

▼ Fiona Lloyd-Davies filming in the Congo with the Panasonic AG-AF101



JACK KAHORHA

FIELD OF HOPE IN AFRICA WITH AN AF101

A VERY DUSTY ROAD TEST!



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FIONA LLOYD-DAVIES

▲ Masika Katsuva, the inspirational subject of Field of Hope. The survivor of four brutal rapes herself, Masika now runs a centre for other victims of sexual violence



▲ Masika in the Field of Hope



▲ Masika brings the women together to help them improve their lives by growing crops

Not one to shy away from tough environments and even tougher subject matter, award-winning documentary-maker **Fiona Lloyd-Davies** decided to shoot her latest film in the Democratic Republic of Congo on a Panasonic AG-AF101, even though the camera was at the time brand new and not yet fully tested. She describes the country as "one of the toughest environments a camera can work in – very hot and very, very dusty". A graduate of the Royal College of Art, Fiona also works as a photojournalist, so image quality is of prime importance to her. The observational documentary *Field of Hope* follows Masika Katsuva, an inspirational survivor of rape, who runs a centre for other survivors of sexual violence – women, children and men. The film juxtaposes their stories with a symbol of hope – a new crop of beans that brings with it the chance of a better future for the group. Here, Fiona reports on how the AF101 stood up to the rigours of the shoot.

Everything in the Democratic Republic of Congo is extreme – the heat, the dust, the bone-rattling roads and the beauty. It's rich, lush and a fantastic place to photograph. But, it can also be dangerous. The war was officially over in 2003 but pockets of fighting spring up across the country like mercury. Last year the UN dubbed it the 'rape capital of the world' with women having been systematically raped there since 1998 when the war started. When I first went in 2001, 70% of the women in the town I was based in had been raped. The only difference today is that they've now often been raped four or five times, and their children from rape have been raped too. It is heart-breaking but also one of the most important and compelling stories I've ever covered. So I pursued a commission from Al Jazeera English to make an observational documentary.

The film centres on Masika, a rape survivor and the centre she has set up for others who have suffered similarly. One of the key aspects of the film is the visual theme of their 'field'. When Masika has funds she rents a field where the group can grow crops to eat and sell. This gives them a reason to be together and to support each other. The film shows them sowing and harvesting the crops, and the ways in which they support each other,

listening to each others' problems and even laughing together.

Camera choice

One of the key criteria when pitching and budgeting for this commission was what I would shoot the film on – how to achieve the best quality images on this logistically challenging shoot with a very limited budget.

Because the landscape would be integral to the film, it was essential to be able to capture visually strong footage, so I wanted to find a way to make the film as cinematic as possible. However, I also knew the equipment would have to be both portable and manoeuvrable to be realistic for me as a self-shooter with no camera assistant or sound recordist.

Initially, I looked into taking two cameras: one to shoot the main film, plus a full frame DSLR for the landscapes. On closer scrutiny, this simply wasn't practical. I wasn't happy using a camera without inbuilt sound channels, and colleagues had told me that the DSLR option I had in mind didn't handle movement well. Just as importantly, the two formats would look quite different and it would be very difficult handling the two cameras on my own. This option dismissed, my search for a high-quality, cinematic solution led me to the Panasonic AG-AF101. It was brand

new on the market and pretty much untested, but the narrow depth of field and HD quality sounded like it would fulfil my visual brief.

High expectations

The information available flagged up the camera as bringing 35mm quality and narrow depth of field to a new community of film-makers, at an affordable price. So I had high expectations. However, hiring the kit was expensive. It wasn't just the body, but all the lenses (primes), accessories (matte box, filters) and the nanoFlash with all its extras (more on this later). With my tiny budget I was really pushing the boat out to use this camera. However, I feel it has definitely been worth it. Obviously the camera will only deliver images as good as the operator but the colours are vivid and intense, and the detail images – such as droplets of dew on giant leaves – look fantastic.

How did the camera perform?

As this was such a new camera on the market I was fearful it wouldn't stand up to the rigours of working in Congo. The dust, constant jarring on rough roads, rain, intense heat and moisture can take a real toll on any camera. I need not have worried as there were no technical problems to speak of and

the camera performed very well.

Working tapeless proved to be fairly straightforward as well. Having worked digitally on stills for several years, I followed the same workflow. For safety, I backed up my material twice each night. Ideally, I would have liked to have put the rushes onto an additional format, possibly even tape, to lessen the risk of losses but the reduced cost and greater efficiency of using an entirely tapeless workflow stacked up and I felt reassured by talking to other users of the SD recording format.

Pros and cons

The camera itself is light enough to be handheld without much effort, or rests well in the crook of an arm. It feels good and handles well. The menu is easy to use and does what you expect it to, feeling familiar even though there are new and different options; these are easy to find. The iris/exposure also worked well.

At the time of the first shoot, there was no zoom lens that would work with the camera so I used prime lenses. This in itself brings pros and cons. The pros are obviously the quality of the lenses and the different mental discipline of working with fixed focal length lenses. Using primes slows you down, and in many ways this suited this kind of film, making

me think harder about what I wanted to shoot and how to shoot it. I think this made for better images and higher quality pictures.

The drawback though when working in a place like Congo is that you sometimes need to catch things quickly; there's no time to change lenses or you'll miss it. By the time I returned for the second shoot, zoom lenses had become available and I took a Canon 24-70mm as well as keeping the 18mm prime and adding a 200mm for shooting close-ups of the beans and various insects. A particular problem shooting in the bright light of the Congo was the need to stop down so far that vignetting became an issue. Being on my own meant using filters was difficult.

The main disadvantage of the camera at present is that it doesn't record 50 MBps to onboard cards. The onboard camera card only records 35 MBps, which is not broadcast quality. This necessitates rigging up an alternative to record onto separate SD cards at 50 MBps and therefore an extra bit of kit to carry, set up and remember to plug in. When you're working on your own, it's almost a step too far. The hire company, VMI, supplied a nanoFlash recorder and Anton/Bauer battery to power it, but it was heavy and cumbersome. Initially, we looked at attaching it to the camera, but this made it too heavy for me to hold. In the difficult environment of Congo I wanted things as simple as possible. It was my husband, a retired army officer of 30 years, who came up with the solution:

a sturdy Russian soldier's army belt that he'd swapped when serving with the UN in Bosnia, plus two ammunition pouches, all held up by a pair of braces. It worked perfectly.

Tapeless versus tape?

I've only worked tapeless once before and on that occasion I had a cameraman and a technical whizz of an AP. This was going to be very different. I would be on my own. However, it all proved to be fairly straightforward, using 500GB rugged hard drives to back everything up twice. At the end of the shoot, I ran out of space on my drives but had enough SD cards to prevent a disaster. Next time, I'll take Terabytes. There is, of course, one tremendous advantage in that you can view your rushes without worrying about damaging the tapes. In the past I've had problems caused by viewing rushes, where the kit has broken down because of the dust. Using a laptop back at base, transferring everything each evening, meant this wasn't an issue.

The only real potential problem with this technology is its dependence on electricity. Where I was staying, this was in limited supply as we were on a generator. The main genny was broken and the priests were using a smaller one which would over-heat after three hours and have to be turned off. I just about managed, but it showed how important it is to take enough cards and batteries in case one can't transfer after the shoot.



▲ Children tending the crops in 'the field' which is in a mountainous area

How easy is the AF101 for a one-person crew?

Working on one's own is a challenge wherever you are. In Congo, it's even more so. You have to be super-organised and choose your local crew (fixer and driver) carefully. Having worked frequently in Congo over the past 10 years, I now have a thorough checklist. Luckily I work with a fantastic fixer and translator who is also a journalist so understands what I'm doing and this helps a lot. The driver soon became a boom operator and learnt how to set up the tripod. Nevertheless, it's a huge amount to take on for one person, especially as it's not just the filming, but the nightly aftercare of the equipment and now transfer of footage as well. It can be done, but it's a hard task.

Conclusions

In general, the camera is user-friendly

and easy to use on location. The menu is similar to previous small cameras I have used and is pretty straightforward to operate. The AG-AF101 had only been released onto the market 10 days before I was due to leave and the hire company VMI (GTC sponsors) were still testing it out. They were tremendously helpful, giving me invaluable advice and backup. The main area I felt needed improving was the ability to record 50 MBps on the camera but this was resolved by using the nanoFlash solution.

Overall, I was pleased that I obtained the high-quality, cinematic results I was after and at a very compelling price. Congo is a beautiful part of the world and I wanted a camera that could do it justice. Not only did it bring out the vivid colours of the people and their environment, but its large chip allowed me to adjust the depth of field to great effect.



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Fact File

Fiona Lloyd-Davies has made documentaries for the BBC, Channel 4 and Al Jazeera English over nearly two decades. She is well known for the 20 films she made for *Newsnight* with Salam Pax, the 'Baghdad Blogger' which brought recognition with an RTS Award for Innovation. This was her second RTS, the first being for her film *Licence to Kill* in BBC2's *Correspondent* foreign affairs series.

The Field of Hope will air on Al Jazeera English on Tuesday 30 August. See more about Fiona's work at: www.studio9films.co.uk

See more about the Panasonic AG-AF101 at: <http://tinyurl.com/2eq3oxg>

