

# TIM PALMER

## DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

British Cinematographer  
Covering International Cinematography  
[www.britishcinematographer.co.uk](http://www.britishcinematographer.co.uk)  
Issue 042

### Close Up

#### — Tim Palmer

## *The Road To Coronation Street*



DP Tim Palmer (*Cold Feet, Life On Mars, Mistresses, Ashes To Ashes, Vexed*) alerted us recently about a longform drama he had shot using the Canon 5D DSLR. So we asked him to give us his warts and all overview of using that particular camera.

The production *The Road To Coronation Street*, directed by Charles Sturridge, with Rebecca Hodgson the producer, is about scriptwriter Tony Warren's travails in trying to get *Coronation Street* made, and revolves around life at Granada Television in 1960 when the studio was run by the Bernstein Brothers. This ITV Studios production for BBC transmitted in September, and is thought to be the first British longform show shot entirely using a DSLR.

Speaking about choosing the 5D for the shoot, Palmer comments: "When the director and I first met we both sprang it on each other how well the 5D would suit this project. So it was a fait accompli from there on. I've done a great deal of work on the camera this year and had recently shot a narrative-based commercial. That convinced me of the efficacy of the 5D system in shooting longform drama."

*The Road To Coronation Street* did not have a large budget and the intention was to shoot fast, in real locations and with a small crew. "I knew how quickly the 5D could be manoeuvred into small spaces and how well it handled uncontrollable daylight. Our main set was the seventh floor of Granada Studios. There were southwest facing windows along the entire length of the floor, which we clearly could not light through. There were no blinds as the vogue in the early 1960s was for voiles on the windows. The only control I had was a set of frames painted to match the window frames with Rosco window scrim attached," he says. "Whenever we looked out of the windows we'd set the frames and, when we were using the length of the set, we'd remove them and the daylight would be our main light source."

A couple of Kino Flos for fill were the only other lights and there were no ceiling fixtures. Of course, the problem arose when a shot started with action around the window and then moved into the inner office space.

"Whereas normally one would need to perform a pretty radical iris pull, due to the size of the 5D's chip, its resolving power is so good that it renders overexposed highlights in a way that no other budget HD camera comes remotely close to. I could let the highlights blow with confidence knowing that the look would be more akin to 35mm film."



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Initially the BBC was reluctant to let Palmer use the 5D as it did not conform to its HD guidelines regarding compression, in spite of the camera's 1080p recording capabilities. Palmer shot tests, which he says passed the compression test with flying colours, but highlighted aliasing issues on shiny surfaces.

"Ian Potts, the BBC's head of technology, was very supportive and could see how good the image quality was. He encouraged us to do further tests that might address the aliasing. However, we only had one day to go before principal photography began and there was not enough time to shoot further tests and get the results back and approved. As it happened there was a very simple fix. We had shot the original tests with the camera in a default picture-taking mode, which averaged out the contrast and detail levels. We just wound the contrast and detail in-camera right down to the minimum and the problem was solved, and this did not affect the general look of the picture either.

Praising the producer and director's tenacity, Palmer took a punt and started filming with the 5D knowing that BBC policy stated that 25% of a production could be originated on a non-HD platform.

"We were hoping that by the time the BBC had seen the first few days' rushes they would sign off on the 5D, but if the worst came to the worst we could move to a different camera before exceeding the 25% limit. As it happened, due to some initial teething problems with processing the 5D files, we reached our cut off point before approval by the BBC, so the production had to change from using the 5D to a Sony 750, Pro 35 with Zeiss SuperSpeeds. We were all very despondent as our sleek colt of a camera had metamorphosed overnight into a lumbering carthorse. Happily the good news arrived the following day from Ian. He thought the 5D footage was some of the best HD material he had seen and authorised us to revert to the 5D for the rest of the shoot," Palmer says.

Asking about the advantages of using the 5D, Palmer replies, "Apart from the size of the camera and its light gathering capabilities, the real magic comes with the pictures it takes. The large Vistavision-size chip that demands longer focal lengths to achieve a 'normal' perspective, and the resulting shallow depth-of-field, all work together to bring an intensity to an actor's performance that very few budget cameras can match. Actors love the camera because it is so unobtrusive and directors love it because it makes their actors look so good."

As for the drawbacks and disadvantages, he says, "Everybody talks about the rolling shutter problems, but I have never experienced it. Undoubtedly, if you pan quickly across static vertical objects you will see it, but it was never an issue for us. There are some difficulties using Canon lenses. Although they are optically superb, due to the autofocus system the lens barrels rotate continuously making life awkward for the focus puller. It is not an insurmountable problem, but an unnecessary hassle."

Palmer's solution is to use old Nikon AIS manual focus lenses with EF adapters. "I have access to a great set of lenses which have had all the hard stops in the iris removed enabling the iris to rotate freely thereby allowing controllable iris pulls. With proper gearing, and a good follow focus, they are about as user friendly for a focus puller as you could expect, without going for a PL mounted 5D and cine lenses (a setup that our production could ill afford).

"The only drawback for us was the lack of a remote focus. There are a couple in existence designed for the 5D, but they would have been too expensive to hire in. On fast moving shots the focus puller would set a distance and I became very good at maintaining that distance from the artist until the focus puller could dive in and take control. I was lucky enough to have a superb focus puller, Darren Ravenscroft, and really, despite the supposed difficulties of keeping focus with the 5D we did not experience any problems at all."

When asked whether the 5D is good enough for a feature, Palmer responds, "DSLRs are already revolutionising filmmaking, and I'm proud to be associated with the first mainstream British TV drama to be shot using one. I don't think the camera is quite ready yet for the rigours of long-running TV series production, nor a feature. The accessories are still very much the fruits of a keen and able enthusiast's labours and the viewfinder, monitoring, video sending arrangement leaves a lot to be desired. But if you embrace the camera for what it is - a tiny thing that takes amazing pictures - and not try to dress it up as a fully-loaded Genesis, you will be amply rewarded."