

James Fulcher (18)

Diary of a young CAMERAMAN

Faced with the dilemma of how best to get proper training in his chosen career of television camerawork, camera assistant James Fulcher has rejected the university route, opting instead to try and gain experience 'on the job'. But just how easy is it to get started in this way? James fills us in with the story so far ... and the tale of his progress will unfold in subsequent issues of 'GTC InFocus'

To give my background: I am 18 and, following advice from many TV professionals, have made a conscious decision not to go to university (yet anyway...). Instead, I am trying to learn camerawork 'on the job' and to develop my skills practically. I have steered away from taking a television-related university course for reasons I will state later and the route I have chosen is to try and build up my practical experience and testimonials of work. This has been by attending numerous events, approaching people in the industry, following

anti-bullying DVDs that I shot with a borrowed Panasonic DVX100B.

During the last two years at school, I would occasionally take a day or two off to work on a production, generally unpaid of course. With the benefit of hindsight I now know that the jobs advertised for 'experience' with no pay generally aren't worth it – but I didn't realise that at the time. It's on professional productions (often with GTC members) where people actually take the time to train and advise

to www.jamesfulcher.com.

Nevertheless, it has been one of the most useful tools for getting work. It's a starting point where I can direct people towards testimonials to prove that I am worth giving a chance to.

First exclusive

Then I had a lucky break. In mid-August last year, there was a shooting in a local town; I heard reports on the radio of two men being shot after an argument. Grabbing my camera, I raced to the scene of the potential news story. I was surprised to find

on the GTC Forum. I spotted a message which read *'I have a requirement for a runner... mainly humping kit and assisting dolly/jib set-ups. Negotiable but probably £70 a day or so, for 5 days next week (my client's budget) to assist a 2-man crew in 10 locations (all interiors) in and around London. Not a heavy day's work and no technical expertise required although opportunity to closely job shadow.'* It was ideal, a perfect learning opportunity. This was the first job I applied for and from hesitantly taking this job I have received numerous others.

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forums, establishing a web presence and adopting an entrepreneurial approach. For this, the GTC – in particular the GTC Forum and events – has been an invaluable resource. In taking this path, I am diverging from that commonly suggested by careers advisers and those outside the industry. If it works out, then I'll carry on; if it stops being productive then I can reconsider my options.

Early beginnings

My first serious attempts to put into practice my early interest in camerawork came when I was 14. I began by searching for charities and local schools who wanted short productions made and, after being stalled briefly by legal issues regarding filming in schools, I managed to produce a small series of (now cringeworthy!) me. Some of the charity work at school was useful though. While not paid (even expenses weren't covered), the experience and the CV material I acquired made it worthwhile.

With this limited experience behind me, when an ex-Sky presenter came into school to give a lecture, I found I had sufficient material to impress her. I basically hassled her until she agreed to put me in touch with a professional cameraman so that I could spend 'a realistic day' with a working cameraman. This only furthered my interest. At around this time, I bought a website for about £40, which I then filled with everything I could possibly fit on. In many ways it was punching above my weight and this has been recently updated and tamed

nothing but a few police cars at the cordon. After about 5 minutes of congratulating myself on being the first person there, I realised I was at the wrong end of the cordon! Racing along to the other end, I was still one of the first there. Within half an hour the area was filled with satellite trucks and news crews, but before they turned up I had already interviewed as many locals as I could. There was one man on the edge of all the commotion who seemed to be observing, so I went over to talk to him. It turned out he was the only witness to the shooting. I explained my situation and he agreed to do an interview. By the end of it, a large crowd had surrounded us and when he was asked to repeat what he had said he refused. My interview became an exclusive! The first proper work I got was through an advert

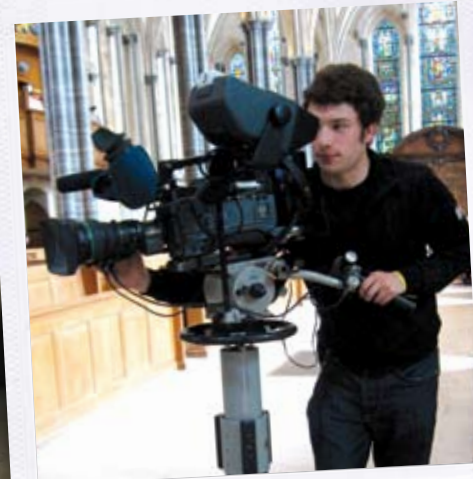
Then I was invited to help as a runner/assistant for the filming of the BBC News/Sport Conference in 2008. This was my first experience of studio work and I was thrown in at the deep end by being put on camera with directions being fired at me through an earpiece (at that stage I didn't have a clue what half of them meant). However, I used my initiative and took a few educated guesses, which seemed to work!

There are many times when jobs have been awkward but they have usually paid off. One of the most logistically challenging was an offer of three days' work as a camera assistant on a documentary in Yorkshire. Not an offer I could refuse, but unfortunately I couldn't drive – and at the time when the call came I was standing in a field in Devon. There were about 14 hours to get to Yorkshire and, to make matters worse, I had to walk miles to get a mobile signal. Just to complicate things even further, this was the day my number was

STARTING OUT



Steep learning curve



Film and refilm!

being transferred to a new phone, so I had to explain that, at some point in the day, the number I was phoning from would be different but the number to call me on was the same! After speaking to locals and finding out there was a night train at 1am that would take me to London, I took the opportunity. Perfect. Well, nearly perfect. Unfortunately the train went through loads of university towns and was packed, and I couldn't afford to get a bed on it. However, at least I got there on time.

Steep learning curve

Working on London Fashion Week was one of the quickest learning curves for me. This was four days supporting the main lighting cameraman. The majority of the challenges were logistical, with up to seven shows a day spread across London, working surrounded by other crews and with very long hours. It was necessary to work rapidly and efficiently, and by learning from my mistakes I gained invaluable experience very quickly.

I have found that one good way of practising my skills and getting useful feedback is to set up and film interviews with actors who need footage for their showreels. I upload the file to a server and email it to a lighting cameraman for their advice, receiving back invaluable comments like "Audio sounds like it was recorded next to a public lavatory. Obviously done with the camera mic. This is inadequate for a showreel. Did you add the music to hide the poor audio?".

Whenever something is inadequate and changes suggested, I go back and refilm and refilm until the quality is respectable.

In the short while I have been out and about trying to acquire proper skills, I have realised that camerawork is often not properly appreciated as a craft. When reporters can go out and film an entertainment report on a Z1, it is all too easy for broadcast television standards to slip. However, as we saw at the recent GTC Awards event, there are still some TV gems being shot. To perpetuate these standards in television production, it seems essential to provide quality training. With the current situation of limited training, and only a few industry-led and recognised training courses, it is very much a case of the 'survival of the fittest'. I have heard quoted several times that the number of Media/Broadcast students graduating in the UK is enough to completely replenish the whole print, radio and television industries within two years. In many ways, this does not reflect the quality of some of the students, but it does create a logistical impossibility.

Looking at it cynically, it seems university degrees are often not targeted at the correct people. Of course there will be some taking these degrees who are suited for the industry and will go on to have a successful TV career, but realistically a large number of students will be disappointed if

they think they are going to get work on the back of their degree.

Looking to the future of the GTC, will there be enough skilled craft camera operators to uphold the current standards of the Guild? Hopefully the answer

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will be yes, but it seems that, as there are now fewer and fewer staff cameramen, there will be fewer training opportunities. Increasingly, camera crews are not able to choose who is trained as HR take over this responsibility? Freelancers often will not be able to afford the time or possible risk of taking on someone as an apprentice, and as the freelance sector in the industry continues to grow, this problem gains more significance. Perhaps this is something for the GTC to develop. If the practice of people being put forward for training programmes by people who do not understand the industry increases, the route I have chosen will not be viable and opportunities to learn camerawork as a craft will be lost.

That said, so far I would thoroughly recommend the approach I have adopted to anyone looking to get into camerawork. I have learnt a massive amount that can only happen practically in my short time as a camera assistant.

On many productions I have been thrown in at the deep end, finding myself on night trains travelling the length and breadth of the UK, in the presence of royalty, working in 5-star hotels (but sleeping in 2 star hotels!), helping control crowds of children, meeting people from all walks

of life, and finding myself in weird and wonderful situations I never would have dreamt of. Even as I am writing this, I am on a train travelling to the west of Ireland, to attend a pre-production meeting for a possible upcoming production.

My main tips for other students are:

- Be punctual – 'one hour early is better than one minute late'
- Grab every opportunity for work and training as generally it won't find you
- Keep up-to-date with the industry (through resources like the GTC Forum/website)
- Advertise yourself through a personal website, the GTC website etc.
- Meet everyone and anyone you can and do take advice from professionals!

I would be interested to hear if GTC members feel I have taken the correct route, either on the Forum or at: james@jamesfulcher.com