



THE BIG RED ONE



JAMIE HANNIGAN talks to cinematographer James Mather (*Adam & Paul, Prosperity*), proud parent of the new RED ONE Digital Video Camera.

JAMIE HANNIGAN: Apparently the RED ONE is described as 'a hard drive with a lens in the side'...

JAMES MATHER: Well yes, I suppose that is a way of boiling it down. It does do the things that all the other cameras do and it's more elegant than a lot of the Arriflex stuff. A lot of the criticisms that are coming at the RED are from two camps: people who have a vested interest in seeing it not succeed, so people like Panavision – they're not interested in seeing the RED succeed and I wouldn't be if I were them either. They've got a €5,000-a-day Genesis to rent so it's in their interests not to find any positives. The other camp tends to be people who have come from using handycams, where the camera does everything for you. They're used to taking a camera out into a field and just shooting something and it does auto-focus and does all those things, but pro-kit has never been like that.

From what I've heard from the two RED features underway this year – Brendan Muldowney's *Savage* and Conor Horgan's *One Hundred Mornings* – moving onto the RED would seem to be more analogous to the challenges of a 35 mm shoot.

You're right, yeah, it's not a pick-up-and-go camera, it requires all the diligence that 35 mm filmmaking has, so this idea that it's the kind of low-budget option – from a crewing standpoint – it's certainly not. I mean you need two people, plus the cameraman, to run it safely. You can run it on a hard drive, but there

are risks: hard drives and laptops fail all the time, and you're basically shooting with all your eggs in one basket, as it were. But if one memory card fails, you've lost maybe three minutes; you can easily pick that up in a shooting day.

So essentially you're going to need someone like a clapper loader, constantly changing memory cards and dropping the footage onto a computer?

You need a clapper-loader, exactly. You get about four to five minutes on the cards. But that's good, film rolls are exactly the same, film rolls are four to five minutes. So again, it's people who are coming from shooting on MiniDV who find this difficult, whereas in the film world, we've been doing it for years. And it's also good discipline, because it means everyone is focussed when the camera's running, which is what I quite like: 'We're rolling now, everybody pay attention.'

How does the RED compare to Super 16 mm, price-wise?

It would be a lot cheaper, I would have thought. Well, the potential is to be cheaper. But the myth that suddenly there's this camera on the market for \$17,000 is really not quite true, because you can't shoot with that thing. In the last couple of years I've spent about a hundred and fifty, maybe a hundred and sixty thousand getting the kit together. But that's all the bits you need to shoot with: you need lenses, you need a way of viewing your image, you

need a means of recording it, you need a means of downloading it and you need good kit to shoot with.

I understand the camera is quite heavy, even without all the add-ons.

Yeah, it's a heavy camera, it's as heavy as a Panaflex Millennium. By the time you load it up with everything, handheld shooting is physically exhausting with it. And you can't just get a cheap camera head, you've got to get something heavy duty like an OConnor or a Miller. Put it this way: my camera head costs ten grand. But it's the same paradigm as film, nothing has actually changed, the cameras aren't smaller and lighter. The criticism seems to be coming from people who are used to small, light cameras and can't get over the fact that they're suddenly carrying this thing like two breeze blocks on their shoulder.

I use this thing called an Easyrig, which is basically a contraption you sort of strap onto yourself and it basically takes most of the weight of the camera. You're still handheld, but I can shoot all day on that, with almost no fatigue, with two batteries and everything. But again, this is another thing: I've used it a lot, I've tested it. Figure out the problems, figure out the solution and then it's not a problem anymore.

What recurring problems or quirks have you come across using the camera?

Well, it's sort of a prototype and it is a computer so it's a little unpredictable because they release



PHOTOS: Still from short film *Retreat* (2008), shot on the RED in the South of France © Vast Valley Limited (left). Still from Steven Soderbergh's *Che*, also shot on the RED camera (right).

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software builds for the version.

In other words, the camera is essentially a computer, so they change the functionality of the camera through software, not hardware. So you get an email from RED saying there's a new operating system for your camera and it will give you faster frame rates or some new thing. But as you upload that, it's like all software: it's got its bugs. So what might have been fixed in the build before has now got a bit of an issue. Now, they're very quick to deal with all of this – I mean, overall, the system performs incredibly well, considering that a year ago they weren't even on the planet. I'm amazed. At this stage, I could safely say I've shot dozens of commercials on it and I've had absolutely no trouble whatsoever. We've never had a problem that has stopped a shoot or proven insurmountable. But it's quirky, you've got to learn the camera, there's small tricks you begin to learn. A lot of the problems that seem to be occurring are a result of people going and renting the camera, thinking they can pick it up really quickly. Then they get out there and they think it's not working, it's broken. It's idiosyncratic. You learn that you have to press this button before you press that because it could crash otherwise. Things like that.

One example is that the chip is very sensitive to infrared. So if you go out and you're using what they call ND filters, which are like sunglasses you put on the camera to darken down the image, the camera starts to get contaminated. The RED filters are only cutting the visible spectrum of light; they're not cutting the infrared. The effect of this is that the image starts to go slightly out of focus and quite purple. Now you can't really fix this in post, so it's something you have to know. What you do is, you get a thing called a hot mirror that reflects out the infrared light, which you need to keep in a matte box.

The point is that you wouldn't necessarily know this unless you had used the camera and tested it and that's one of the reasons that I would be reluctant to send the camera out without somebody who knew what they were doing. Otherwise they could come back and say: 'I shot this thing and it's all purple and out of focus – you rented me a rubbish camera!'

How much does it cost to rent out?

My kit goes out for 1,300 euro a day. That's the cost of my full kit, that's everything.

How does the image bear up against film?

Well, the RED footage is very clean, you know. Film is still a very plastic medium, in that it's malleable, film can take a lot of abuse. But film has had a hundred years to get its act together, digital has only been around for a couple of years, so it's still kind of learning. Film has more dynamic range, a wider range of tones from bright to dark.

Now, part of the cameraman's job that whatever he's recording onto, he does his best to make sure that it's recording within its range. So the RED has nine or ten stops, so you try and work to that. Film has twelve or so... But any camera, if mistreated – even the Genesis... If you stay within the parameters that the camera has coming out of the factory, you'll have a very nice picture. That's running it at its centre, where it's at 320 ASA, you're sticking to all the baselines. The minute you start cranking gain up, it starts looking horrible, like cheap video. Like *Apocalypse* (shot on the Panavision Genesis), lots of it looked like dog shit. They were in a dark canopy of trees, they basically just fired the gain chip to see a picture in shot, and it looks like that, and that's

the price. I think a lot of people want a straight answer, like 'RED is better!' but it's not that simple, unfortunately! Like a lot of things in life.

If you were to shoot something now like say, *Adam & Paul* – a low-budget feature shot on Super 16 mm – would you be pushing to use the RED instead?

Well, I would basically sit down with the director and we'd go through everything and argue the merits of each. We nearly went to HiDef on *Adam & Paul* until Lenny Abrahamson looked at the HiDef – and this was before RED was even created – and he said, 'I can't have it look like this, filmmaking is hard enough without having the image look like *Hollyoaks*,' so he decided to go on film and I backed him 100% at that time, because there wasn't any option. There were no cameras that didn't look a bit like Digibeta available. I that's the RED's big sell: it can be confused with 35 mm if you're careful, it's got a lovely depth of field and it's very film-like. You're getting all this with no additional costs apart from your gear rental, which is a very attractive prospect for producers and directors alike. The real reason it will win in the end is that it's an acceptable balance between quality and cost. It's not bad quality for a very good cost. In other words, producers like it because suddenly you don't need to process rushes, you don't get hairs in the gate, you don't have problems in the lab, you don't need couriers. So it'll be an economic as well as a tech battle, to be honest with you. I speak to lots of people who are debating whether they're going to shoot on RED or not or they're going to shoot this or that or they're thinking of all these other formats and I can just see the producer behind them going, 'We're shooting on RED. That's it, it's decided, the minutiae is for you to worry about.' ♦