

ALL IMAGES: ITV



The masked crew-sader: actor Robert Glenister takes delivery of the props, camera, lighting and sound equipment for the shoot

TV Phoned Home

Throughout the pandemic and lockdown, some of our peers continued to output exemplary work under the most challenging conditions, news being a key example. For most of us, though, work evaporated overnight. We were replaced by often frustratingly poor results from Zoom – let’s not even mention lighting and framing! It wouldn’t be their chosen method to shoot drama, but DoPs **Jamie Cairney** (GTC member), **Ben Wheeler** and **Len Gowing** ably rose to the challenge for ITV’s *Lockdown Stories* – all without setting foot outside their own homes.

Jamie Cairney: Ron and Russell’s story

It was certainly a surprise to get a call mid-lockdown asking if I was available to shoot a short drama for ITV... “Hold on, let me check my diary! But wait a minute, how are we going to do it?” With a rapid turnaround required, what was to follow would be a very intense period of discovery, learning and endless discussions over Zoom. After that out-of-the-blue call from director Louise Hooper one Friday, we were up and running by the following Tuesday, wrapped by the Saturday, with the grade and delivery happening the week after that! So, how did we get to that point?

The basic concept was for the actors to film themselves, in the safety of their own homes. But rather than framed within a simple video diary aesthetic, ITV wanted four fully scripted dramas, albeit each only 15 minutes long. Separate crew and kit units were hired to shoot each individual story. ITV’s idea was to try and keep the technical aspects super-simple and they had already decided upon the system to be used by the time the DoPs were brought onboard. Using technology previously proven on some live remote links for *Ant & Dec’s*

Saturday Night Takeaway, the setup consisted of delivering several Samsung S10 smartphones and other equipment to each actor’s home. We would then teach relevant members of the household how to use the kit, after which we’d direct them during the shoot via Zoom. Ultimately, the actors and their families became the film crew.

Phoning it in

The phones would run an app called Filmic Pro, which took full control of the camera settings and recording system, with the phone’s screen mirrored and streamed over IP to a remote technical operator’s computer giving them complete control of the phone. So, all the actor or family member had to do was point the camera and keep the phone charged. The remote operator, in our case Ian Threlfall, could adjust focus, iris, ISO, shutter speed and white balance, as well as handle the file management, etc. Ian’s screen was then shared via Zoom, allowing us all (director, DoP, AD, Production) to view the phone’s image from the comfort of our own homes. This, along with the actors being on a Zoom call with us, meant we could see what the smartphone was pointing at and what the family (our cast and crew) were physically doing. Our final team member was technical supervisor Richard Palin, who kept an eye on streams and comms.

Data-day issues

Louise and I spent that first prep weekend discussing the script and devising our shot-list. In between these sessions, I spent as much time as I could getting my head around the technical system. Luckily, I own an S10 phone myself, so I was able to download and get to know Filmic Pro. One part of the tech spec was that the recorded data would be uploaded directly from the phones to Google Drive and forwarded to the edit from there. This idea immediately rang alarm bells because I know from experience that Drive is only just about good enough for uploading PDFs, let alone huge video files. I tried it out and my first few attempts resulted in failure, as nothing would upload via WiFi or 4G. Eventually, I managed to upload one 10-second file in 4 hours. Not great.

Thankfully, I was also in contact with my old friend, DoP Ben Wheeler, who had already started shooting the first episode. He was able to give me an insight into how the system was operating 'on set', while I could feed back to him what I was discovering under calmer conditions. Just as in my tests, Ben's team was experiencing the problem of not being able to upload their footage. He wisely instigated a chat between all four DoPs, so we could share information easily – and cry on each other's shoulders! This confab allowed us, together, to achieve the optimal result from both app and phone, which at that stage was, to be honest, at best only on a par with SD analogue video quality. Furthermore, the live image we were seeing, which was being compressed several times by separate systems, was not something upon which we could reasonably base any technical choices. It was a bit like trying to light and shoot wearing a blindfold.

Old skool wins

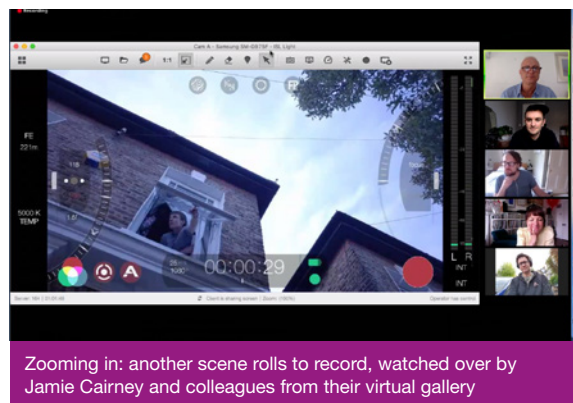
So my next move was to call our fantastic line producer, Menzies Kennedy, to let him know the upload system wasn't going to work. It turned out he'd already had the same message from Ben's unit... we were going to need another plan. My suggestion was to go more traditional: let's place a DIT outside the house to process the shot material before dispatching it to the edit on hard drives. My main justification was that we would quickly discover any problems with the footage and could therefore reshoot if necessary. Waiting hours for files to upload would potentially risk the shoot in its entirety if a clip, or batch of clips, was corrupted or found to have been faulty at point of capture. Menzies agreed and took this to ITV, who fully supported the decision, showing flexibility that was greatly appreciated by us all. This is what we chose to do on my unit, otherwise we'd never have met the delivery schedule. Social distancing was observed at all times and the phones were disinfected before being passed from the house to the DIT and vice versa.

Virtual tour

That Monday was spent discussing at length how the shoot would work and regularly checking in with the family, in our case Robert Glenister, his wife Celia and their son, Tom. As we couldn't recce the house, Robert shot a video tour for us. From this, I drew a floor plan of the house so that Louise and I could work out where we would shoot, as well as designate which areas were out of shot for storing kit and unwanted furniture. The video also allowed me to understand how the natural light played and what practical lighting was available, as these would be my main sources of light.

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Zooming in: another scene rolls to record, watched over by Jamie Cairney and colleagues from their virtual gallery

Network support

To support the shoot, ITV had sent a very basic kit comprising a stills tripod, table-top tripod and DJI gimbal. I decided I needed to enhance this, so organised another delivery that included a decent Miller DS10 tripod, a 1x1 Litepanel (used for a streetlight effect), some reflectors and white sheets for bounce, some black sheets for negative fill and a few scraps of muslin for diffusion. I also included an all-important stash of gaffer tape and croc clips. Tuesday morning was spent instructing Celia (who would be our technical person) and Tom how to build and operate all the kit and familiarising them with some basic jargon. The afternoon was taken up with rehearsing a few scenes and testing the workflow and stability of the streamed video and comms. Then Wednesday until Friday were run exactly like conventional shooting days, with 10 hours on camera and 1 hour for lunch, patiently supervised by 1st AD Mark Challenor.

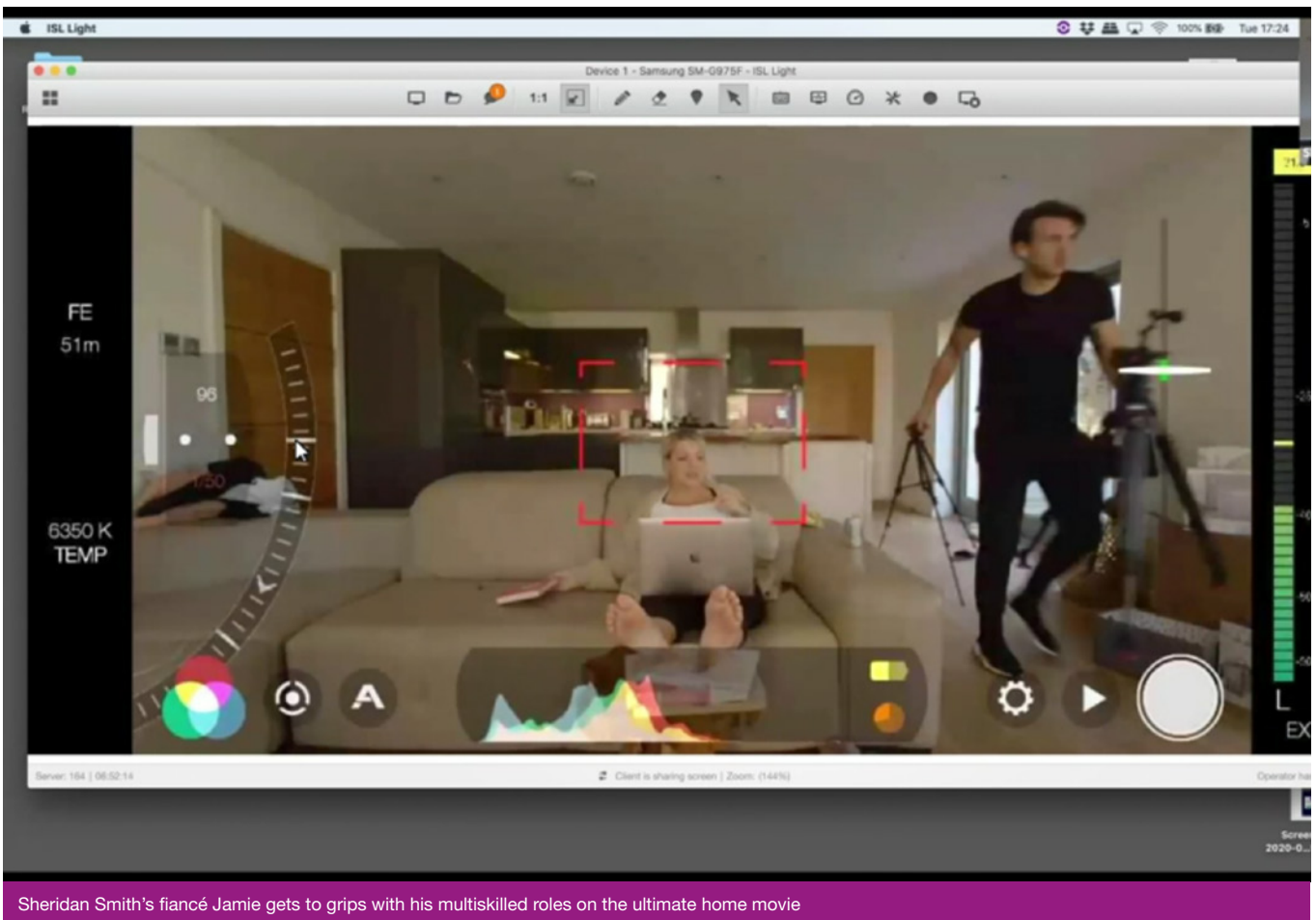
Keeping it in the family

The Glenister family were an absolute joy to work with, taking to it with much enthusiasm. Celia especially embraced her many roles as camera op, spark, standby props, costume, makeup, location manager, and more. This made the whole process a lot less frustrating than it could have been, although I can't imagine what it must have been like for her having me constantly instructing "Up a bit, down a bit, pan left..." and so on, all day! Regardless, Celia was unflappable and a quick learner for someone who had never been involved with film production before. By the end of the shoot, she was confidently suggesting ideas and able to compose shots with a decreasing need for direction from me.

Pictures locked down

So, seven days after the initial phone call, we had wrapped, having obtained all the shots we needed, with very few issues. The resulting product is obviously a little rough around the edges and the limitations of the camera's focus, dynamic range and colour science leave a lot to be desired, but I was amazed with what we had achieved under very unusual conditions; we all rose to the challenge, and thoroughly enjoyed it!

I have suggested to ITV that there are many better technologies (with better image capture) we could have used without overloading the actors and their families. Any professional IP camera would be a great way to go and I'd definitely recommend the amazing cameras from Z Cam, introduced to me by fellow GTC member Mark Move. These are small and very simple and, if connected via IP and combined with AF lenses, we would have full control over every aspect of the camera and its settings.



Ben Wheeler: Mel's story

When director Paul Whittington asked me to collaborate on *Isolation Stories* I jumped at the chance, having built a great relationship with him on *The White House Farm Murders*. The challenge seemed exciting: to shoot a short drama for ITV with an unbelievably tight turnaround, in an 'unprecedented time', and all from the comfort of my own home! I got the call on the Wednesday evening and it was proposed we start shooting the following Sunday, so clearly prep time was going to be limited. Oh, and everything would be done via Zoom!

We started immediately, with tech run-throughs led by the folks at ITV who'd already been using this system for LE shows. Paul and I prepped as we would usually (albeit over Zoom), breaking down the script and exchanging visual references, creating a storyboard of sorts. After a day's tech rehearsal with our main actor, Sheridan Smith, and her fiancé, Jamie, who would be our camera operator (as well as grip, spark, standby props, makeup and almost everything else), we started shooting *Mel*.

Thinking outside the box

The phone's output was streamed to our technician David Loudoun's computer via the ISL light app, and he then shared this with me via TeamViewer, which allowed me to control the camera remotely from my laptop. Communicating with cast, director, producer and 1st AD via Zoom, we also used Sheridan's iPad (as their Zoom connection) as a witness camera to give us an overview of what was happening in their location. It really made me appreciate quite how much, when we are physically in the set, we rely on spacial awareness to gain a sense of light, space and mood, so this physical detachment felt very different.

As expected, the process began slowly, due to the pictures we were viewing looking more like children's crayon drawings, making it nigh on impossible to judge composition, let alone focus or exposure (although we did rely heavily on the histogram). However, this improved slightly

on Day 2, when Jamie informed us there was a way of viewing far superior pictures via some adjusted screen-share settings. Still, this method was reliant on decent bandwidth at the cast's end, which seemed to be good in the mornings but pretty ropery by the evening. Thankfully, we established a bit of a rhythm, meaning we achieved all the shots we had planned, albeit with a real battle to get there.

Thinking aloud

It turned out to be far more exhausting spending 12 hours a day hunched over a laptop on Zoom than doing a full day handheld with a real camera on your shoulder. This was in part more a mental strain, having to verbalise every thought. With respect, having to describe in the most basic sense where and how to move a camera or level a tripod to an insurance broker did require the patience of a saint. Luckily, Jamie was a quick learner, an extremely hard worker and was absolutely invaluable; we really couldn't have done it without him.

That personal touch

What this way of working really did bring home is the importance of collaboration in our role as DoP. I really missed the usual interactions with a production designer, gaffer, focus-puller and all the other HoDs we take for granted on a regular shoot, every one of them as important as the other in creating a piece of work. It was an experience, for sure, but I can't help feeling I was rather like a chef with no knives, wearing a blindfold.

We did, however, achieve a great and memorable piece of television, thanks in no small part to an outstanding performance from Sheridan. It was a fun challenge, if occasionally frustrating experience, but certainly a unique part of TV history, whether for good or bad! And there was a big plus side: as soon as they called 'Wrap!', it was like being teleported home, as I closed the laptop and immediately poured myself a large glass of wine!



The ultimate in remote camera operation: Eddie Marsan's wife Janine lines up a potentially challenging shot for DoP Len to expose correctly with minimal lighting

Len Gowing: Karen's story

I was approached by my friend Ken Horn, who told me he was producing one of four short films set in the current lockdown – and he would like me to be DoP. There was a twist: there would be absolutely no physical contact between the outside world and the actors, except for a delivery of lights and camera equipment – oh, and the cameras (Samsung S10 phones) would be operated by the actors' families. As our shoot would be the last of the four, at least I would be able to benefit from the other DoPs' experiences, but it was clear the whole concept would need some serious thought as it was definitely outside the normal comfort zone.

Shifting time

I was familiar with remote control of computers but not of a mobile phone. In the event I found the software used for capture a little buggy (we never did get to the bottom of whether this was actually the app or something inherent in the system), but our main issue was that the timebase was never consistent. The app was designed to be able to shoot at 25fps, which it did, occasionally; however, because mobile phone cameras inherently utilise a variable frame rate, the frame

rates of our rushes were all over the place, anywhere between 23 and 30fps. One of the other crews was fortunate not to suffer with this though and I don't think they were doing anything different to us (unless they just weren't telling!).

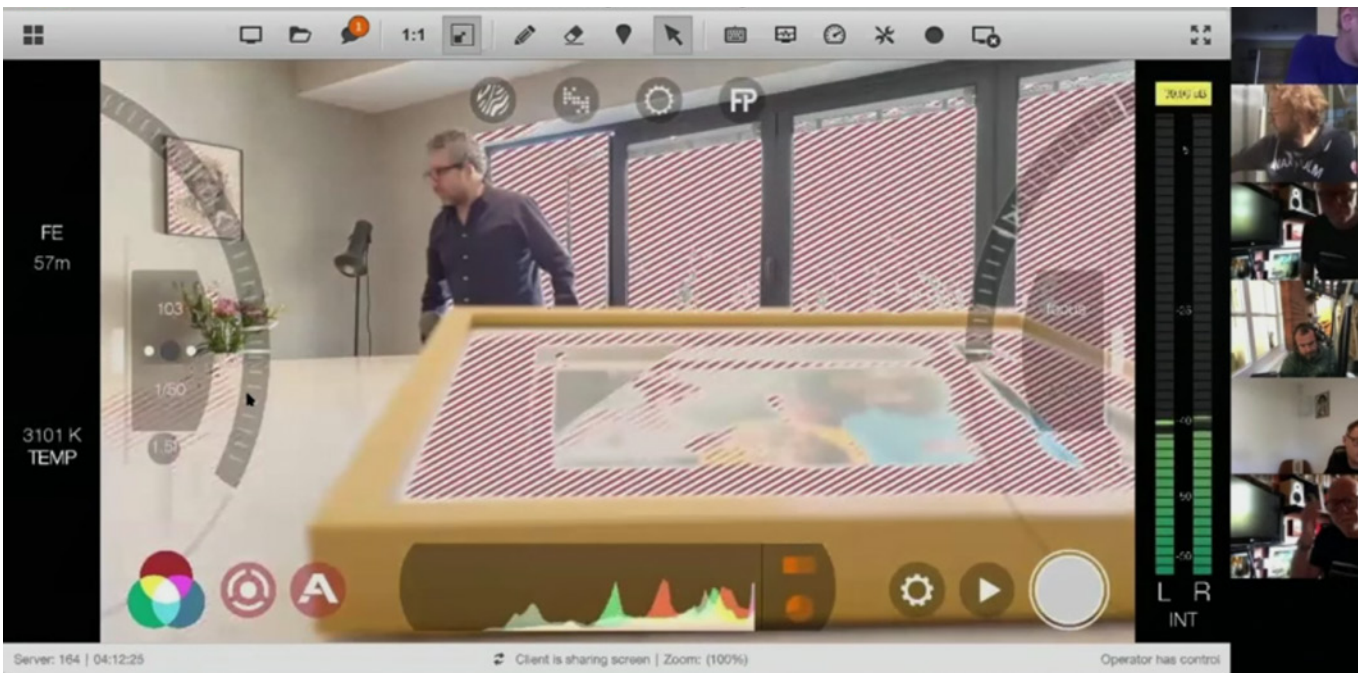
Another technicality was that the rushes couldn't be collected and taken away to the edit in the usual way due to social distancing. At least the other shoots' troubleshooting enabled us to pre-emptively adapt our workflow to bypass similar frustrations. We found that, by creating small proxy files immediately after shooting, we could upload them to the Google Drive, so the edit team was able to access and assess the material pretty much as soon as we'd shot it.

Big window of opportunity

Decisions had to be made in advance on what equipment would be needed and, given that those operating would be novices (in our case, actor Eddie Marsan, his wife Janine and their children), you had to prethink the simplest way to do everything; for example, how to light each situation. Knowing that our location featured large, north-facing bifold French windows and the weather forecast was for constant sun all week, my approach was to utilise available light when looking anywhere other than directly out. This was achieved with a large poly board, which the sound recordist (stationed outside the house) kindly set for me throughout the day. This actually worked rather too well on occasions, meaning I had to reduce the light bounced into the kitchen when the sun was too bright. The most tricky element was when the camera looked from inside to out so, with the approval of director David Blair, I was allowed to take a creative judgement on what areas outside could overexpose and likewise what parts inside could be left underexposed – on a per shot basis. David was enthusiastically prescriptive in his direction to Janine, our camera operator, which relieved me of some of the pressure, but I was still able to interject for subtle shot improvements.



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For a DoP, nothing beats being physically in the room, but at least the ISL Light app provides more advanced control of the phone's camera settings, including familiar tools to assess exposure

Thinking aloud

Reflecting on how the new methodology impacted the 'normal' side of the job, I'd say it was mentally challenging. It takes quite an effort to verbalise every element of your thought process over Zoom – and this only once the director has finished any discussions with the cast. Having an alternative communication channel (an app called Unity) really helped in this respect, enabling direct communication among relevant crew members but not impinging on the Zoom chat (as long as you remembered to mute your Zoom mic!).

If I were given the chance to shoot another of these, with phones once again preordained, I would get my hands on the relevant model prior to the shoot and really familiarise myself with it. In an ideal world, I'd investigate many of the alternative wireless options available too, and – most importantly – test, test, test!



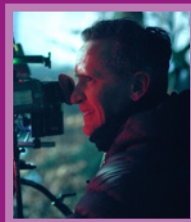
Tech instruction and support had to be done whilst adhering to strict quarantine and social distancing protocols

Fact File

All four episodes of *Isolation Stories* are available on the ITV Hub along with a behind-the-scenes programme revealing how the teams brought this unique concept to our screens.



Jamie Cairney is no stranger to pushing the boundaries of drama and comedy in some standout series, most recently the Netflix hit *Sex Education*, which is nominated for a GTC Award for Excellence, having previously picked up GTC Awards for *Detectorists* and *Flowers*. Jamie is represented by Berlin Associates & WME. See more of his work at: www.jamiecairney.com



Ben Wheeler fell in love with filmmaking when, aged 13, he joined the Children's Film Unit in the late 1980s, and gained valuable work experience within the camera department. His subsequent career has involved shooting numerous documentaries for various broadcasters, followed by becoming a camera operator in comedy, including on hits *The Thick Of It*, *The Smoking Room Series 2* (his first series as DoP in 2005), *Peep Show* and *The Inbetweeners*, before shifting to drama in 2015, on such hits as *Dr Foster*, *The Durrells* and Amazon Prime's *Alex Rider* to his name. Ben is represented by United Agents. See more of his work at: www.benwheelerdop.com



Len Gowing began his career in 1984 as a trainee on *Brookside*, aged 19, in his home town of Liverpool, before progressing to Lighting Cameraman. He went freelance in 1992 and was DoP on series such as *Thief Takers* and *Liverpool 1*. More recently he has shot drama/comedy, including *Come Fly With Me*, *Touch of Cloth*, and various shows for children's TV. See more of Len's work at: www.lengowing.co.uk