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# Z CARS

*Early in 1962 a new crime series appeared in BBC television that set a new standard for this type of programme. It had an authenticity and immediacy that won a quick approval from the viewing public. After running successfully for more than three years the series is due to come to a finish at the end of this year and the author, who is the Producer for the series, writes on the background and production of this series.*

As EIGHT O'CLOCK approaches on Wednesday night, a team of actors, production staff and technicians prepare for fifty minutes of live television drama. The programme—transmitted weekly from the BBC Television Centre—is about policemen in 1965.

In the early 1950's, the BBC Drama Department output included a series of features, transmitted about four times a year. Subjects ranged from alcoholism to open-cast coal mining, deep-sea fishing to prostitution; from work at the United Nations to provincial symphony orchestras. These Dramatized Documentaries as they were called invariably attracted large audiences who were well satisfied by the authenticity of scripting and production.

Careful research by writers into practices and attitudes provided revealing scripts; at this time the direct television interview was relatively novel and could be self-conscious and not always penetrating.

More recently the Dramatized Documentary output included two separate aspects of police work. Firstly, in 1959 a single programme "Who, Me?" a story of criminal investigation set in Liverpool. And secondly in 1960 "Scotland Yard", a thirteen-week series produced with Metropolitan Police co-operation. Particular interest was taken in "Who, Me?" by several police forces, notably the Lancashire Constabulary.

When in 1960 a new major police series was being planned, the decision was for a provincial setting. With knowledge of recently instigated Crime Patrols, research was carried out in Lancashire with the assistance of the County Constabulary. The purpose of the Crime Patrols is to deal immediately with crime and disturbances, and to set up any necessary procedure for enquiry. With speed and efficiency the patrols reduce the already heavy burden upon the Criminal Investigation Department. A format was required by which this particular aspect of police work could be communicated weekly through television. If this was to be achieved with any authenticity —and truth—the format could not be what is all too often understood by the word—rigid and predictable. The need was for a vital locale for a chosen set of characters. Any set pattern had to emerge through police routine and be made a virtue. Preliminary research by writers in the spring of 1961 followed by the production team in the summer saw the first episode of "Z-Cars" transmitted on 2nd January 1962.

The setting is south Lancashire. An imaginary police area, Victor Division, embraces dockland and rich residential seaboard to the east, known as Seaport —and inland to the west an industrial estate and housing development, known as Newtown. Neighbouring Liverpool City lends added vitality with its Merseyside characteristics.

Two constables in a plain radio car constitute a Crime Patrol—with a call sign prefixed by the letter Z for crime. The series operates two such cars in Victor Division—hence Z-Victor One and Z-Victor Two. In the scripts these two units of the cast forming the foundation of the programme are supported by the uniform branch and C.I.D.: A uniformed sergeant and police constable—a detective chief inspector, detective sergeant and detective constable. Radio

communication to the cars is made through the Information Room of County Headquarters. The female radio operator completes the regular cast—and it is from this headquarters that senior officers occasionally descend and, when the seriousness of the crime warrants, take command.

The writers work individually. By working 'on the ground' with the police they are able to build strength on character and detail, recognizing regional 'differences'. The best possible writers are selected with the capacity to be excited by the subject and the medium.

Because of the nature of mobile police work, the scripts generally move fast, covering numerous interior and exterior locations. The stories provided by writers themselves or retired police officers are considered for their contribution to the series by the Story Editor and Producer. A balanced impression of the crime in Victor Division is important to the development of the characters. Newtown must not have more than its share of murders and serious crime —neither must any single officer be involved unrealistically in either too much serious crime or a rush of crimes of a similar nature. Character development must be watched through personal involvements and experiences. Careers and particularly promotion must be considered. Episodes are scheduled when scripts are commissioned. Writers must conform to the 'controls' of cast as well as to the studio and film facilities.

Actors engaged for a fifty-minute drama programme rehearse for eleven days within a fourteen-day period, which is preceded by film shooting. "Z-Cars" transmits live, weekly, and for this reason the crews of Z-Victor One and Z-Victor Two basically appear in alternate episodes. The other 'regular' members of the cast are rationed to the writers, depending on story requirements.

A Director is generally in active production for four weeks. A longer 'turn round' helps the

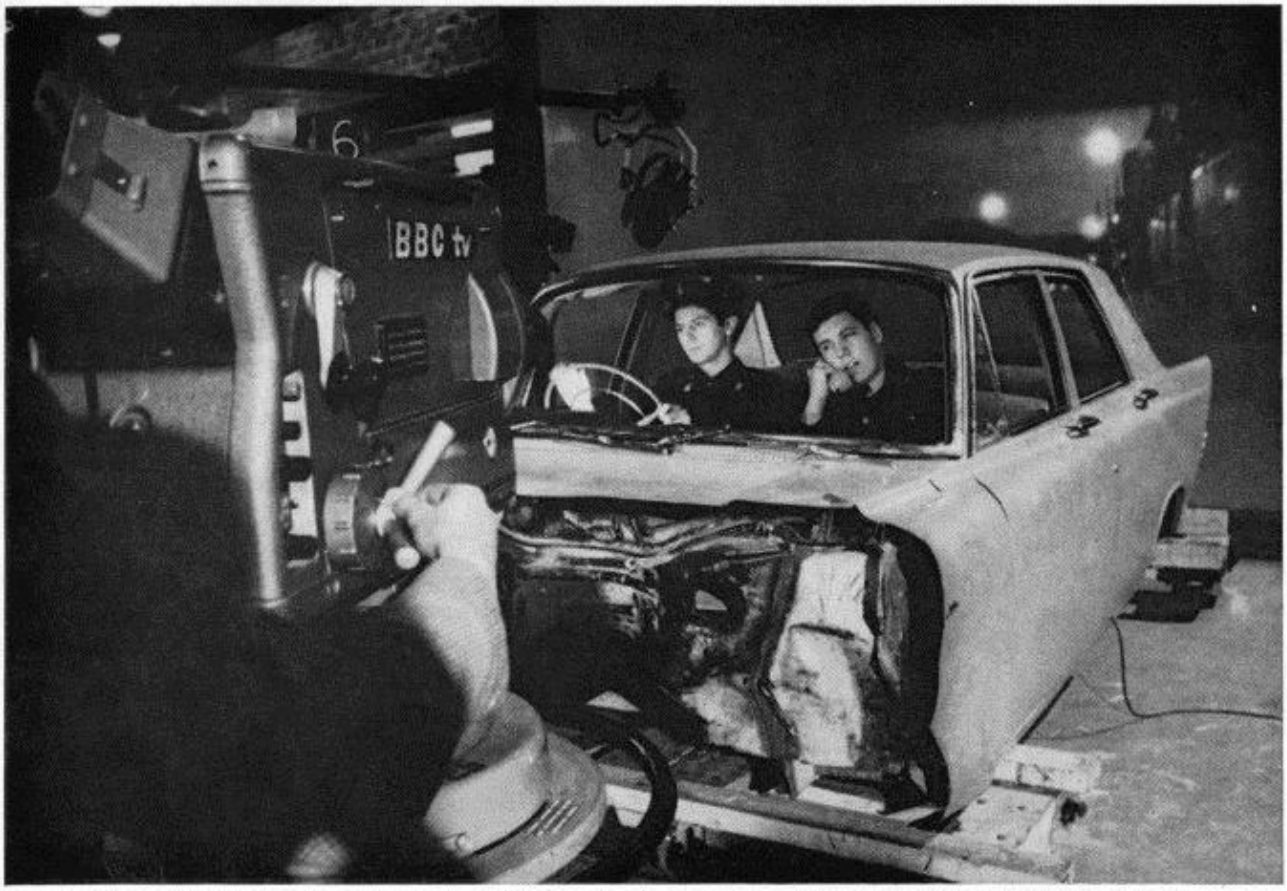


Fig. 1. A mock-up of a Crime Patrol car being shot against moving back projection during a rehearsal of a "Z Cars" episode *The Listeners*.

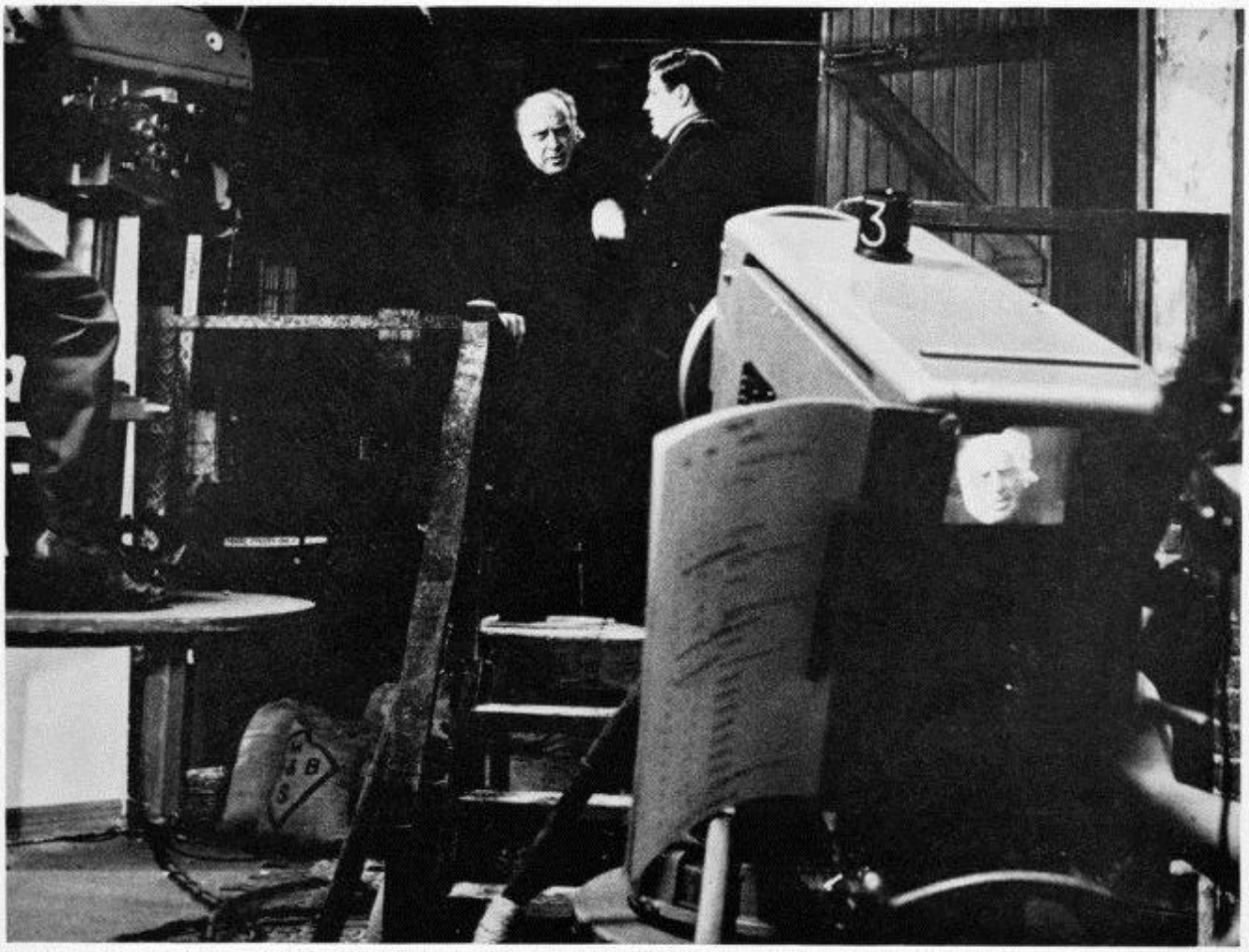


Fig. 2. Colin Welland (PC Graham) takes hold of the night watchman (George Colouris) in a scene from *The Main Chance.*

preparation of more than usually complex scripts—problems often arising out of the use of film. Provided the general intention of the series is understood, an individual approach through direction can be vitally stimulating to all concerned. Direction falls into three phases—planning, pre-filming and the rehearsals which culminate in the live transmission.

Much of the initial nine days' preparation can be taken up considering the non-regular characters in an episode. By the time the Director has discussed the script with the Producer and, if possible, the writer, his cast requirements become evident. It is the casting that can help keep a series fresh. Careful selection of both experienced acting talent and relatively new faces can prove enormously exciting.

A Director's early work with the Designer is all-important to the images that finally make up the programme. The cameras and microphones must be free to examine and highlight the behaviour of the characters from continually fresh angles. Whilst allowing for this, the Designer must create a positive atmosphere in an authentic setting. Suggestion by shape, texture and lighting is complemented by attention to detail. Often, studio sets must match film locations, and these complementary sets must be determined at an early stage.

Scripted basically for the television studio, film is used for three main purposes: (1) Exterior and some interior locations which cannot be contained in the studio for reasons of space and economy; (2) expansive movement of vehicles; and (3) selected sequences which can benefit by film cutting. A fight could fall into the last category; but here the immediacy of the television studio has always to be balanced against additional film camera angles and pace achieved through editing. Film provides an average

Fig. 3. The author who is Producer of the series discusses a point with Detective Sergeant Watt during rehearsal.

of ten per cent of the total programme and is time-consuming in preparation and execution. This is inevitable as its main purpose is story-telling through many and varied locations.

Pre-filmed sequences, later to be inserted into the live programme, can only be shot satisfactorily if related closely to the subsequent studio work. Quality of the 35-mm film must match the live pictures and the greatest possible care taken with the lighting. Again, the immediacy of the continuous television performances must not be lost by either actors' performances and general continuity, or seem to be out of key through any departure of camera operation or tempo of cutting. The first and last shots of each film sequence are all-important as is the sound when bridging film to studio. Sound overlap mixed in before and out after picture is occasionally advantageous.

Studio scenes following film sequences employed to establish location are handled either in built sets or against back projection. Whether it be still slides, moving static plates or travelling backgrounds for vehicles, they are shot whenever possible under the same lighting conditions as the related film sequence.

As with the writers, so the Directors gain by visiting Lancashire and seeing and hearing the police at work. The rehearsal period is similar to that of any other television play, but a Director's first-hand knowledge of the subject complements the authenticity of the script.

With a weekly 'live strike' (and frequent appearances in subsequent episodes) the regular cast have to divide their attention between two rehearsal rooms. Schedules are prepared calling the entire cast to the first hour of the first day, to enable the script to be read and timed in the presence of the writer, Story Editor and Producer. For the first few rehearsals, the Director is without certain regular cast, but they join for their scenes to be plotted in time for the first run-through. A complete rehearsal, for the benefit of the technicians, takes place three days before the cast move from the rehearsal room to the television studio. Those present, who have already attended a

planning meeting during the Director's period of preparation, include the Designer, Lighting Supervisor, Sound Supervisor and Technical Manager. Camera plans and running orders issued for this occasion indicate the movement of cameras and sound booms during the running of this episode. Five or six cameras are mounted on pedestals with the occasional use of a motorized or crane mounting for additional height. If the setting demands, pedestals are elevated on to scaffolding either built into the scenery or standing freely. Four sound booms may be augmented by stand mikes or 'fishing-rods'.

The last two days of rehearsal take place in the 63000 sq. ft. of Studio 3 or 4 at the BBC Television Centre where overnight the scenery is set and the lighting rigged. Having completed the detailed rehearsals the Director and cast are ready to combine with the technicians. Over a period of eight hours, an average of three hundred and fifty individual shots are set up. Throughout, adjustments are made to lighting; the Designer, watching shot by shot, notes necessary adjustments to the sets and dressings. Sound engineers balance studio output to effects on tape and disc. Film sequence and moving back projection are both cued from the Director's gallery with the live action for the first time. Film or telecine sequences require an eight-second cue—if, however, studio scenes between film sequences run less than twenty seconds, the film continues to run and a second cue is dispensed with.

During the seven hours of the second camera rehearsal, the episode is run through completely twice or three times, giving everyone the opportunity to perfect the operation and acclimatize to the ultimate pace. Scripts sometimes demand more sets than can be accommodated in the studio or create other problems which make continuous running of the episode impossible. In these circumstances, short scenes are pre-taped during the camera rehearsal and inserted during transmission on a ten-second cue.

The live transmission each Wednesday night brings a very real sense of occasion. Fifty minutes of absolute concentration bring an excitement to technicians and actors alike. The audience is there; communication is immediate with the best possible picture quality. Any reaction—whether it is a telephone ringing, press criticism the following morning or an appraisal by fellow professionals—is stimulating and an important factor in keeping the programme 'alive'.