

Professional Camera



VariCam 35 adds colour to BBC's Broken

Director of Photography Joel Devlin makes use of the VariCam 35 exclusively to shoot six-part BBC One drama 'Broken', featuring Sean Bean and Anna Friel

Client - LA Productions
Location - Liverpool, UK
Products Supplied - VariCam 35

Challenge
Create a drama that highlights the colours of the North of England within a hard hitting storyline

Solution
Using the VariCam 35 and its incredibly accurate colour palette to create a visual reference to 1970s American photographer William Egglestone.

“It also has an advantage in that it's a 4K camera, and there are not a lot of cameras out there that will produce this kind of picture and do it in 4K”

Joel Devlin, Director of Photography



Screenwriter and producer Jimmy McGovern's latest six-part series *Broken* follows in the footsteps of hard-hitting dramas such as *The Moorside* and *Little Boy Blue* as TV drama continues with unflinching portrayals of modern British life.

Having worked on the likes of long-running BBC One soap *Reg*, notable for its socially challenging storylines, alongside creating crime drama *Common* and docudrama *Hillsborough*, McGovern has an impressive track record of creating series involving sensitive themes of injustice, grief, personal strife and social friction.

The series was produced by Liverpool-based LA Productions, in and around the city, alongside the company's post-production arm LA Post. Director of Photography Joel Devlin, whose credits on VariCam include the BBC's 2015 series *Dr Foster* as well as 2017 Channel 4 drama *Born to Kill*, used the VariCam 35 exclusively on set.

Featuring Sean Bean as Catholic priest Father Michael Kerrigan, *Broken* is set in contemporary urban Britain, and follows a number of characters that are linked through the Priest.

"I came on to the project through director Ashley Pearce," said Joel. "I trained to be a photographer before going into film, and Ashley used to be a fine artist before coming a director, so we had very similar visual touchstones."

For visual inspiration, Joel looked at photographers, in particular the work of American William Egglestone, who was prolific in the 1970s and 80s and focused on America's so-called 'Bible belt' in the south and the midwest.

"They're similar communities to what's covered in *Broken*, they're impoverished, they're feeling very distant from the mechanisms of society, and yet Egglestone photographed these communities in a very bright and colourful way," he explained.

"He celebrated light and colour in ordinary life and I really wanted to use that approach in *Broken* and stay away from the 'grim up north' palette."

Having previously used the VariCam 35 to great success before on *Dr Foster* and *Born to Kill*, Joel had already been won over to some extent. "The colour aesthetic was one of the reasons why I went with the VariCam. I was lucky enough in that I had already used the camera on *Doctor Foster*, so had confidence in its abilities, which allowed me to spend less time testing for *Broken*", he explained

"*Dr Foster* centres around a different part of society, but it used a lot of real locations where you don't have the kind of control that you get in a studio, and I was very impressed with the VariCam even at that early point, so when it came to *Broken* I was already steering towards using it.



"I used to shoot documentaries and my choice at the time before we moved to HD was the tape-based VariCam - it was the camera that most represented Super 16mm and it had the contrast and look that you'd get with film. I think the 35 has a similar sort of sensibility about it - it feels very filmic to me."

Closely working with rental provider Panavision, Joel used vintage ultraspeed lenses on the production - "There's a lot more drama out there, but there's not necessarily a lot more money around, so you're under a lot of pressure to shoot something high quality fast. The technology allows us to do that, but it still has to be tempered against something that gives an artistically good look. From a cinematography point of view I think it's very important."

"Even though the low light capability may be the deciding factor on certain shoots, it also has an advantage in that it's a 4K camera, and there are not a lot of cameras out there that will produce this kind of picture and do it in 4K. Capturing deliverables in 4K is also becoming more and more important."

"Like the old documentary VariCam from way back, it offers not just one thing, it offers a range of things that elevate it above its competitors and that's what I like about it."

LA Productions' Head of Post Patrick Hall was involved on the project from the very early stages.

"It's lovely to be involved in a project from the very start," he said. "You get to see it all through and for consistency in the edit it helps because you're much more embedded in the story."

"Some projects you're involved with for only a short time, and don't necessarily see it to the end, but with this one, because we were involved for so much longer, we were much more engaged. Hopefully that comes through into the finished work."

"I edited the last two Jimmy McGovern projects we've done here at LA Post, and I've been lucky enough to edit four of the six 60-minute episodes of *Broken*."

The colour palette and overall visual aesthetic that DOP Joel Devlin and the production team was aiming for with the show meant that a camera that enabled it was important. And with Joel Devlin's previous good experience with the VariCam, it was a straightforward choice to make.

"On *Broken* there are a lot of scenes in low light and at night, and when we saw what was coming directly off the camera, it looked fantastic in terms of the sensor and being able to switch the ISO."

"It's a really nice camera with some fantastic images and a very simple workflow for us into Avid and Blackmagic Design's DaVinci Resolve when we graded," explains Patrick.



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"What the camera gives you in terms of colour palette is a really nice starting point - the realism and depth worked really well with the look that we were going for. When we did the camera test it all looked as we wanted it to."

"All of the daytime shots as well as the majority of the night and low light scenes were naturally shot, and the camera enabled us to pull out a lot of the colour richness and depths from the scenes in the colour grade."

Through his work on the project Patrick got a close look at what VariCam was able to deliver in terms of colour. "Because of the way we were dealing with the colour balance and really pushing certain areas of the palette, we found that the camera tended to put a lot of magenta into the skin tones - there was a lot of red in the skin tones already, so much of the work in post was about rebalancing that in the rest of the grade (customised LUT)."

"We developed an interesting workflow in Resolve where we were able to select just the skin tones and pipe back in the correct tones into the colour grade once it was done," explained Patrick.

"So we did the colour grading, and then were able to go back to the raw image from the camera, taking that nice realistic balanced skin tone and then put that back in along with the rest of the grade."

The drama was shot on Panasonic's AVC-Intra 444 codec, with the master footage shot on 4K. With the series going to air on TV and streaming at Full HD, the final edit was scaled down in post to accommodate.

"On *Broken* we had the choice of three cameras, and the VariCam suited the story, the backdrop, the style. I think the 35 now has all the options to make it futureproof - the ability to see in the dark, but equally during the day produce some gorgeous images," added Joel Devlin.

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 [BBC One trailer for 'Broken'](#)
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