

Festen, shot on DVcam: the art-house movie that opened the film world's eyes to the possibilities of DV



DV devotees

DV may spell cheap-and-cheerful to some but, as Rob Buckley discovers, others are busy developing a whole new DV production grammar

Most people expected digital video to change *everything*. From more efficient, more flexible shooting crews to simpler post-production and lower costs, digital was to be the industry's Domestos - able to kill all known problems. Its one drawback was thought to be quality: no one expected it to have any. However, a whole set of London-based units founded on the back of DV are now claiming that even quality is not at issue.

"The message I'm getting is that it's the right tool for the job," says Euan Semple, head of the BBC's Digilab. "Depending on the experience of the person using it, and what they expect to do with the kit, they can now pick from a range of options where previously it was just high-end stuff."

Digilab is the BBC's response to this ballooning choice in equipment: the simpler days of "one size fits all" BetaSP are disappearing rapidly, to be replaced with a cornucopia of formats and cameras. Semple and his staff have the unenviable task of sifting through the whole range of digital products to see what their strengths and weaknesses are for specific tasks, and advising accordingly.

"At Digilab, we don't specify what people can

and can't use, but we do give warnings about things we find 'difficult' to use. Technology may be getting more complicated, but it's actually becoming more accessible." As a result of DV and related technologies, Semple feels, people are becoming more confident about production: they specify exactly what they want, either for their crew or for them to go out and use for themselves. "The exciting thing is that it blurs the edges between different groups that have been quite separate in the past."

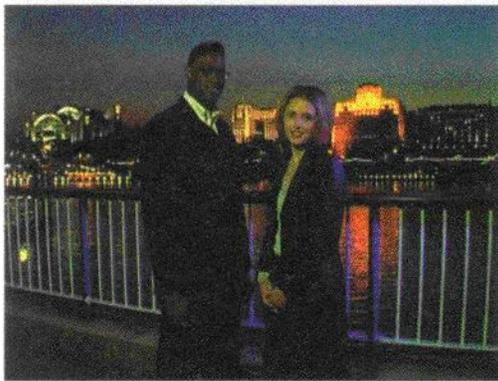
Working out the pros and cons of digital is exercising most broadcast organisations, though few have dedicated groups like the BBC's. LWT has, however, since the launch of its own Lab at the start of the year. Set up by director of programmes Marcus Plantin and run by ex-LWT producer/director Ralph Jones, The Lab is an attempt to become "small and nimble, like an independent production company," and to train the next generation of programme-makers - all while experimenting with DV.

Jones was brought on board because of his previous experience with digital formats. "I'd used them for programmes and series for broadcasters outside ITV, so I was keen to set up The Lab and see

what we could do with our new toys."

Jones lists the advantages of digital: it's lightweight, easy to use, cheaper, and the cameras have intelligent labour-saving features. For low-budget work, it's certainly worth considering. But BetaSP now has many of the qualities that were once the attraction of DV: smaller crews, thanks improvements in SP cameras' light-sensitivity, and smaller, lighter equipment. (Its price has also fallen.) Then there are always the things that are the same for both analogue and digital: tripods, for example, still can't be miniaturised. For Jones, though, "it just happens that the mix of camera features, size, quality and price works for us."

So what are the caveats of working with DV? "Some people in front of the camera won't take you seriously if you use the very small handycams, so we tend to use them for back-up. And you have to go to the bother of colour correction if you have to mix DVcam and SP footage." But the similarity in the formats' picture-quality actually means that different directing styles are more noticeable than format switches. It's easier to mix DV and SP footage from the same director, Jones believes, than to mix



Nightlife is one of the first projects for LWT's The Lab. Shot entirely on the outfit's preferred DVcam, the 10x60-minute programmes are a mix of arts, entertainment and current affairs

two DV shoots by different directors who hadn't compared notes.

He also offers advice on compatibility. "You should make up your mind to go with one format. I know that in theory you can mix them up, but I find you should stick with one format." The Lab has gone with Sony from start to finish: 95% of its material is shot on DVcam, the rest on SP by freelance crews; even its editing suite is one of Sony's ES3 range rather than the more traditional Avid.

Whatever their choice of format, if there's one thing that links DV proponents right now, it's their choice of names. Film Four's low-budget film-making unit, headed by Robin Gutch, is called... The Lab. Gutch believes DV is going to be a crucial part of his Lab's work and that it will "liberate film-makers to discover their own voice." DV has many advantages for low-budget film-makers, he believes: it gives them greater practical access, it avoids the costs of large 35mm crews and expensive kit, and it can produce better performances from actors by offering greater intimacy. It's quite feasible for a director who wants to experiment to take a few days with a DV camera and his cast to try out shots - something normally far too costly.

"What you're also beginning to see are digital calling-card films - films shot by directors showing off their talent. All they have to do is raise a little money and go out and shoot." And this is another advantage of DV for Gutch: saving a lot on stock means you need to raise less up-front for the shoot. It's only during post-production that the initial low resolution of the material forces up costs and that Super16 starts to look more attractive.

Of course, DV can't match 35mm in quality, so DV films will only lend themselves to art-house audiences, Gutch suggests, who are ready to see something different. It will be a few years, he believes, before digital quality is of a standard suit-

able for an action film - right now, in fact, it isn't good enough for the audience to differentiate between a "mountain, the sky, and an animal moving across it. At the moment, DV's strength is its difference. Audiences aren't bothered by technology, only the calibre of what they're seeing on screen: TV documentary series like *Video Diaries* have shown that." Still, Gutch bets, within three years there'll be a digital film in the multiplexes that will do for DV what *Toy Story* did for cgi...

Although its advantage over analogue production is as yet slender, DV is starting to show its mettle as part of a digital workflow. At Digilab, Semple is more and more being asked to assess middleware and server-based systems, and both he and Jones acknowledge that DV's biggest contribution may be the increase in the use of desktop editing packages. While Semple is assessing the new software, Jones is taking the plunge and equipping his LWT staff with Adobe Premiere so that they can do their own off-lines without entering an edit suite.

At BBC Resources, technical director Keith Harlow sees DV's ability to integrate into a server-based production process, with multiple users able to access the same material at the same time, as making post-production a lot simpler. "The big breakthrough will be when we put more material on servers, disks and DVD."

And Keith Wilkinson, who looks after the BBC's high-end Digilab equivalent Smart Productions,

agrees. Most of the problems of shooting on DV are to do with widescreen lenspieces and resolutions, he says; its suitability for purpose is not at issue. "DV may not be quite there yet in TV, and there's still some way to go before we reach an end-to-end digital process, but it's popular with everyone who uses it because it gives a view of the whole process."

At post-houses, though, opinion varies. Penny Verbe, facility director of high-end Soho facility Smoke and Mirrors, likes its flexibility even though it's "not as good as D1 for keying and blue screen-work." Richard Dawes, md of Brighton's multimedia specialist Victoria Real, thinks that DV lacks the aesthetic qualities of analogue, and makes everything more complicated. "From the producer's perspective, it's a lot more accessible and gives them greater portability for current affairs; I imagine it's also easier to use. DVCPRO 50 seems good quality; digital Hi8 may be usable for news. I don't have views on - or any confidence in - the other formats but, if all the broadcasters have DigiBeta transmission suites installed, that's what they'll want as the delivery format."

Other than simplifying the end-to-end production process, DV's other main contribution is not so much to reduce the size of crews (which is happening across formats in any case), but to blur the distinctions between jobs. Directors are more likely to go out to shoot their own footage, while Wilkinson is seeing "people who have been cameramen for 20 ▶

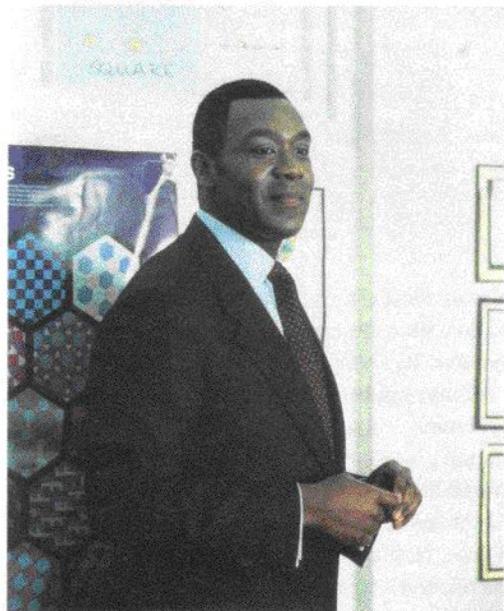


Ibiza Uncovered was one of Lab md Ralph Jones' earlier forays into DV. Shot on Sony DSR200s and DVcam, the programme won an award for Sky



The BBC's *Battersea Dogs' Home* was shot entirely on DV. Fly-on-the-wall documentaries are where DV is making the biggest impact

SHOOTING ON VIDEO



Lucy Gannon's forthcoming Lenny Henry series *Hope and Glory* is shot for the BBC on DigiBeta, the digital format taking over from BetaSP for high-end drama. Can the smaller formats compete at the low-end?

years being asked to join the production team."

Jones' team of journalists have been known to shoot, direct, edit and voice-over their own footage. "People are sometimes out as single operators, sometimes as camera operators, sometimes as camera operator/directors. It really is mix-and-match. We even bought our editing equipment on the strength it was 'so simple, a journalist could use it.'"

Jones believes the new generation of broadcast journalists emerging from college aren't phased by being asked to "multi-skill" like this. Paul Eggleston, senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire's school of journalism (which now uses DVCPRO on its courses), is preparing his students for a future where every element of production could be handled by the same journalist. "We all know that most regional TV wants half-hour documentaries for under ten grand. Budgets are squeez-

ing out personnel we used to hire for specific jobs. This means we have to teach multi-skilling."

And how is this new generation of journalists taking to DV? "This year, on a degree course of 12 students who opted to do broadcast, eight or nine opted for TV, whereas last year it was three. We think the new equipment has a lot to do with that: the interface makes it a pleasure to use."

But, while DV may be changing jobs, craft skills remain the same. "If you have a good camera-operator," Jones says, "he saves your bacon. Which is why the best are paid so much money: they've made a number of directors' careers." Wilkinson too sees craft-skills as all important, and DV as simply a cheaper way of deploying those skills. As its quality improves, perhaps DV's greatest effect will be to break down barriers between jobs, with only their talent differentiating people. ■