



# On the other end of talkback

JANET MCALLEN

Multi-camera director **John Kirby** regularly directs the OB coverage of some of the UK's most important national events, including the State Opening of Parliament, as well as the nation's favourite music events, such as the BBC Proms. Key to the success of these live broadcasts is the support of fantastic camera crews and in particular the camera supervisor. Giving the director's point of view of how this all works, John shares his appreciation for the craft and skill of television outside broadcast camera crews.

In the 2016 GTC Awards, presented in May, three camera supervisors received well-deserved Awards of Excellence: Bruce Miller for the coverage of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championship Finals; Jon Lord for *Remembrance Sunday: The Cenotaph* and Vince Spooner for the BBC Proms. Each recipient accepted the award on behalf of their camera teams – men and women with remarkable skill and expertise.

A multi-camera director is totally reliant upon the crew, whether it be Cameras, Sound, Lighting, Vision, everyone working on the floor and in the gallery – a large team all pulling together to achieve a television outside broadcast (OB). The likes of Bruce, Jon and Vince and their teams are all sterling examples of the highest standards of craftsmanship in British television today.

## A career in OBs

I directed my first OB back in May 1983 when I was knee high to an Osprey. It was a live half-hour, two-camera OB from a farm in Crich, Derbyshire. Sitting in the Bristol Lightweight Unit (BLU), I was so apprehensive (scared, truth to tell) that I hardly said a word over talkback. I'm not convinced I looked at the monitors much either. I was totally focused on the buttons in front of me – camera one, camera two, caption scanner and one-inch VT. Unlike Mr Morecambe and André Previn (aka Preview) from the famous sketch, I somehow managed to press all the right buttons – and in the right order! Thanks in particular to the cameras who carried me, it actually looked surprisingly smooth.



My second OB, Edgware June 1983 – gaining confidence by sporting a tank top (I'm in the centre)



GTC member Phil Nixon offering high shots from the hoist

## State Opening of Parliament

Henry VIII is thought to have been the first monarch to attend the State Opening of Parliament in person in 1536. BBC Television has broadcast this ancient ceremony since 1958. It's a programme the Corporation does very well; developed and honed over the years, it balances political debate with high ceremonial against the rich tapestry that is the Palace of Westminster.

It's a relatively big OB – 18 cameras in the Palace of Westminster; 4 in a presentation studio on Abingdon Green; 2 exterior cameras including a hoist; a news feed from Buckingham Palace; a helicopter; and an array of remotes in the Lords and the Commons courtesy of BowTie Television who provide the coverage of the UK Parliament.

As the director I don't see the camera rig, which is understandably extensive and needs to be achieved with the utmost care given the sensitivity of the surroundings. Inadvertently scratching the paintwork may lead to a period in The Tower! This May, Supervisor Bruce Miller and his

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superb camera team completed the rig with considerable aplomb and all worked first time at the facilities check. The camera positions are practically set in stone; it would probably take an Act of Parliament to alter one of them. That said, we had two extra cameras this year. For the first time we were allowed to put a live camera in the Prince's Chamber, an anteroom between the Royal Gallery and the Lords Chamber, through which the Queen processes. Andy Powell captured this never-before seen sequence brilliantly, which was quite a challenge as the Prince's Chamber was full of Gentlemen at Arms and attendant lords-a-leaping. But, ever the diplomat, Andy managed expertly to cajole the men in tights to stand clear of his lens.

The second new position was at the top of the Royal Staircase that, on the day, is lined with sword-wielding troopers of the two regiments of the Household Cavalry, the Life Guards and the Blues and Royals. In the planning this was a confidential position that we could not talk openly about and it didn't even appear in the camera script. For the first time at the State Opening of Parliament, the Queen and the



State Opening of Parliament camera rig – Bruce Miller and team



View of proceedings for Huw Edwards



Cenotaph rehearsal at Wellington Road Barracks under the watchful eye of legendary RSM Billy Mott



Camera rehearsal at the Cenotaph

Commons Picture Gallery. At the statue of Attlee, a camera on a platform picks him up and follows Black Rod through the Members' Gallery until just before he reaches the Commons, where finally we cut to a Sony P1 with HDFA, mounted on a magic arm and clamps to capture the slam and Black Rod banging three times on the door with his trusty rod. There is some considerable pressure to get this right, not least for Black Rod, so he and Mark rehearsed the walk together the day before the ceremony.

**Ceremonies from the Cenotaph**

One OB when I was totally reliant upon the camera supervisor was last year's Cenotaph ceremony for the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign. I was advised that this occasion was to be "similar but different" to the annual Service of Remembrance, which I watch as a viewer every year. I thought I knew it. I didn't! And I was extremely fortunate that camera supervisor Jon Lord, who regularly supervises the Remembrance at the Cenotaph, kindly agreed to look after me.

Over many phone calls and a couple of visits to Whitehall to see every planned camera position, Jon patiently guided me through the tried-and-tested way to capture a service at the Cenotaph. Without his wise counsel and the splendid camera team he put together, I would have been simply unable to deliver appropriate coverage of this humbling occasion. That said, I was disappointed that even though Jon at each of the recess and on the rehearsal day had provided clear blue skies, he was unable to maintain his blue-sky thinking and it was a wet and gloomy start to the TX!

**A gulf in experience**

As Ms Tina Turner might sing, with UK camera crews you get used to working with "simply the best". So, I was understandably cautious when called upon a couple of years ago to work with various local camera crews in far-flung parts of the world.

BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, uses media to improve health and to help people understand their rights. I've been involved in directing and helping others direct *Question Time*-style televised debates, usually in places of conflict. This is enormously humbling and has taken me to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Libya and Zambia. It's a great privilege to work with the ordinary, yet extraordinary, people of these countries.



Commuting to work in Kabul

In Kabul, at Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), for instance, BBC News Technical Coordinator (TC) John Prendergast and I were faced with eight eager cameramen, whom we were to train in the dark art of covering a live televised debate. While John looked after matters technical (including line-up procedures down to the basic levelling of a camera on the tripod, which was apparently news to our crew), I covered shot sizes, terms of direction, safety wide shots, and so on. Not being fluent in the Afghan languages of Pashto and Dari, our teaching was through a translator, which actually proved surprisingly beneficial as it allowed time to think what to say next.

I was pleasantly surprised at how proficient the camera team became after just a few guidelines from John and me.



OB 1 Radio Television Afghanistan

“ I'm always impressed by how camera operators can turn my shot description into a picture that's far beyond my expectations.

They began to frame well and, after some practical exercises, learnt to work as a team rather than all whizzing to offer similar shots of, for example, a member of the audience asking a question. It was apparent that the OB crew at RTA was not used to working as a team. The craft disciplines all did their own thing with no central co-ordination from an engineering manager or even a producer. RTA directors did not brief cameras or, as far as I could see, talk to them at all other than over the dubious talkback system. There was no camera supervisor and this lack of communication was further exacerbated by intermittent tally lights.

But they were good people and taught me a lot, as did all the camera crews I met and mentored on the BBC Media Action projects. One of the surprisingly regular frustrations in these volatile countries was training a camera crew to be show-ready, only to find a totally different set of operators would turn up on the TX day!

“ It takes a particular and specialist expertise to be a member of the Proms camera team – and this is not just knowing the difference between an oboe and a cor anglais. There are many, many shots, very little time to reframe, and not every orchestra is television-friendly.

Duke of Edinburgh would not as is traditional alight from the new Diamond Jubilee State Coach at Sovereign's Entrance and climb the Royal Staircase to the Robing Room. Instead they were to take a surprisingly small lift, accompanied by the Lord Great Chamberlain and Black Rod. To capture their exit from this lift and progress to the Robing Room, Ian Dicker stood patiently behind his radio camera for well over an hour. We were only permitted one single shot – and a very expensive one it was too!

Black Rod's role at the State Opening of Parliament is one of the most well-known images of Parliament. He is sent to the Commons Chamber to summon MPs to hear the Queen's Speech and, by tradition, the door of the Commons is slammed in his face to symbolise the independence of the Commons. This is the money shot! This part of the proceedings is covered on three cameras, with ace Steadicam operator Mark Faulkner, assisted by Alice Berkeley, starting off Black Rod's walk from the Central Lobby and through the

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**BBC Proms**

The BBC Proms is the greatest classical music festival in the world. This year, 29 of the 75 Prom concerts will be televised from the Royal Albert Hall, surely the finest of all concert venues. For camera supervisor, Vince Spooner this entails weeks and weeks of preparation: liaising with the Proms Office and OB facility suppliers Visions, and sourcing a camera team to cover all 29 concerts, each involving anything from 6 to 11 cameras depending on the particular repertoire.

It takes a particular and specialist expertise to be a member of the Proms camera team – and this is not just knowing the difference between an oboe and a cor anglais. There are many, many shots, very little time to reframe, and not every orchestra is television-friendly. I always have two Vinten Ospreys on the stage amongst the orchestra to capture the conductor and low angles of the instruments. It often calls for a considerable skill to sweet talk the musicians into adjusting their positions slightly to accommodate our shots and the

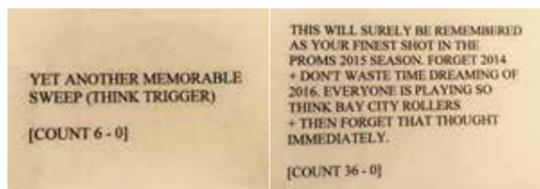


Dave Brice at the Proms

camera ops on the stage kindly take it upon themselves to negotiate. Among others, Liz Hillman and Wai-King Cheung have effectively secured on-stage positions purely by charm, which OB camera crews seem to possess in abundance.

Having watched televised orchestral concerts from all over the world, it's no exaggeration to affirm that nobody does it better (as Carly Simon might sing) than BBC Proms cameras. The schedule is tight. We usually only get a chance to follow the orchestral rehearsal from 1430 to 1730, followed by camera notes, supper (in my opinion a period that is sacrosanct for all crew); then it's back on cans at 1900 for final checks before the TX. We're usually covering around 100 minutes of music, all scripted, and quite regularly the conductor will not have rehearsed the full repertoire with cameras.

What I didn't fully appreciate until recently is the constant chatter that goes on between cameras to enable shots to work, e.g. a camera briefly adjusting position on the stage for a jib move or craning down in 'no man's land' to clear a wide shot. This just happens without any direction from me and is most helpful and appreciated. I'm always impressed too by how camera operators can turn my shot description into a picture that's far beyond my expectations. I try to keep shot descriptions brief and let the operator turn my rough sketch into their masterpiece. That said, on the Proms I've been known to make an exception for ace jib op Dave Brice!



DAVE BRICE

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**Fact File**

**John Kirby** is an OB Producer/Director with particular experience in the live multi-camera coverage of music/entertainment and special events. John began his career at BBC Television Centre, which used to be the best television studio facility in the world. Clip from showreel: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRIDW82strM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRIDW82strM)



CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU



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Liz Hillman operating a 3D camera on the Last Night of the Proms



CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU

Wai-King Cheung operating amongst the Prommers in the Arena



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