

Q&A

with **Karl Rooney**



Falling Flat

the lockdown sitcom
that we all need

Sitcoms aren't dead, they're just not getting made. There seems to be a perceived consensus that the desire for a new classic audience-based sitcom isn't there. **Karl Rooney** and his team disagree and during lockdown went the extra mile and made one themselves. So, when Karl told Zerb's Managing Editor Rob Emmanuel all about it whilst they were on an OB together in Liverpool, little did he know that he'd talked himself into a magazine article...

Rob Emmanuel (RE): Karl, what did you do?

Karl Rooney (KR): During lockdown, we made a sitcom called *Falling Flat*. I built a set in a local village hall and we shot a pilot, using a multicamera set-up. We filmed it once restrictions had eased a little, following all the safety guidelines, having already done all our development work and rehearsals remotely over Zoom.

Basically, like most people during lockdown, we were bored. A group of actors, writers and I spent our time on collaborative Zoom calls, reading each other's scripts, discussing them and giving advice to one other. The more we developed each script, one in particular stood out to me. One of our group, Peter Etherington, had written a narrative that was set in a flat and had a cast of four. And more

importantly to me, it was the style of sitcom that would suit being recorded in front of a live audience. So, we spent the lockdown months developing his script.

It occurred to me that this might be something that we could make ourselves, once the restrictions eased, and should in theory be easy to make. In practice, however, it wasn't so easy, mainly because I didn't like any of the locations that were available, and decided to build a set in a local village hall, which had been closed for the duration of the lockdowns. As the restrictions began to lift, there was a window of one week before the hall was due to be reopened, which gave me seven days to build a set, shoot the sitcom and dismantle everything so we could vacate the space in time for their business to resume.

None of the cast could meet until the day of the shoot, so we had to rehearse everything over Zoom. And I had stupidly long hair from lockdown. It might have seemed that I'd bitten off more than I could chew, but I'm quite a determined person and I had a fantastic professional crew and literally the population of a small village (my amazing neighbours) that pitched in to help.

RE: Why an audience sitcom?

KR: I love them! I love working on sitcoms and love watching them; I've spent a lot of my career working on them. One of my first freelance jobs was as a camera assistant on *My Family* and I was hooked on sitcoms. The way an entire studio crew work together with the cast to put on the show for the audience in the evening is an amazing process. It seems to be

a dying art, the unspoken choreography of boom operators seamlessly manoeuvring the mics into position while the camera crew repo their peds in and out of the set to achieve better eyelines, but it's a fantastic process. I spent a long time as a camera assistant before I gradually began to pester my camera supervisor, Tony Keene, to let me have a go on his camera during rehearsals, until he eventually let me have a go on the night. I never looked back and have operated on many a sitcom ever since.

I've always had the ambition of directing. I've made short films, for example *The Green*, which featured a cameo from Johnny Vegas. I've made a bunch of music videos but, having seen how sitcoms are made, I've really wanted to direct them.

I was in the fortunate position to be able to trail many directors who kindly let me sit behind them in the rehearsal rooms, where they would share all their secret tips and techniques with me. Nick Wood was particularly generous with his time in training me. Whenever I was on Camera 5 and he had a small scene requiring only four cameras, Nick would often let me run up to the gallery and direct a scene. I then had to rush down and jump back on camera for the next scene but it was so much fun. Eventually, I got to direct some episodes of *Citizen Khan* for BBC One and am currently working on multicamera sports, directing Rugby Union.

RE: So the village helped?

KR: I got to know the people in my village very well during lockdown and they wanted to help. A local café made pizzas for the crew, a local photographer took some shots, friends

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helped administer COVID tests and we managed to arrange for some friends' children to get some work experience. The local village hall got some cash, which was appreciated, considering how long it had stood empty and closed for business. We had a small window before it reopened and so I ventured to find a set.

As it happens, a production manager had posted an advert online asking if anyone wanted any sets because they'd just finished a shoot and were having to throw them all out. So, having hired a Luton van, my friend Justin Spary and I turned up at this giant warehouse full of sets. I had a mild panic and exclaimed, "I hope you're not expecting us to take all that!"



Top left, opposite page: Well, here's another fine mess I've gotten me into!; Above: Only another 14 more hours to go...



Nick, you're supposed to plug these in AND turn them on! The Prince of Darkness reigns supreme once again...

We stuffed as much as we could into the van and returned to the village. Another friend from the local pub generously let us keep all the set materials in one of his storage containers until the shoot. It definitely felt like a community was coming together to help.

RE: What's *Falling Flat* about and who did you cast?

KR: It's essentially *Steptoe and Son* but with a mother and daughter in a flat in London. Battle-axe Jackie has her heart set on becoming a dark Web super-seller, while dowdy daughter Helen is desperate to live the glamorous life she's read about in the Argos catalogue. But, no matter how hard they try, their plans always fall flat.

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It was incredibly tricky to rehearse over Zoom. One of the things I love about sitcoms is physical comedy and having to block movements without the actors being in the room is tough.

Janice Connolly (*Phoenix Nights*) took the role of Jackie, with Lisa Depuis playing her daughter Helen, and Ben Robinson and Doug Setters completing the cast line-up. Janice is friends with one of our Zoom group who introduced us to her. We were very lucky that Janice gave her time, as with all the cast and crew who worked hard on a very long day. I'd worked with Lisa before on other projects and whilst she's a great actor, she's a lady of many talents and so she generously cut my hair the night before the shoot.

RE: How did you all work together during lockdown?

KR: It was incredibly tricky to rehearse over Zoom. One of the things I love about sitcoms is physical comedy and having to block movements without the actors being in the room is tough. Everyone learnt their lines and we all discussed the nuances of the script in our online working group sessions.

With regard to the recording itself, I had really wanted to recreate how the sitcom would be filmed in a studio, so built the set in the same way and staged the action as if we were running it in front of a live audience. I'd figured out all the blocking so that, when it came to the shoot day, I walked the cast through the scene, then we rehearsed it in front of the team. I told the crew what shots I needed and then we recorded the scene. It sounds simple but there was a lot of planning and so many elements that could go wrong.

As a director, when you rehearse a sitcom, you'll usually spend the week blocking everything through with the actors, so they know where to stand and hit their marks. You'll also have someone keeping an eye on the continuity, but unfortunately, that was a luxury (or necessity) that we didn't have.

The camera and sound departments worked incredibly hard and basically operated with half (maybe less) of their usual resources. Even so, I feel the results still manage to reflect what a regular sitcom would be despite the challenges, and I'm very proud of what everyone achieved.

RE: How did the crew work in these unusual conditions?

KR: I had a great crew, people I've know and worked with for years and they're some of the best in the business. As I mentioned earlier, I tried to recreate a multicamera studio environment as best we could. We had two cameras on peds and generally aimed to do a couple of passes of each scene,



Who turned the house lights on?!



We can't fit all of that into the Luton, surely?

all of which I'd scripted so that I knew the angles I wanted. Giuseppe Ingrao and Mark McCafferty, the camera operators, were great, although Mark in particular had a tough task. On the day before the shoot, my lighting director, Nick 'The Prince Of Darkness' Bradbury, and I were rigging the kit when we realised one of the lenses we'd borrowed didn't have the correct input connection to receive a focus demand. We subsequently spent the night trying to get an adapter but simply ran out of time with no success. But, knowing how good an op Mark is, I asked him to operate using a zoom demand only, which would require him to reach round and focus the barrel of the lens directly, whilst tracking the ped on an uneven surface. Anyone who has worked on a sitcom knows how quickly you have to reframe and adjust your shot and position, so what I was asking of him was no small task. Oh, and could he take some still photos on the day, too, please? Easy for a man of his calibre.

All the crew really were fantastic and very generous with their time and talent. Nick kindly looked after all the technical aspects, which was great because it meant I could leave him to it so I could focus on directing.

RE: Nick, what kit did you use?

Nick Bradbury (NB): We had two Sony FX9s with a Canon CN7 and a J14 with MTF Services B4 2/3-inch to Sony E-mount Super 35mm adapter, supplied to us by Russell Martin of Over Exposed Ltd. The camera settings were: S-Cinetone picture profile, 1080 25p, 180° shutter, +3db gain; I lit the show working to a base colour temperature of 4500K and a stop of f3. The Camera Store provided us with two Vinten Osprey peds and Vision 250 heads.

RE: How did your setup differ from a full-scale studio sitcom and what difficulties did you face?

NB: The main differences from a normal sitcom were firstly, we were only working with two cameras compared to four or five, and we had no means to rack them remotely. Secondly, we had neither a desk to control the lighting nor a grid from which to hang the lamps; I either had to use C stands or clamp lights to the top of the set.

RE: What look were you going for and did you have any influences?

NB: I've tried to take inspiration from sitcoms lit by Martin Kempton and Martin Hawkins. From reading the script, I thought I'd try to make the kitchen look grungy, which helped because I'd pretty much run out of lamps. I wanted to experiment by not using a downstage fill on the kitchen and have it top lit instead, to make it look a bit worse than, and a different, colder colour temperature from, the living room to give a sense of variety between both areas of the set.

My aim was to light the living room from upstage as well as motivate a bit of light from our window, but leave the kitchen lit from above, as though the light was coming from an overhead fluorescent light fitting. I wanted a small amount of light to come from underneath, as if from a counter light, to make Lisa appear a bit sinister in her seduction scene. Basically, I threw every lamp I had at it and I think it looked great, but it helped that the set looked so good.

RE: What's it like working with Karl?

NB: I've known Karl for many years. We met at university and have worked together on many productions. I'm impressed with how he will spend his time and money to create a piece of work, and I'm grateful whenever he gives me the opportunity to shoot it. As a director, Karl knows what he wants to achieve but at the same time, he will encourage your own creative input.

The sitcom was a long day and very ambitious in terms of our practical limitations, but the atmosphere on set was one of fun and creativity, and that comes from the director. The catering was also fantastic – but then Karl has learned that it's important to keep me fed if he wants a happy collaborator!



"Give me a few more lines or I'll give you a mullet, Karl!" Multiskilled Lisa Depuis brings a new meaning to the cutting room floor



No, you never said record, Karl!

RE: Why does Karl call you *The Prince of Darkness*?

NB: I was lighting the studio for one of the Rugby League shows, which we both work on, when a bulb popped and the presenter was thrown into shadow and Karl has never let it go!

RE: Back to you, Karl. Nick mentioned the set looked good, how did you get the props?

KR: Mostly from my loft. Jackie's character is a hoarder so we needed to get as much junk as we could. My wife, Amy, and I had so much stuff from when we moved into our house, so I just got it out of the loft, dressed the set, and threw a lot of it away when we wrapped the shoot. But it's nice seeing old items from our life in the set. For example, you might notice a cutout of the Statue of David in the background, that was from Amy's hen do, and some old 16mm film reels, they were from a university project of mine, on which Nick was the DOP. You can't see anything on the reels because the shots are too dark – the Prince Of Darkness strikes again!

Amy was an integral part of the project, not just for her patience with the fact I was spending money that could have gone towards a holiday, but she also sourced most of the props online for free. She discovered that a lot of people seemed to be wanting to get rid of stuff. I turned up at one person's house to pick up just a rug and they ended up giving me most of the contents of their shed. Amy found almost everything, including the kitchen sink – a fridge, carpet, rugs, curtains, worktops, and a sofa. Having discovered there was a perfect sofa available in a nearby house,

Amy, Justin and I had gone round to pick it up. We spent a good hour trying to get it out through the front door, but the sofa just wouldn't fit, even despite us hammering off its feet and saying, "Pivot!" about a hundred times (a classic sitcom reference there). I finally called a halt to the whole endeavour when someone raised the suggestion of taking the door off its hinges. Thankfully, Amy managed to source another sofa from elsewhere.

RE: You recorded the show on a closed set, so how did you get the audience laughter?

KR: For obvious reasons, we couldn't film in front of a live audience. So, after editing the show with a fantastic editor, Simon Gibbs (who was very patient with me), I organised a screening at Riverside Studios with the intention of recording the audience laughter. We'd left extra pauses for the laughs,





It was a lot of words for our amazing sound department from Otterhead Studios to record, but they got every last one of them

which was tricky for the actors without having an audience to bounce off. My excellent sound supervisor, Oscar Ball, (who always sighs every time I call him because he knows I'm going to be asking for a favour) had arranged to hang mics from the ceiling of Riverside's screening room. But he rang the night before to tell me that he had COVID and consequently could no longer attend the next day.

The whole point of the screening was to record the audience and now I'd lost my sound recordist. I frantically called around every contact I had to try to find a last-minute replacement. The next day, I was keeping my fingers crossed waiting for people to call back – whilst making cupcakes for the guests! – when, at around midday, a sound recordist who was willing, able and available got back to me and agreed to turn up that evening to record our audience laughter track. The screening was great fun and went without a hitch. The show received a great response from everyone in the audience on the night, and we've subsequently had positive feedback from viewers too.



Above: You're on mute. You're on mutel! Bottom of opposite page, left: And action!; Right: I didn't manage to sneak these back to my loft



Karl, I think there's a camera in shot

RE: So, do you think audience-based sitcom is dead?

KR: NO! I often ask my friends what their favourite sitcom is and the majority of the time they'll say the likes of *Friends*, *Blackadder*, *The IT Crowd*, *The Big Bang Theory*... which are all audience-based sitcoms.

I seem to be told persistently by the powers-that-be that no one wants to watch these types of shows or that they're no longer relevant, but that seems to contradict my own experience as well as that of my friends and family. Only yesterday, I saw my friend's 10-year-old son glued to episodes of *Mr Bean* that he'd downloaded to his iPad. The sitcom format is not dead in my view, it's just not considered cool.

They're tough shows to write. But simply ruling out the entire genre is not allowing the opportunity for the next *Friends* or *Blackadder* to be made. I think people want them and there are people out there that want to make them.

RE: And finally, what's the future for *Falling Flat*?

KR: I'm going to keep pitching it and hopefully we can get a series commissioned. I have other scripts that I'm developing and will keep plugging away. I'm passionate about audience-based sitcoms and look forward to the genre's inevitable revival.

FACT FILE

To request access to view the pilot of *Falling Flat*, visit: fallingflat.co.uk

Karl Rooney's director credits include *Citizen Khan*, *Mrs Brown's Boys Live* DVD and *Premiership Rugby Union* (PRTV). As a camera operator, Karl has worked on *Not Going Out*, the 2012 London Olympics, Rugby League and much more.

To find out more about Karl and his work, and to contact him, visit: karlrooney.com

