

Down with the kids... on Outnumbered

As families up and down the country settled down on Christmas Eve to watch the *Outnumbered Xmas Special*, many could be heard to remark 'Haven't the kids grown up?' - just as you might about the children of some relatives or friends you haven't seen for a while. After six years of famously naturalistic performances, particularly unusual in a comedy series involving children, the family in *Outnumbered* almost feel like friends who live down the road. This considerable achievement is no accident: everything about the method of shooting the programme, ever since the pilot programme, has been designed to create an environment in which the children can appear as natural as possible. This means not only the well-publicised 'ad libbed' script, but the camera crew have also played their part by going along with virtually no rehearsal, an exclusively handheld style of shooting and minimalistic lighting. DoP for all the series, GTC member Martin Hawkins, explains how it all works.

Never work with animals or children... or so the saying goes. But when directors Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin from Hat Trick Productions call, you tend to say 'yes', no matter what's involved.

And that's what happened back in 2006 when they asked me to light and shoot a new, part-improvised, part-scripted, situation comedy about three children and their mum and dad who were... 'Outnumbered'.

Ad lib?

The question I always get asked when people find out I work on this series is: "Do they really make up all the lines themselves?" Well, there is a script but the children don't see it, only the adults. Instead, Andy and Guy, who thought up the series and together write, direct and produce it, talk the scenes through with the children just prior to filming them. At first, the BBC commissioners couldn't get their heads around the fact that the children would 'improvise' their lines and not learn them off the page in the normal way. So, over one weekend at Guy Jenkin's house, we filmed a short pilot programme. This was with the same cast: Hugh Dennis (Dad), Claire Skinner (Mum), Tiger Drew-Honey (Jake), Daniel Roche (Ben) and Ramona Marquez (Karen), who was just 5 years old at the time.

Chatting with Andy and Guy before we started, it was clear that their main concern about filming the series was with all the technical 'stuff' that tends to envelop actors on a film set: the dolly, tracks, tripods, lights, flags, stands, booms, as well as loads of people. For *Outnumbered*, they wanted to keep all of this to a minimum and to avoid anything on set that would distract the kids from their performances. They didn't want



The regular *Outnumbered* crew: Peter Welch, Me and our brilliant assistants Louise Edmunds and Martin Blinko

to have to tie the kids down to marks or make them stand in a certain place; they didn't want to rehearse; and they wanted to work fast. Was I still interested?

So, out went the dolly and tracks, out went the flags and stands, out went the tripods. To make the children feel comfortable they wanted to shoot in a real house on location... so out went a nice warm studio. Oh yes, and out went loads of people.

Because of the improvisation, a second camera was agreed to. So, equipped with two cameras and a couple of Kino Flos, off we went to Guy's house to shoot the pilot.

As real as possible

With the kids playing upstairs, we would block the scene out with

Not having all the caravans and paraphernalia that normally come with a TV production, plus the fact that we are a very small and compact unit, plays a huge part in the attitude of everyone connected with the show and I believe it is reflected in the end result

Hugh and Claire, walking through where the children would come and go. Andy and Guy, it would be true to say, are completely focused on performance but both also take a big interest in the

action as they like it to be 'real'. When it came to directing the three children, in order not to confuse them with too many notes from different people, Andy would look after Ben, while Guy would talk through the scenes with the other two (although as Tiger has grown up he now has both directing him). Meanwhile, I would work out how to use the two cameras effectively without getting in each other's way as we like to cross-shoot whenever possible.

If, for example, the scene involved Karen coming into the kitchen to tell her mum and dad she didn't want to go to school, Guy would chat with her, explain what the scene was about and suggest lines she might say and things her mum might say to her; in other words, talk her through the script in story form. It's amazing how the children remember; it may come out in a slightly different order but it always sounds real. I don't think enough credit is given to Hugh and Claire for the way they cope with this (or to the editor for that matter) as most of the time they have no idea what lines are coming at them or when.

Either Andy or Guy would always be on set and near to the camera to help talk the children through the scene if they needed help and also for reassurance. Meanwhile 'Video Village' was set up in the next room and whoever wasn't on set would be watching the monitors and available to advise the script supervisor on which take they preferred or which lines they liked from different takes.

We have always been encouraged to call everybody by their character names (even referring to Claire as Mum and

Hugh as Dad) to keep it real for the children).

Once camera positions had been decided, radio mics fitted and the scene lit, Guy would bring Karen onto the floor and show her which area to work in. This was also the point at which we would start the cameras rolling, but with no loud 'Action' or clapperboard. Claire and Hugh would start talking and we were away, always filming the first go and never rehearsing.

Working with children

So, six years, four series and three Christmas specials later, that's pretty much how we still shoot it. As the children have got older, we can now have them on set for longer periods, which has made life a lot easier and these days we're more relaxed about using a



Above: the cast; Below: Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin watch over the performances in 'Video Village'



clapperboard and saying 'Action!.. but still not too loudly!

On the first couple of series we were only allowed the children for a very short amount of time: Ramona for just four x 20-minute sessions in a day with a 40-minute break between sessions, so the time with her soon went. This is why the children aren't very often around for a whole scene and they tend to pop in and out. If they needed to be in a scene for longer we would have to position them in such a way that they

The directors, Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin, were concerned about all the technical 'stuff' that tends to envelop actors on a film set: dolly, tracks, tripods, lights, flags, stands, booms, as well as loads of people... they wanted to avoid anything on set that would distract the kids from their performances

wouldn't end up in the back of other camera angles as we had to continue filming while they were off on their breaks. This was always interesting as the adults move around quite a bit. Added to that, the children weren't in every day so we would often start a scene with them but not be able to complete it until two or three days later. My script would be a mess of notes and drawings to recall actor and camera positions, what side of the line we were shooting from, what lights were in use, where the sun was, etc, etc.

Lightweight unit

Another thing that makes *Outnumbered* special is that we also take over the house next door, which becomes the unit base. Breakfast and lunch are cooked in

the kitchen by the lovely Pam and we eat in a marquee in the garden. The living room becomes the production office and green-room for the adult artists. Costume is in the master bedroom and the other bedrooms are divided up between the children and their tutors. There is no make-up department so that means no checks just prior to a take. As soon as the children walk on set, we just turn over.



Breathe in for a tight 3-shot!

be the height of the operator, whether you're standing or kneeling – and kneeling can get very uncomfortable after a while. If you're not comfortable, then the camera will be less steady and, especially as television sets in the home get bigger, this becomes an issue. For *Outnumbered*, we always try to shoot at the same height as the artist, be it the children or the adults. I don't like looking down on the kids, but in order to get some foreground or an over-the-shoulder shot, we do sometimes look up at the adults (which I think is fine as you should look up to your parents when you're young). Over-the-shoulder shots of the children often mean a bit of adult body in frame to connect the artists. To help with this, I had four wooden boxes of 8"x 9"x 10" made up for Peter and myself to use. With the addition of a couple of 2" pancakes, we can make the camera whatever height we want and can stack them on top of each other to give a lot of extra flexibility in achieving the

perfect height for each shot, just as you would if the camera were on a dolly. This may all sound a bit obvious but, as we don't have a grip, it sure saves a lot of time looking around for telephone directories to add to a lens box!

I love to use foreground in shots and will go for it whenever I can to give the shot depth, but this was really difficult in the early series when the children were very young. Having shot their close-up



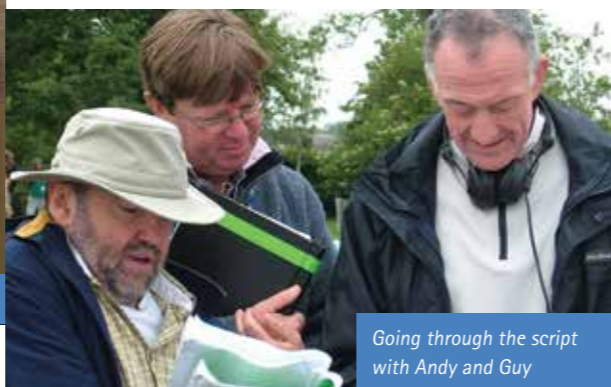
Filming with John Walker in Karen's bedroom

Outside in the back garden, we pop out a fence panel and can nip between the two houses very easily and quickly. Apart from a couple of Luton vans parked just round the corner – one for lighting and the other for props – you would never know there was a film crew inside. Not having all the caravans and paraphernalia that normally come with a TV production, plus the fact that we are a very small and compact unit, plays a huge part in the attitude of everyone connected with the show and I believe this is reflected in the performances and the end result.

The same crew has been involved with all the series to date and this creates a great working relationship, not only with the children but with the adults too. I would like to thank GTC member and top operator Peter Welch who has been by my side operating on second camera for all the series, as have Martin Blinko and Louise Edmunds, my two faithful assistants. The lighting gaffer is Paul Barlow and our best boy is Jon Tanner. I couldn't wish for a better camera and lighting team. I must also mention another key part of the team: Ross Baker at Halo Post, who grades the show and does a wonderful job too. I think it's very important for the children to have familiar faces around as it makes them feel more relaxed and at home; another reason for their great performances. It has been fascinating watching the kids grow up. Of all the many enjoyable shows I work on, *Outnumbered* has to be right up there at the top.

Custom-made boxes

One of the problems I have with shooting handheld on programmes that aren't meant to be spoof documentaries but 'normal' (whatever that means), is the height the camera shoots at. *Outnumbered* is shot handheld for all the reasons I've already explained, rather than to make it look like a documentary; nevertheless, I do think this gives it an interesting feel. If the camera is on your shoulder then it's always going to



Going through the script with Andy and Guy



Pete Welch making use of one of our custom-made boxes



Sparks: Paul Barlow (gaffer) and Jon Tanner (best boy)

and a mid reverse on, say, Mum or Dad, they would then have to go for their break. In order to continue filming while they were off set, we would then have to shoot the adults clean. Andy or Guy would become the 'stand in' and try to get to the same height as the children to enable the correct eyeline to be kept. I will leave it up to your imagination how this sometimes looked!

Minimalistic lighting

The lighting has pretty much stayed the same for all the series. In the kitchen, where 70% of the action takes place, we screw a couple of daylight 4' x 2-bank and 4' x 1-bank Kino Flos into the ceiling and walls, plus a 4' x 4-bank in the corner of the room and try to recreate the soft, natural light from the windows. These are not all on at once but it allows me to use just the ones I need for the shots at any one time. As I was once told,

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lighting isn't about the lights you turn on, it's about the ones you turn off. With a 2.5k HMI and a couple of 1.2k HMIs outside the windows, that just about does it for daytime scenes. We don't often shoot at night but when we do I just change the Kino Flo tubes to tungsten, turn off the 4' x 4-bank, add a low 2' x 4-bank Kino Flo or a 1' x 1' Bi-colour LED Litepanel to recreate the light from a practical lamp on set, flip the camera filter wheel to 4300K to keep the pictures warm, and turn the fill level down. 'Turn over'...

One thing *Outnumbered* has taught me is that by keeping things simple you work much faster which ultimately means you spend less time rigging and more time filming, and this, in turn, makes for happy directors. And, hopefully, happy directors will mean they keep on phoning you! Well it seems to work with Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkin anyway.

Fact File

See more about Martin at: www.martinhawkins.com

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