

# Starting a new television career behind the camera

**Luke Sheehan** the GTC Bill Vinten Awards and Education Officer organised a panel discussion, 'Getting Started with Your Career in Television' at Coventry University for students and graduates.

## By Luke Sheehan

The panel discussion was squarely aimed at recent graduates and current students, and I was extremely grateful to our panel members for volunteering or agreeing to take part. The obvious question for recent Graduates and current Students after studying for several years is, "What's next?" As such I felt that it was important to dedicate one of the sessions to giving advice and guidance to the attendees, but from the perspective of those who are working within camera departments in the industry who made their start within the last few years. Our panel consisted of James Watson, Alexander Lines, Fiona Schimmel, and Hannah Mellish, with the discussion moderated by the Chair of the GTC, Graham Maunder. Here are a few edited and abridged questions and answers

## Tell us how you got started in the industry, how you got to where you are today, and if there is anything you wish you'd known when you started.

### Hannah Mellish

I studied Film and TV Production at the University of York, and whilst I was there, I got some work experience at a shopping channel called Ideal World and through that, I managed to get a full-time job operating there once I graduated.

That role involved cameras, sound and lighting, so a multi-skilled role. I was there for about a year and then after that, I moved on to another shopping channel, QVC, which again was a multi-skilled role involving camera sound and lighting. From there, I applied for a camera operating job at ITV, which I saw advertised on Facebook, which I got, and I have been there for two years now.

### Fiona Schimmel

"I went to Middlesex Uni doing TV tech course and I was a freelance camera assisting

throughout my second and third year of uni, mainly in studios, for example on panel shows and the Big Brother live shows and any other studio jobs around London. When I graduated I got a staff job at an outside broadcast company and I was a staff camera guarantee/ operator for five years. I've been a freelance camera operator and also occasionally freelance camera guarantee for about four years now. I'm mainly working on live sports like football, rugby, athletics, boxing, tennis, whatever comes in and a little bit of studio on the side as well."

### Alex Lines

I was on the same course as Hannah, film and TV at York when I graduated. I didn't know how to get into the industry and I don't think I had made the best of my time in making good contacts, so I just did short films myself to keep my head in the game while doing other little jobs. Then at the running club I went to in Brighton, I found out that one of the guys there was the financial director of a company called The Imaginarium Studios, which is a motion capture studio. So I used his name in an email to the company. Luckily it turned out one of our old lecturers worked there as well, so he said, oh I know Alex, let's get him in. So I did a bit of work there, which was good, but it was kind of more 'dailies', or some weeks here and there, as opposed to full-time work to earn a living. I started to worry about everything that I was going to do. And then luckily the GTC Bill Vinten Awards happened and a film that I had done at uni. ended up being a runner-up and the prize for that was some work experience on BBC's Doctors. During my week there, I asked around how I could get a job in the camera department there. Someone gave me the contact details for the hire house that rented the camera kit. I called them up and said, could I have a job? And they said, funnily enough, someone's



Hannah Mellish, Camera Operator for ITV Daytime.



Alexander Lines, Camera Assistant for TV Drama Productions & Film.

just left, so yes. So I ended up doing four years there because it was such a good experience, kind of going out on shoots and dealing with the newest kind of cameras and lenses. That was at Transmission TX at Shepperton Studios and I made some good contacts on the shoots I was on and became quite good friends with one of the focus pullers. He started taking me on shoots and eventually, I went freelance.

### James Watson

I went to Ravensbourne University and did



GRAEME MCPALPINE



James Watson, Camera Guarantee and Operator for Timeline Television.



Fiona Schimmel, Camera Operator for OB sports, events & studio.

a course in TV production there. Then by the time I got halfway through my last year there, I was doing bits and bobs of freelance operating. I think one of the things we did was one of those MMA events where there were two cameras and you were just constantly running around with your cable bashing for yourself from four in the afternoon until two in the morning. Probably health and safety-wise, it wasn't the smartest, but by the end you had earned £200 and you thought, this is wonderful.

Anyway, that got a bit of experience under the belt. After university, I applied for Timeline TV's graduate scheme. They rejected me! So I went freelance for a few years. I did a lot working with smaller OB companies, ones where football clubs could do their streams of matches. I did a little bit of multi-skilling as well. I did bits of replays and basic engineering and stuff like that. And then I was doing bits of freelancing for Timeline on the side. And about three years later after that Timeline came back to me

and they were like, actually, do you want to work for us? So I thought, yeah, give it a try. Why not?

### **Any particular advice for people who are just finishing their courses?**

**Hannah Mellish**

I think you don't have to aim for the big companies straight away. Look for the small companies. I started at a Shopping Channel, it was live TV, but people are so judgmental of shopping telly. It's one of the

least respected areas of multi-camera, but it was the best place for me because I was behind a camera as soon as I graduated. I was operating cameras for live television for around 11 hours a day, and that sort of experience is just invaluable. It didn't matter what I was shooting; I was behind the camera and that's the most important thing. I think you shouldn't discount those smaller companies that might not be BBC or ITV or whatever, because they will often give you the skills to get to those bigger companies in the end. But I think you just have to be persistent, passionate, and you will get there eventually, but you've got to be patient, because it won't happen straight away. You've got to do the hard graft, the long hours and the low pay, but it will get better.

## **Fiona Schimmel**

"I got my first assistant gig doing corporate OBs. When I started I didn't know a single person in the UK TV industry. I emailed probably around 20 camera operators, just from email addresses I could find in magazines and online research. Eventually a cameraman took me along to a small OB company that mainly did corporate jobs. I wasn't always getting paid, but I was getting work experience and I was networking and that's how I then got on to further things through the people I met. So while it was for a company I had never heard of and sometimes for a small audience, it was a really good starting point. So when you are getting started these small companies are worth looking at. It's also worth getting experience in different areas. Through somebody I met on a job, I did a couple of days working on a drama and that's when I realised it wasn't for me. When at university, I liked the idea of working on drama, but when you see the reality of what it's like, for example the hours and working environment, it may turn out that what you thought you wanted to go into might not be the right thing. I ended up working on an outside broadcast by chance. I was quite set on working on studio shows, and then I just happened to get offered a job at an outside broadcast company. Because staff jobs are really rare, I decided to take it and see what it was like. I thought even if I was just going to do it for a while to get the experience and get new contacts, it was worth trying out.

It was probably the best thing I ever did, because I absolutely love working on sports. I still do some studio work, but this kind of work, filming sport, is my passion now, and I would have never found out if I hadn't taken that chance. Before I started on OBs I thought filming football, for example, might be quite boring, but actually, it turned out

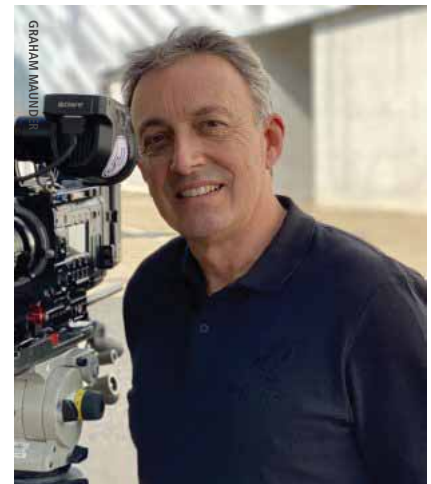
to be really fun. But I wouldn't have known unless I'd taken the risk. So it's worth taking a risk on something that you might not think you like until you find out if this is the right thing for you."

## **Alex Lines**

When going to drama, you have to be prepared to accept that in the first couple of years, you're probably not going to make any money, because, as you probably know, they have a route of camera trainee and then you have a second assistant camera, and then a first assistant camera and then an operator. Generally, the route that people take when they leave university is they become a camera trainee in drama production for probably two years, and the rates are relatively low. You have to kind of see it as you're being paid to train. I took a bit of a weird route when I was working with the hire company. I went out on the shoots, and I was pretty much the second assistant camera, even if they weren't calling me that. So I kind of leapfrogged over being a trainee, and I went off and did other shoots as a second assistant camera, and that was good, but what I realised when I went on a much bigger band two and band three production, I didn't know enough to be a second AC on those shoots. So after two or three years of sort of being a second AC, I went back and I did a year of being a trainee, and I just decided, right, I'm not going to make any money for a year, but I'll have the knowledge from being a trainee, so I guess preferably be a trainee first, as opposed to having to go back and learn it all. I'd also say always be prepared to be lucky. There is an element of luck in the industry, where suddenly someone that you know will call you up and say, come and do a day on this, and then suddenly you'll have a three-month shoot off the back of it. Obviously, have your CV up to date so if you get a text saying can you do this and send me a CV, you can send it straight back as opposed to two hours' time when they've filled the position. And I think that my number one tip would be, to be nice and be friendly and humble.

## **James Watson**

There are three different things that I would say would be the biggest bits of advice if you're just freshly graduating or starting out in the industry. The first is about knowledge. I think it's very easy when you've done three years of university and you can come out thinking I know everything, I've been so well prepared for this. Here I am ready, and then people can come into that with this attitude of, I know everything I need to know, I can go right to the top straight away. In theory, yes, you may well, but also there always



Graham Maunder, Director of Photography and Chair of GTC.

has to be an element of humility to it. And I think that's something that is a wire that can be threaded at either side quite easily. But equally, at the same time, it's really important that you show what knowledge you have, that it's just about almost asking it in a curious way, kind of rather than being, oh, you're doing that for that. Kind of asking questions that can show your knowledge while still asking them to give you additional knowledge, if that makes sense. The second one, the money thing, I think it's important that as professionals, we always need to strike the balance between getting experience while also knowing that your time is valuable. I think when you're getting some early experience, particularly if you're shadowing or going in for free, know how valuable being there that experience is worth to you and almost set yourself a target of, OK, I'm going to do this much of that before it's not financially worth it. At least you can use that experience to try and shop around and get somewhere else. The last thing my biggest advice would be, especially if you're looking at going freelance, and I can appreciate the irony of me saying this and as a member of The Guild, but multi-skilling is helpful and I think that this is the way the industry is going forward. There is less money around. And I think it is important to have, even if it's just a base level skill set, of what other departments do and what else goes into doing it.

## **What would you have put on a CV, how do you keep it up to date, what sort of things are people looking for?**

### **James Watson**

I must admit I did a lot of CV stuff at the start when I was just starting to freelance. Then once I got past that first year or so, stopped being about CVs and it's just about your name and, oh, you've worked with



Luke Sheehan, GTC Bill Vinten Awards and Education Officer.

this person and all this, which it doesn't necessarily mean that's the right thing to be in the industry, but at the end of the day, nepotism probably is 90% of the way that all jobs get crewed. You get on the crew because someone else knows you already and someone's worked with you on this or that. The really hard challenge is making your CV stand out to get that first contact and that first introduction, that first job. So for me, it was all about keeping it to one page and making it visually interesting but it doesn't have to be a multi-graphic PowerPoint type thing. I put borders around each section, key skills and proficiencies, stuff like my academic stuff, what jobs I've done to that point, and what roles I've been in. And that was kind of all I had, but that was enough for me.

### Fiona Schimmel

"I think it's important to make it relevant to who you're emailing, messaging or sending it to. When I was on staff, the entire department was a little bit involved in

the initial recruiting when we were about to hire two new camera assistants going on to become camera guarantees. The company got so many CVs that had nothing relevant to outside broadcast. I know a lot of people don't know how outside broadcast works, especially because not many universities teach about it since it's very hard to recreate in the university environment but we got a lot of CVs who clearly had no idea what outside broadcast was and they would list lots of drama credits. Most of those people probably wouldn't enjoy loading hundreds of boxes on a truck, rigging cameras in a stadium and then operating a camera, because it's a very different skill set. So definitely make it relevant to who you're trying to target."

### Hannah Mellish

I'd also say proofread it like a million times. If there is a spelling mistake or a grammar mistake, you're likely just to get disregarded straight away, because there are so many applicants. They want someone who pays attention to detail and doesn't just send things off without reading it.

### Alex Lines

Just be objective with what you've done and don't kind of flower it up and lie, because no one expects someone out of uni to have loads of experience. It always makes us smile when you get a CV and it's got someone's name at the top and below it says D.o.P. We understand it's kind of naivety or because at uni you've been a D.o.P. and you've done these student films, but it's kind of funny seeing someone saying, I want to be a camera trainee when they're a D.o.P. So just kind of keep that down at the bottom, as that's what I've done at uni. Just be objective, be factual, but don't try to suggest that you're more successful than you have been. Because I

guess people have been in the industry a long time.

### Graham Maunder

One of the key things to do if you're shadowing someone is use that chance to talk to people, show how interested you are, be proactive, and that you're making the most of your time. Never be afraid to ask questions, or say you don't understand something. I'd much rather you say 'Sorry, I'm not sure what you mean by that', as you will be given much more time than someone who's just pretending they know stuff and don't. It's always worth being nice to people, generally in life anyway, but it certainly can pay dividends in our industry. And also being kind, hopefully I have spent my whole life inside and outside my career being kind. Plenty of people who I crossed paths with when they were much younger are now directors I work with, or working very high up in Channel 4 or wherever. Hopefully one day, you get to where you want to be.

### Luke Sheehan

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks once again to our Panel Members, and our moderator and GTC Chair Graham Maunder. I'd also like to thank Coventry University for hosting this panel discussion, and the The GTC Bill Vinten Awards Day. I look forward to organising a similar session for the next awards event, as I feel that replicating it will benefit another cohort of Students, Graduates, and New Entrants to the Industry - they are the future of our Camera Departments.

---

Article by Luke Sheehan, the GTC Bill Vinten Awards and Education Officer.

## Luke Sheehan

GTC Bill Vinten Awards and Education Officer.

Email: [luke.sheehan@gtc.org.uk](mailto:luke.sheehan@gtc.org.uk)

Website: [www.firesparkle.co.uk](http://www.firesparkle.co.uk)

## Alexander Lines

Camera Assistant for TV Drama Productions & Film

IMDb: [imdb.to/47p09BN](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm47p09BN/)

LinkedIn: [bit.ly/46ICAuc](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bit.ly/46ICAuc)

Email: [Alexdlines@gmail.com](mailto:Alexdlines@gmail.com)

## Graham Maunder

Director of Photography and Chair of GTC.

Instagram: [@cameramangraham](https://www.instagram.com/cameramangraham)

Website: [www.apodis.tv](http://www.apodis.tv)

## Fiona Schimmel

Camera Operator for OB sports, events & studio

LinkedIn: [bit.ly/3upn8Qy](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bit.ly/3upn8Qy)

## James Watson

Camera Guarantee and Operator for Timeline Television

LinkedIn: [bit.ly/3uttMVX](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bit.ly/3uttMVX)

## Hannah Mellish

Camera Operator for ITV Daytime

LinkedIn: [bit.ly/3MSi2SY](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bit.ly/3MSi2SY)