

GTC member **Martin Hawkins**, winner of the GTC TiCA in 2015, is the DoP behind the look of much of Ricky Gervais' recent work, including *Extras*, *Derek* and the mockumentary series *Life's Too Short* with Warwick Davis. With his long track record in lighting comedy, and flexible and practical approach to shooting, Martin makes the perfect complement to the comic genius, whose latest TV series *After Life* aired on Netflix this spring.

In *After Life* (Derek Productions), Ricky Gervais plays a recently bereaved widower, Tony, who is depressed to the point of being suicidal, yet wants to stay alive long enough to dish out some shockingly brutal truths and insults to practically everyone in his circle, as if to exact some form of revenge for his loss. The series explores Tony plumbing the depths of grief in a self-destructive way, while in the meantime his friends and family attempt to save the nice man they once knew. It's an uncomfortable watch at times, but nonetheless attracted a large and appreciative audience, so much so that a second series has been commissioned.

Ricky, who also wrote and directs the show, explains the rationale behind this odd subject for a comedy. "I've always found bleak funny. I got this tweet once that said, 'Call yourself a comedian? You are about as funny as a fart at a baby's funeral.' But in my stand-up I say, 'Imagine that at a funeral. Like, that's not funny?' You've set the scene, everyone's in tears; it is the bleakness that's funny. People dealing with grief is funny. You don't laugh at the time if it's happened to you, but you do in retrospect."

So, with this pretty dark topic being treated as comedy, it was important to get the look and planning for the series right. Martin explains: "Comedy has to be the most important thing both on set and in the frame, with everything else coming after that. We wanted the series to feel dishevelled to reflect Tony's character, but with a 'look' that wouldn't distract from the comedy. It had to be realistic rather than glamorous." This was achieved in a couple of days in the grading suite when they tried out several looks. The one that Ricky chose (which was also Martin's first choice) was a rather flat, desaturated image to match Tony's mood. However, they didn't want to go too dark because, although Tony is in a dark place, in contrast, the world around him is still lovely – and he's missing out on it.

Having worked with Ricky so many times before, Martin already knew that the comedian hates delays on set, liking to keep the energy up, so lengthy holdups for camera or lighting are to be avoided at all costs – plus he likes to finish early!

The black art of shooting comedy



Trevelyan Oliver (B camera operator) and Martin shoot side by side in a tight corner

Choosing a flexible kit

The budget allowed for two cameras, but Martin was also keen to push for a third matching lighter weight camera that could go on a MoVi as Ricky had talked about wanting to move the camera as much as possible. Ricky is a big fan of European dramas, where the camera often follows the protagonist and, since he doesn't do a lot of detailed shot planning, preferring instead to give the actors freedom on the day, Martin decided that having a stabilising rig ready to go at all times would be ideal. "It wasn't a question that we could book Steadicam for certain days; we needed something with us all the time that we could bring out quickly. The MoVi was the obvious thing. So I needed a camera I could stick on a MoVi that would match the main A and B cameras precisely – like an ALEXA Mini or VariCam LT, but the ALEXA isn't fully 4K, so that ruled it out as the series was for Netflix and in 4K."

Hire company 24/7 put together a great package based around two VariCam 35s plus an LT. This meant the LT could be set up on the MoVi for whenever required. Martin says: "We would prep all three cameras every morning and take them all to the set, so if Ricky wanted to walk and talk down a street, for example, we could be ready to go in 10 minutes rather than having to wait to break everything down and reconfigure it. We also had the luxury of a 12-ft jib arm and the MoVi just clipped onto that, which gave us some great crane shots, relatively quickly and without too much fuss."

Already a fan of Panasonic cameras, Martin was impressed with the VariCam 35, which he had previously only used on a couple of small shoots. "All the controls are in the right place; the menu is easy to understand, so changing something like the ISO setting is just a quick press of a button, plus the pictures from it are beautiful."

The series made use of the camera's dynamic range, filming in 4K HDR, with series colourist Vince Narduzzo commenting: "We can already see that 4K HDR is the future for the industry. In fact, there is a wider jump from HDR to 4K HDR than SD to HD. We found we had a lovely look and feel to the images, with all the colours nicely separated. It's pretty amazing when you see it." Vince was also really impressed with how well the images from the 35 and the LT matched.

Shooting fast with short days

The camera has a dual ISO facility but it wasn't actually needed on this series as it was filmed in the really hot summer sun of 2018 and there were no night shoots. A 'night' scene in the woods where a drug dealer buys some cocaine, was actually shot in the middle of the day in Hampstead! Ricky

likes to keep the days short, aiming to finish each day around 16.00, believing that everyone works better, himself included, when they're not overtired and have a chance for time with family or to do whatever they choose outside work. This is an aspect very much appreciated by the camera crew, several of whom have young children: "You just finish around 4 o'clock and it's great; those that have young kids can get home for bath time and you can all be back for tea and an evening at home with your family... it makes such a difference." Martin reflects: "This used very much to be viewed as a dilemma only for women who had come into the industry, but now, more and more men are saying, 'Actually, I want to see my children too' or 'I want to support my elderly parents,' or whatever it is. I think the people that usually make the decisions don't seem to care about children or a homelife, which is why you film from 8 to 7 every day. It's one of the nice things about working with Ricky – he recognises that people need to have a home life."

Despite the relatively short days, the output is in line with other productions, covering maybe seven or eight pages of script plus improvisation in a day. Many scenes are either cross-shot, or with two cameras side by side, with the decision about how to shoot them taken primarily for acting and performance reasons rather than lighting or other technical considerations. Martin says: "Ricky wants it to look good but his main priorities are always the performance. If you can make it look good as well, that's a bonus! We'll have several takes but not loads – and they won't usually be for technical reasons, mostly for performance or to provide an alternative."

Calling the shots

On shoots with Ricky acting and directing, Martin is very much a Director of Photography in the true sense of the phrase, and will talk each 'setup' through with Ricky on how best to shoot the scene (drawing on his good knowledge of what Ricky prefers). This frees up Ricky to concentrate on working and interacting with the other actors, as well, of course, as his own performance. Any pre-rehearsals before the shoot starts will have been mainly about discovering how the actors work together rather than precisely blocking the action or putting shots on it, which tends to be done once everyone is on set.

As Martin likes to operate the A camera himself on these shoots, this makes for a pretty busy time on set. Back in the distant past, he used to do his own focus as well (having originally come from a TV studio background) but these days he always works with a focus puller. "If you don't, you spend too much time concentrating on focus – even more so nowadays with the large-format cameras. You just can't do it. It's a really tough job, and by releasing that aspect, you have 100% to concentrate on the framing, lighting and the scene in front of you. There's nothing better than losing yourself through the viewfinder in a great performance."

Working with an actor/director that is in almost every scene can place extra responsibility on the DoP in ensuring that the story is told in the best way possible for both the drama and the comedy, but also that it will work in the edit. To avoid delays, playback on set is kept to a minimum. Martin explains: "Ricky will watch the first take back and then say either: 'OK, that's great, let's do one more for fun' or do another after giving some notes, or maybe he'll say 'Love it, let's go tighter.' As long as he is happy with the performances, he doesn't need to see each take back. He knows the frame size and he knows a great performance when he sees one. He's a clever man and he's a great actor. I do think that After Life is his best

work, writing, directing and acting. It's been a real pleasure losing myself in the viewfinder..."

In terms of technical checks there are other pairs of eyes back at the 'video village', which is positioned as close as possible to the set but out of the way. The producer, Charlie Hanson, and the script supervisor will make sure everybody sticks to the script and point out things like booms in shot, and the DIT will note any technical problems when uploading the rushes. So, there is a chain of progress, but in terms of the creative process it's very much down to a dialogue between Ricky and Martin, which is another reason Martin likes to be close to the action on camera. He may mention a problem or suggest an alternative and, through doing so straight away, Ricky can make a quick decision whether to go again, which avoids losing energy by going back to the video village to play it back. Another set of people saw the rushes on this shoot as well: Rec709 rushes went off to Netflix each day. Martin says: "It was a bit nerve-wracking at first, but in fact they didn't ask for any changes at all during the entire shoot."

Speedy glass

With speed of operation a primary factor, Martin opted for zoom lenses (the ARRI /Fujinon Alura 45–250mm and 18–80mm were the workhorses for the main cameras, with the 15.5–45mm for wides and handheld operation) plus Zeiss Ultra Primes for the MoVi. The zooms were used almost all the time on the A and B cameras – again to avoid any holdups that would be caused by frequent lens changes. Martin comments: "If using a zoom gives you another two minutes for an extra take and that's the take they like, then that's the best use of time. Zoom lenses are so good now – even wide open. I get what primes do and their advantages, but in this case they really weren't necessary apart from for their weight when on the MoVi."

A nice facility was that the B camera operator had an onboard monitor, which showed the A camera output, so he could quickly respond by matching the size of shot. Likewise, Martin had the B camera's output, which was really useful when showing Ricky the frames they were considering.

Moving with the MoVi

As mentioned, having the MoVi ready to go at all times did away with technical breaks to reconfigure the camera. Martin hadn't operated the rig before but found it reasonably easy to pick up: "I worked with the MoVi on an Easyrig (also part of the 24/7 package) as it's heavy. I found operating it OK, although I'm not an expert. We had a couple of days at 24/7 playing with it but there's nothing like putting it on in action with the pressure on. The thing I didn't know enough about in the early days was how much the window setting affects the pan and tilt. We got away with it but it could have been better. Generally I was pleased with the shots though."

Naturalistic lighting

When it comes to lighting, Ricky loves realism, so in the interior sets built on M stage, Pinewood, the light was designed to come from windows and natural sources. In the case of the newspaper office, they opted for a proper ceiling, with ceiling tiles and downlighters for the basic coverage and just a couple of ARRI Sky Panel S60 lights with DoP soft boxes and egg crates by the cameras, Martin says: "just to get the shadows out of the eyes – I do like a little sparkle in the eyes!"



Ricky and Martin – shooting a computer screen in the gloom of Tony's house

Martin is a fan of ARRI Sky Panels: "We used the S360, S60 and S30 – they're punchy and you can add a softbox with an egg crate which makes them quite controllable. They're just a bit heavy – but I don't have to lift them! I do like the 1x1 Litepanels too for when you're in a tight situation, because again they're quite soft but you can add a little softbox and they become even softer. I don't mind lifting those! And the 4-ft Kino Flo is still a favourite too. We also had various HMI's coming through the windows on location and ARRI T12s and T24s in the studio."

For this show, Martin opted to go without diffusion filters on the cameras. Back in the day, shooting with 2/3" sensor cameras, he would often use a Lee Soft FX filter behind the lens to make the image less harsh, but he didn't think the VariCam needed it and they didn't want After Life to look 'glossy'. Some minor adjustments were made in the grade (which Martin attended), to take out a little detail – but not that much because, as Martin says: "The Panasonic images are really beautiful straight out of the camera."

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Kit list

Cameras (4K)

- 2 x Panasonic Varicam 35 – 4K camera package
- 1 x Panasonic Varicam LT – 4K camera package
- 3 x Cine Power HD30 26v block batteries

Zoom lenses (4K)

- 2 x ARRI/FUJINON Alura Lightweight Zoom 15.5–45mm
- 2 x ARRI/FUJINON Alura Zoom 18–80mm
- 2 x ARRI/FUJINON Alura Zoom 45–250mm

Prime lenses (4K)

- 1 x set of Zeiss Primes:
- 12mm, 14mm, 16mm, 20mm, 24mm,
- 32mm, 40mm, 50mm, 65mm

Matte boxes

- 2 x ARRI MB-18 Full Production Matte Box (2 & 3 Stage)
- 2 x ARRI LMB-15 Wide Angle Clip-on Matte Box (2 & 3 Stage)

Lens control

- 2 x ARRI follow focus kits – FF4 or FF5
- Follow focus unit for Varicam LT
- 2 x Preston 3-axis wireless lens control systems
- 2 x Cine Tape Measure Control Units
- 2 x Fluid Zoom Demands

Monitors, distribution and playback

- 2 x TV Logic 5.6" HD-SDI onboard monitors
- 1 x TV Logic 8.4" HD-SDI monitor for MOVI wheels
- 4 x TV Logic 9" HD-SDI monitor & 2 x T bars
- 2 x 17" HD-SDI monitors
- 3 x HD-SDI video distribution amplifiers
- 2 x Hard Drive Recorders/Playback systems & operator
- 2 x IDX Endura 12v V-Lock battery kits for monitors
- 5 x Teradek Bolt Pro2000 HD-SDI Video Link (Dual Receivers)
- 3 x Transmitters
- 5 x Receivers
- 2 x Sidekicks
- 2 x Card Readers

Camera support

- 2 x O'Connor Ultimate 2575C Pan and Tilt Heads
- 2 x Ronford Baker tall legs
- 2 x Ronford Baker short legs
- 2 x Ronford Moose Bars
- 2 x Rolling Spiders/Wheels

Accessories

- 4 x Magliners
- 2 x 10" x 10" Four Wall Blackout EZ-UP
- 4 x Camera Umbrellas
- 1 x Director's Tewie Viewfinder
- 1 x Pentafinder

MoVi

- 1 x Movi-Pro Professional 3 Axis Gimbal System, Complete Underslung & Overslung Mount when on Crane & Dolly
- 1 x Movi Controller/Wheels – for Jib Arm
- 1 x 9" monitor
- 1 x Remote handles
- 1 x Easyrig harness
- 1 x Magliner



Martin, James Abbott (B camera focus), Will Anderson (B camera grip) and Trevelyan Oliver (B camera operator) - having a paddle!



Back L-R: Nile Connolly-Martin (B camera trainee), Kylie Stubbs (A camera grip), Ollie Lockett (A camera focus), Will Anderson (B camera grip), Matthew Tregoning (clapper loader), Simon Buck (DIT), James Abbott (B camera focus), Adam Green (A camera trainee); Front L-R: Trevelyan Oliver (B camera operator), Martin Hawkins (DoP/A camera operator), Tom Cliffe (playback operator/video assist)

Across the series, the AVC Ultra 422 codec was used and Vince explains: *"This was essential to create the final finish for the series, complementing the filming with a natural grain to focus the audience's attention on meaningful scenes, such as one where Tony attends his wife's graveyard... We wanted a natural grain to enhance the narrative, and we were really happy with the end result."*

It's all about trust

The fact that these shoots work so well is largely down to the working relationship that Martin and Ricky have built up over several series and Martin really values the trust that Ricky places in him. *"There is definitely a lot of trust between us and I really do appreciate that. As the DoP I can make a big contribution and that's very rewarding. I guess it's the combination of him trusting me but also liking what I do. Although, I suppose that's what it comes down to with most directors, doesn't it?"*

Fact File

Martin Hawkins has been a GTC member since the 70s and was honoured with the GTC's highest award, then the Television Cameraman's Award (TiCA), in 2015.

See more about Martin's work at: www.martinhawkins.com or contact him on: mjhawk@btinternet.com

