dedicated to the electrical and lighting rig, placing enough lamps to ensure that all the interior and exterior sets were appropriately lit. This was complicated by the fact that the episode would be broadcast at night but the majority of rehearsals were taking place during daylight hours. By the end of the week the remainder of the camera and sound rig was completed and everything was set for the camera and sound crew. The camera, sound and Assistant Directors teams all arrived with only four days until the live broadcast and only three days until an 'as live' dress rehearsal was scheduled to be recorded. Two days of slow technical rehearsals were followed by three full runs of the episode, these culminated in the dress rehearsal, which was recorded as a safety copy of the episode which could be used in the unlikely event of a loss of the live signal. Members of the Assistant Directors team who were positioned in the various sets were fitted for police uniforms in case they were caught in shot or had to make impromptu appearances to troubleshoot (figure 15).



Figure 15: Assistant Director's Team



## 9 Script Supervising

The term script supervisor is a slightly ambiguous one – meaning different things on different genres of production. On single camera dramas the script supervisor will be responsible for maintaining continuity, compiling notes for the editor and marking the progress of the unit for the producer. On a multi-camera production the script supervisor's role varies depending on whether the programme is live or pre-recorded. On a live programme it is the script supervisor's responsibility to ensure the programme meets the timeslot allocated by the broadcaster, they can also call the shot numbers and camera numbers from a camera script leaving the director free to watch the monitors and cue to the action and camera moves. For this particular episode it was necessary to have two script supervisors both taking on multi-camera aspects of the job; as this was a live episode and needed to fill the one hour time slot one script supervisor was purely responsible for the timing of the episode and liaising with the channel's presentation team and the other one exclusively focusing on calling the shots in the director's camera script. Two vision mixers were also needed, one to cut the programme and one to be on standby, the vision mixer was the one role who had a cover in case of illness, indicative of the importance of the role and the key contribution they made to the production, without a vision mixer who had an in depth knowledge of the precision timing of the stunt sequences the entire production would have undoubtedly failed.

## 10 Sound

In addition to the live stunts and the live cue-ing and cutting between cameras, the sound department also had to undertake practices, which are not the norm for television drama. Usually in any television drama from soap opera to high budget single camera dramas the sound mix is achieved in post production with only clean dialogue and separate wild tracks being recorded on set and the various effects added during the dub. However for the *Live Bill*, the sound designer John Osborne, had to create the illusion of a post produced sound mix for the episode. He mixed live dialogue with phone effects, recorded sound effects and background noise to create a soundscape, which set the scene for the episode. It was also crucial that the actors who had dialogue via telephones and police radios could really hear one another for their cues. This is also not common practice in shooting television drama and some scenes were totally reliant on the actors being able to hear one another by phone with the audience hearing both sides of the conversation. The sound mix was a skilled one and earned John Osborne a Royal Television Society Craft and Design Award for Best Drama Sound 2006.

## 11 The Dress Rehearsal

The dress rehearsal was the first opportunity for the stunt and visual effect teams to perform all of the varied parts of the stunt sequences. Problems arose when the car did not overturn and land on its roof but instead went up the pipe and landed on its wheels. This was due to a right hand turn in the road being necessary because of the limited space in the studio back lot and the car not hitting the speed required for the driver to turn the car over. The rehearsal continued but using the pre-rigged overturned car (figure 16) and further discussions were held within the stunt team to find a way of turning the car on the live broadcast. The rest of the dress rehearsal ran seamlessly including cutting unannounced to the contingency scene to ensure that this back up also worked. We finished the night confident that we had a great episode on our hands, which would be memorable for the audience and the industry alike. Our only concern was would the audience actually believe it was 100% live!



Figure 16: This photo taken at the dress rehearsal shows the crashed car on its roof as was originally intended with the exploded car in the background.

## 12 The Night of the Live

Final rehearsals took place on the morning of the broadcast and final tweaks and changes made; these were minor changes and were made as is common practice in theatre after a dress rehearsal.

As with any live performance there were imperfections in the live broadcast which astute members of the audience picked up on and posted on various fan websites. These included crew members accidentally appearing in vision and a microphone dipping into shot. The main problem was the [car stunt](#), which, like the dress rehearsal, failed to turn over onto its roof (figure 17). However unlike the dress rehearsal the pre-rigged car could not be used as this would break continuity and the audience's belief and therefore during the commercial break decisions had to be made and action taken. The pre-rigged car had to be removed, this involved the art department using a fork lift truck to pick it up and drag it out of vision, the camera positions and shots had to be re-thought and the actors briefed on the change to the blocking, all within the duration of the three and a half minute commercial break. This scene then became an 'as directed' unrehearsed element and required the actors, camera operators, vision mixer and Sylvie to be creative and think on their feet. The script was picked up again after the post-crash scene.



Figure 17: This screen grab from the live broadcast shows the position where the car ended the crash; this then required an 'as directed' sequence as the rehearsals and camera script were built around the car on its roof.

### 13 Conclusion

The live episode of *The Bill*, like many live theatre and event performances, was not completely perfect in its delivery, however the lack of perfection added to the 'liveness' of the event and did make the audience believe that it was 100% live with no pre-recorded sequences played in. It also provided the audience with a fusion of a live theatrical performance and popular television drama and did fulfil its brief in marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ITV with a memorable television event. Despite the imperfections within the broadcast the production team felt triumphant at the end of the episode and I certainly recall feeling that we had done something which had never been accomplished before on British TV. The live stunts, which were included in the episode undoubtedly changed the principles of live television drama and enabled other subsequent live drama programmes to push boundaries still further in their live endeavours. A live television event such as this can only be possible if a strong team is assembled each with an absolute specialism, and the skill of the producers was not only to have the vision and ambition to go live with the programme but also to assemble the team which could convincingly and collaboratively achieve these aims.



## Biography

Joanna MacDonnell is a Principal Lecturer in Television Production and the Course Leader of the Foundation Degrees in Television Production and in Broadcast at the University of Brighton in Hastings. Jo brings with her a wealth of experience in programme and film making which enables her to uphold the ethos of the courses in emulating industry conditions in teaching and assessment strategies. Jo was awarded a University teaching excellent award and also has an MA in Education.