

## The Highs and Low Tides of Showbiz

(a.k.a. *The Malcolm Treen Life History #97*):

People have often asked me, over the many years that I have been in this "business" we call "show", what the funniest thing is that I have ever seen; I must admit the one still rated amongst my favourites was a video shoot many years ago for a programme called *Love for Lydia*.

It was in the dark days of television, when the camera was still large, but small enough to go outside and do drama inserts - as long as it was still attached by its umbilical cord, first to a 'back pack' and then to the scanner.

I watched with interest as the senior cameraman and the director were setting up a rather brave hand held shot. The camera would pan with two actors getting into the back of a rather splendid vintage car, it would drive off and - here was the interesting bit - the camera would follow it for a while. No track, just a hand held walking shot.

As I have said, along with the camera came a camera 'back pack' and in order to make the job easier for the cameraman, it was placed in the boot of the car. A quantity of cable was looped so it would just unwind as the car pulled away, and all the cameraman had to do was simply keep up with the moving vehicle.

Now this is where I became privileged to two pieces of information that, I realised afterwards, I should have perhaps passed on. But you know how it is, you always assume that the 'grown ups' know what they are doing. **Wrong.**

In order to keep up with the car the cameraman would have to run a bit. The director had said to the cameraman, "the car will pull away slowly and we will cut very quickly."

Meanwhile the floor manager had said to the car driver, "as soon as they are in the back just pull away as normal."

If I have an excuse for not putting these two privileged pieces of information together, it is that only afterwards did I realise the floor manager had never actually had a conversation with the director. So - and you are probably way ahead of me here - as the car pulled away, the cameraman had no alternative but to keep up with the car. His camera cable was attached to the back pack, which was firmly secured into the boot of the car; after all they didn't want the back pack to get damaged did they?

Well you could see it coming a mile off. I've never seen a cameraman run so fast in his life, as this one did to the limits of his ability trying to keep up with the car that was accelerating away from him. In the end he had no alternative but to let go of the camera; I must say the number of pieces that it shattered into amazed even me.



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The engineer looked at the mangled heap of waste metal on the floor (which only seconds before had been a living thing), turned round, sighed deeply, and threw his screwdriver into the pile of twisted and crushed debris.

Everyone around looked very solemn faced, however I'm sorry to say I spent nearly ten minutes laughing in some nearby bushes. Every time the mental image of those little legs going so fast by the side of the car appeared in my mind, the tears welled up in my eyes and I was off again into uncontrollable mirth.

The shot as it turned out was quite successful until the screen went blank - as far as I know it was used in the final edited version.

One of the most dramatic moments I have witnessed was a million years ago on a cops and robbers series called Dempsey and Makepeace. Before the Docklands ever existed I had alighted on Limehouse Basin, which had a swing bridge, where you could cause the most enormous traffic jam if you kept it open long enough (and get mentioned on the local traffic news - but that's another story!).

We were filming a sequence in which Richard Johnson, playing a baddy, goes off the rails and drives his Jaguar car into the dark and murky waters of the basin. After the initial shots of him driving, and Dempsey chasing, had been shot, we came to the final sequence where the car plunges into the water.

The car had been rigged on a special ramp in order to fire it off into the water (I could name the special effects man but I won't, suffice to say it was a learning curve for us all in those days). Something like five cameras were set up to cover the action, at various points round the jetty and even one in a boat bobbing about on the water. As the tension mounted - last shot of the day as always - yours truly was to be found near the catering wagon, telling them it was nearly all over.

The cameras rolled, a man yelled "Action" (in that over-dramatic way first assistants often have: if you weren't worried or concerned before, you sure as hell will be now). There was a thud as the Jaguar moved about a foot forward and then slumped back onto the ramp, then an almighty whoosh as what looked like an exocet missile flew out of the radiator, across the water, over the camera boat (where panic nearly broke out but the damn thing was moving so fast no-one had time to react until it had passed overhead), and splashed into the drink behind them.

The caterer said, "I don't think they got that quite right" (a vile understatement).

Stunt arrangers rushed about, special effects people rushed about, the grown-ups couldn't rush about because most of them were in the boat. But they got back to shore and then rushed about.



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From my remote but perfectly visioned position, I realised that they had had only one go at the rocket business, which was now many feet down in the basin. The only other alternative to get the car into the water was to get another car and push it in - at speed.

To my horror I realised the stunt man was not going to do this but the special effects technician - it was his failure so he felt duty-bound to get the shot they wanted. I gazed in disbelief as the stunt arranger described to him what speed, what gear and more importantly when to brake, so that he didn't end up in the deep end as well as the dead Jaguar.

"My God!" I said to the caterer, "It's all gone horribly wrong and the special effects guy has a death wish." "Oh dear." "Oh dear indeed. You haven't got anything to drink have you?" "Yes, yes we have, but only Gin, I'm afraid." "That's fine, thank you." I lit a cigar and bit my lip and watched as the two cars began their run up. Remember this was a long time before 'health & safety' was invented and my risk assessments were simply calculated by a primitive 'amount of alcohol consumed' barometer.

"Sorry, I don't seem to have anything to mix it with." "It doesn't matter. Just give me the bloody stuff neat." "Neat Gin?" "Yes, for Christ's sake, yes." I yelled quietly (well they were running sound), as the cars began to pick up speed. I took a huge slug of the clear liquid.

The Jaguar plunged off the end of the jetty, not quite at the jaunty angle it would have flown at with the rocket up its arse, but not bad. The entire crew held their breath as the special effects car screeched to a halt and stopped just before the lip of the jetty. I took another slug and breathed out slowly.

"Cut." yelled out the voice. The customary round of applause followed and the stunt arranger came and ruffled the hair of the special effects man.

"Well done, old son. Well done."

"Well that wasn't too bad was it?" said the caterer, "How long will it take them to get the car out of the water?" "I've no idea, I'll let you know tomorrow." "More Gin?" "No thanks," I sighed, "For you, that's a wrap."

Many years later, that same special effects man told me he had never been so shit-scared in all his life, but with 80 people stood round looking for a solution, he had had no alternative than to solve the problem his own mistake had created. Hero or fool? Answers on a postcard to....

There is one location manager I have been told, (there are probably more!) who often uses the phrase, "I am a Location Manager, not a bloody magician." A very fine phrase and I wish I could use it myself but unfortunately I can't. For those of you who have pondered the initials 'A.I.M.C.' after my name on the bottom of these articles and even for those of you who haven't, it stands for *Associate of The Inner Magic Circle*.



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I have been a member of this august body since 1976. I tend to keep quiet about this little hobby because if people get to know, they'll say, "Call yourself a magician and you still haven't found the location!"

Which after a while can upset you to say the least.

***Malcolm D.Y.Treen A.I.M.C***