

Zerb guest editor **Rob Emmanuel** recently turned up for a day's work at Hampstead Theatre, only to find that all the cameras would be lying on their sides – by design. With the inexorable march of social media platforms such as Instagram, is shooting in a vertical format (such as 9:16) the future... and how easy is it to do well?

THE PORTRAIT CHALLENGE

Maisie Williams and Zach Wyatt in director Edward Hall's production of Lauren Gunderson's *I and You* at Hampstead Theatre, streamed on IGTV. With thanks to Hampstead Theatre and IGTV for the production screengrabs

On 15 November 2018, I turned up at Hampstead Theatre as part of the camera crew for a One Box Television job – and we promptly laid everything on its side: the cameras, monitors, even the vision engineer's head (for once, he had the perfect excuse to lie down on the job!)

We were there for a 5-camera recording of *I and You*, a play written by Lauren Gunderson, directed by Edward Hall and featuring Maisie Williams and Zach Wyatt. This was the fifth time One Box had been commissioned to record a stage play at this theatre – but this time there was a twist. Well, actually more of a 90-degree tilt, as the Hampstead was to stream this recording free for a limited period on Instagram TV (IGTV) – and the delivery requirement was an aspect ratio of 9:16 (or in other words 16x9 in portrait).

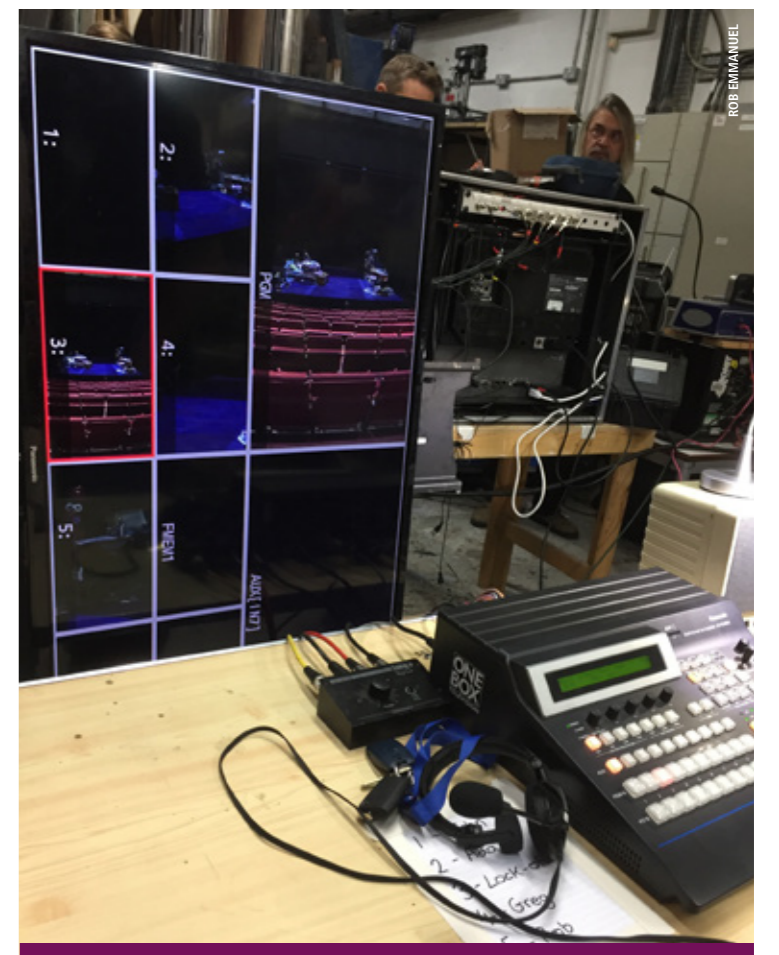
Thinking laterally

Luckily for us, it wasn't the first time Richard Stevenson of One Box had ventured into this territory – and, looking to the future as always, he'd had the foresight to commission three bespoke sturdy steel 'L' brackets, each drilled with the appropriately spaced threaded holes to receive a tripod wedge plate plus the camera's locking plate at a 90-degree flip from horizontal, complete with safety bond and small wooden block to give added support to compensate for the unconventional sideways exertion of gravity on the camera plate. As there would be five cameras, he had to hire in one more (less well-designed) bracket for the fourth camera, and there would also be a locked-off wide shot (Camera 3) from a Sony P70, mounted on a Manfrotto stills tripod with 3-axis head, that could be tipped to 90 degrees as standard.

A quick briefing highlighting the importance of mounting each camera on its 'L' bracket in exactly the same orientation, went like this: "Camera 5, you appear to be hanging upside down!", and then we were all set (albeit viewing the world in a new, mind-bogglingly tall and extremely narrow perspective). This was going to require some speedy rethinking of our deeply engrained understanding of camera grammar and nice framing.



Locked-off P70 camera on a Manfrotto stills tripod – a wide of the stage in portrait really doesn't work and it was impossible to avoid shooting multiple seats foreground



Director John Kirby's position showing vision mixer and director's monitor on Unicol stand in portrait orientation

Obviously, the cameras and their mounts are only one part of the chain; there's all the magic that goes on further down the line as well. As is the nature of flyaway units, there are parts of the gallery that can be adapted more readily than others, and various technical advancements over recent years have allowed the setup to become more flexible. One such area is flat-screen monitors which, with the right brackets, can be rotated to portrait relatively easily (certainly compared to a CRT monitor anyway).

A view from the gallery

On this occasion, the director's monitor, displaying all the camera feeds plus 'Programme Out' could be clocked, but unfortunately life wasn't quite so comfortable for Richard Carroll, the vision engineer: "I and You was a first for me. I've never shot a full production in portrait. In fact, come to think of it, I don't think I've done anything in this 9:16 ratio before. In the runup to the recording, I found it difficult to gauge the pictures, as everything was the 'wrong way around'. Luckily, I had my trusty Atomos Samurai recorder with me and hooked that up to the TX cut so I could at least see things in the portrait ratio. For colour-matching the cameras, I found I had to lean 90° to the left. I just couldn't do it looking at it straight on – it's very strange the tricks the mind plays!

"If I were to tackle a shoot like this again, I'd like to have the vision position set so that the monitor is rotated correctly to reflect the ratio. Modern monitors



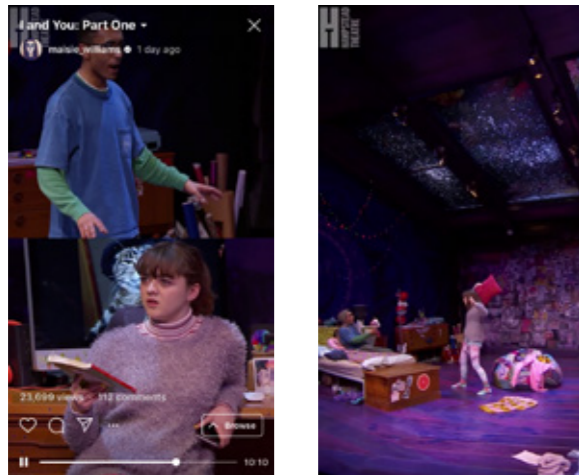
Vision control: The only landscape part of the rig



Rob's view from Camera 5, with Adam and Greg at their cameras

would handle this with no problem. The only issue would be mounting it. Current Sony broadcast OLED monitors are designed to fit in a standard 19" rack in their 16:9 format. Rotating the monitor would need a special bracket to keep the monitor in place, but little else would need to be adjusted.

I don't know of any manufacturers who are developing equipment – cameras, monitors or any other parts of the chain – to enable easy 9:16 shooting. At the moment there just isn't the demand, especially when current equipment can be turned on its side. Perhaps in the future someone might build something, but I'd say it's unlikely. For the time being 16:9 will continue to rule the roost!



"The option of cropping is possible, but then you're compromising on quality, which immediately puts you on the path of needing very high-res cameras (like a Sony F65). At the moment, to get the full HD resolution, spinning things 90° is by far the easiest and only cost-effective way."

The director of the OB, John Kirby, had seen the play before and, with a member of stage management taking on a PA-type role, the two of them helpfully kept us informed of relevant stage directions – but essentially we busked the whole thing on the fly. All the cameras were iso-recorded, giving the option to tidy up the cut and, interestingly, the final stream revealed that some bold decisions were taken in post to composited multi-angles from different cameras at certain points.

Learning to shoot multicamera vertically

Greg O'Callaghan was on Camera 4, to the left of my far right Camera 5 position. As we worked out our basic shots, it was clear that Greg playing fairly wide would work well, allowing a lovely deep two-shot. This was helped by the set design, as the apartment had a slanted roof with big skylights, giving a great dynamic to what would otherwise have been a lot of dead space and ugly shoot-off into the lighting rig at the top. Only when the two characters played wide to either side of the stage was the two-shot compromised, meaning Greg then had to use his discretion which character to favour.

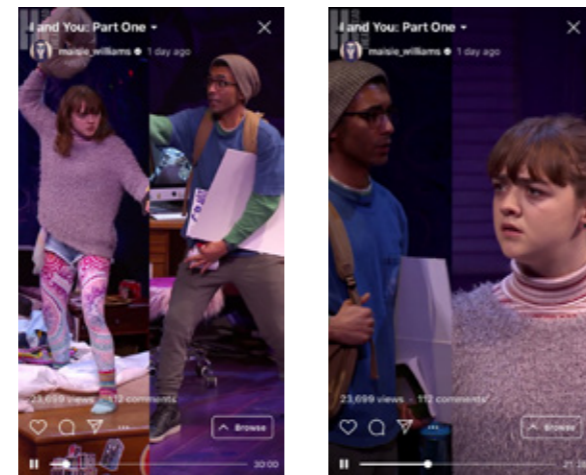
Over on the other side of the auditorium, Cameras 1 and 2 were operated by GTC member John Shuker and Adam Gohil respectively, mirroring and cross-shooting with Cameras 4 and 5 and covering any action favouring their angle. Adam had this to say: "I have been aware of shoots for Instagram before, where Steadicam operators have talked about L-shaped brackets for the camera and having to mount their monitor at 90 degrees, but this was the first time I had worked on one myself."

"Richard Carroll makes a good point that balancing the cameras was more of a faff and could have been easy to get wrong, but thankfully with the custom brackets it was fairly straightforward. I can see that mounting the viewfinder to the side of the camera could be problematic, but at least it means it is in portrait orientation for us to view correctly, which helps a lot. Operating the cameras was pretty normal; I didn't feel I had to change how I worked particularly."

"But we pretty much had to learn a whole new set of TV grammar there and then as we went. Wide shots weren't nearly wide enough across the frame and were way too tall top and bottom, so had to be cropped (in our case to cut out the empty seats). Even then there was too much redundant information and I struggle to see when a 9:16 wide shot would really work... except perhaps for tennis?"

"Long shots of the actors worked perfectly, so long as it wasn't a long two-shot, or they had to be really close to each other (or one slightly in front of the other). When they moved around, shots had to be changed much more quickly than I am used to and it was much harder to contain the action."

"Mid-shots took a while to get used to. Rob and I were doing the opposing singles and I remember feeling I was fighting him a bit at the start because our shots didn't really match. I personally felt we were having an argument about headroom in a civilised way... and we got there in the end! I found that leaving a normal amount of headroom in a mid-shot meant you had a lot of body filling the frame and a small head on top. So we naturally found a compromise, with a lot more headroom than you would expect."



"Closer shots worked fine, though you had almost no latitude if the actors moved from side to side, so these were a more risky proposition, but I think this also had a lot to do with the subject and the unrehearsed nature of what we were doing. I did notice that they used some nice split-screen effects in the edit, which was certainly an interesting way to create a much better looking wide shot."

"I really appreciated John Kirby's suggestion of redoing the first 10 minutes or so because, at the beginning, my inner voice was saying over and over: 'Whoa, what's going on here?' before it all settled down."

Adrenaline rush

For my part, I thoroughly enjoyed myself on this gig. I love the energy of recording theatre plays, especially live and unrehearsed, because of the degree of concentration and energy required. Undoubtedly, the challenge of being on a fairly tight shot following characters who would suddenly run

across the stage without warning was made all the more fun by the frame width being barely twice the width of the actor. This is not to claim it's any more demanding than following any other fast-moving subjects on a tight lens in a standard landscape format (say, for sport or wildlife), but in portrait mode the latitude for losing a fast-moving subject out of frame on a shot size no tighter than a mid-shot is comparable to following an MCU in 16:9 landscape. It's not necessarily difficult, just different.

I echo Adam's comments on our headroom dilemma. When I saw Adam's framing on return, allowing much more headroom than mine, I preferred it and altered mine accordingly. I don't think mine was necessarily 'wrong', but Adam's was more pleasing. Of course, multicamera drama is all about matching shots, so it was a bit frustrating to find that just as I was inwardly celebrating the fact that I'd nailed the containment of a fast-moving actor in mid-shot, I suddenly realised I'd subconsciously reverted to my more conventional headroom once the shot settled... so I was mismatching with Adam again. Did they fix it in post? Unfortunately not on this occasion. Another lesson learned!

Is this the shape of things to come?

I think it's fair to say that this shoot has triggered some interesting conversations among our peers, specifically around the 'landscape aspect', provoking comments ranging from: "Why not just crop the full-size landscape image, it's only for Instagram?" to "This whole fad only comes from people shooting video on phones the wrong way up – and it needs to stop!" All valid and interesting points and they have

their place... but this article didn't set out to debate the aspect ratio decisions, rather to describe the shoot from the point of view of the crew who were there to do the job in hand.

Summing up his experience, Richard Carroll says: "When I tuned in a few days later to the IGTV stream, I was very pleased to see that our hard work had been worth it... and by then my back had just about stopped aching after the two hours of leaning to the left! I can definitely see more work in this ratio happening in the future. The switch away from watching TV in a traditional format is, as we all know, moving rapidly. The power and money of new broadcasters like Instagram is here to stay."

And for Adam Gohil: "It was certainly interesting and really nice to be challenged like this (and it's a good play as well!). I'm glad I did this job and, while I do find the vertical screen a bit annoying, I get that it might be part of the future and that we will have to fit in with it, as grumpy as it might make us!"

So often the joy of what we do is to face the unexpected and rise to challenges, and yet still deliver high-quality results. None of us knows what the future holds – perhaps this is it, perhaps not. We don't necessarily have to love it, but anything that still requires a full broadcast crew and setup, offering plentiful new opportunities, is a positive in my book!

Fact File

With thanks to: Richard Carroll, Adam Gohil, John Kirby, Greg O'Callaghan, John Shuker, Richard Stevenson and the whole One Box Television team

See more about Hampstead Theatre: www.hampsteadtheatre.com

To find out more about IGTV see: <https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/06/20/welcome-to-igtv>

Bespoke offers in partnership with the GTC from the Cordwallis Group.

Working with you to find the right van for your business.



Cordwallis Van Centre (Heathrow)

Great Southwest Road, Bedfont, Middlesex.
Telephone: 020 8045 5150.
Find us on your sat-nav using TW14 8ND.
www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk/cordwallis

Cordwallis Maidenhead

Cordwallis Street, Maidenhead, SL6 7BE.
Telephone: 01628 622 264.
Find us on your sat-nav using SL6 7BE.
www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk/cordwallismaidenhead

Cordwallis Oxford

Oakfield Industrial Estate, Stanton Harcourt Road, Eynsham.
Telephone: 01865 882 885.
Find us on your sat-nav using OX29 4TH.
www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk/cordwallisoxford

Cordwallis Group
In partnership with GTC

Finance subject to status. 18s and over. Subject to availability and confirmation. Terms and conditions apply. Accurate at time of publication [01/2019]. Volkswagen Commercial Vehicle Financial Services. We can introduce you to a limited number of lenders to assist with your purchase, who may pay us for introducing you to them.



Commercial Vehicles