

BBC Post Production Bristol
(www.bbc.co.uk)
Bristol, United Kingdom

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—Jonathon Prosser
Colourist
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Autodesk Lustre at the heart of Casualty.

BBC Post Production Bristol uses Autodesk Lustre and Autodesk Smoke on the BBC hit, Casualty.



Image courtesy of BBC Bristol.

In a fickle world where consumer tastes change by the second, some things stay reassuringly the same. The hit BBC1 hospital drama, Casualty has been seducing viewers since it first hit UK screens way back in 1986 with its iconic theme tune, graphic images and gripping storylines charting the lives of staff and patients at the fictional Holby City Hospital's accident and emergency department.

Now in its 22nd series, it boasts the record of being the world's longest running emergency medical drama series. Not surprisingly, over those 21 years, it's had to continually adapt to an ever changing and demanding audience. And during that time it's seen some fundamental changes – not only to the cast, content and storylines but also to the look of the show.

The look is something that's closest to the heart of Casualty Consultant Director, Keith Boak. He joined the team in early 2007 to give the series a visual overhaul. His remit covered everything from the set, props, costume, make-up, lighting and shooting style, right down to the color grading.

This is where BBC Post Production Bristol, the creative force behind the award-winning Planet Earth and first series of E4's Skins, came in. BBC Post Production is part of BBC Resources Limited, a wholly-owned commercial subsidiary of the BBC. After pitching for the work and carrying out tests to demonstrate the creative ability of its grading team and its powerful Autodesk® Lustre® digital color grading system, colourist Jonathon Prosser was brought in half way through series 22. His mission was to refresh and update the visual identity of the show, and give it a more stylised look comparable to some of the top US drama series.

Jonathon takes up the story: "One of the key strands of the brief was to bring a sense of cohesiveness to the look of the series. The real challenge with a show like Casualty is that so many people are involved – each producer, director and DoP brings his own individual shooting style and visual approach to each 50-minute programme. Creating a seamless visual look for the series was by far the biggest challenge for me."

The show also runs for most of the year, which means there's no let-up for Jonathon. "The good thing though is that after the creative revamp, more time was allocated to grading – around a day and a half as opposed to five or six hours before. This highlights the importance everyone placed on a professional grade," he says.

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But it wasn't all plain sailing for Jonathon. And many of the biggest hurdles to overcome were down to the good old British weather. With Casualty shot on location in Bristol rather than on set, filming has to go ahead whatever the weather – and with programmes usually shot around three months in advance, often the seasons frustratingly don't play ball! “The challenge for me,” says Jonathon, “is to provide continuity to the weather in matching scenes - ensuring it's sunny when it's supposed to be sunny or creating a winter scene for the Christmas special out of glorious September sunshine.”

Jonathon continues, “I was able to use Lustre to create sophisticated lighting effects, which would have traditionally been done in camera. This gives our production team much greater flexibility as it allows them to add effects after the shoot.” For example, ‘masks’ were regularly used to reduce the amount of light in non-relevant areas of the picture to give the ‘subject’ of the shot, greater significance and focus.

The look of Casualty also needs to reflect the frenetic pace of hospital life. “By its very nature it's a quick cut programme and uses long steadicam shots as the camera crew move around the A&E department in continuous shots,” says Jonathon. “There's also a whole spectrum of actors with different complexions - and the grading system's tracking tool helped me to achieve the stylised look the creative director wanted.”

The tracking tool in Lustre makes it possible to easily isolate part of the picture and grade within it. This allows the colourist to grade a character's face to adjust his complexion, while retaining the rest of the shot. This is an automated process, which tracks and analyses shots and retains information about key facial features, so as a face gets bigger or smaller in different camera shots, it will automatically adapt the size of the circle the colourist has applied.



Image courtesy of BBC Bristol.

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“I also used Lustre to create subtle vignettes - to pull viewers' eyes to the important part of the picture, such as a specific character,” says Jonathon. “I was able to defocus some of the vignettes, an effect which traditionally would have to be created in camera.”

An Autodesk® Smoke® editing and finishing system was also used for some real effects on Casualty, such as painting out wires in special effect explosions or closing the eyes on a ‘dead’ body when a character blinked at the wrong time!

The Casualty makeover has given the show a much more visual and stylised feel – perhaps best seen in the resuscitation area which now has a hard, clinical look. “Casualty has grown up,” says Jonathon, and it needs to continually reinvent itself so it's wowing audiences for the next 21 years.

But there's no rest for the wicked – series 23 begins in the autumn 2009, so Jonathon will once again be performing his surgical grading with expert precision.