

PAG ORBITOR

Keith Davidson reviews the latest camera support system from PAG

Like many of you, I attended this year's IOV Convention with a high level of expectation. The expectation was not just for a well-planned event, but that there might just be something on show that would open my mind to new methods and ideas, and possibly also open my chequebook!!

That said, this was the first year I had attended with a clear intention of not making an 'impulse purchase', rather to investigate products and make a buying decision in a controlled manner after the event (yes, I know I would miss special event pricing, but special pricing is no saving if you buy on impulse, and it's something you seldom use later).

With my main area of business being wedding and event videography, I frequently encounter situations where I am unable to use a tripod, due to lack of time, space or the nature of the piece being filmed. Additionally, in such situations 'handheld' can literally be a pain if you are forced to use this method over a long period of time.

It was with this in mind that I went to the convention with the intention of finding a camera support system that would more than adequately meet my needs while not breaking the bank.

I, like many others, circled the exhibitor's stands for a

couple of hours identifying potential items of equipment that would meet my needs. It was only after this that I actually ventured onto the stands to examine and try various items of equipment that would fit the bill. Several highly suitable items were disregarded due to the price tag and some very well priced, but far less practical items ignored as I am not a contortionist.

Finding the PAG Stand

I finally settled on investigating the newly launched PAG Orbitor Advanced Camera Support System (this was not the name by which it was identified at the convention). This is a support system designed to be used with hand-held camera units, such as the PD-150, 170 or new Sony HDs.

I watched with interest as numerous people tried on the rig. Some extremely large, well-rounded and bearded individuals; some very petite young ladies and several other individuals of varying shapes and sizes.

However, ALL had one thing in common, they looked very comfortable using the support system. On this particular day the system was carrying one of the new Sony HD units – not overly heavy, but certainly heavier than my PD-150.

I finally took the plunge and introduced myself to Alan Lavender of PAG UK, asking if I

could try the system. I would mention at this point that I have never previously used anything of this nature, so was slightly apprehensive in both wearing and using the rig. Alan and his staff adjusted various straps, belts and clutches – the system was on!! A little more adjustment and the camera was so finely balanced that it was possible to walk hands-free. The camera effectively became weightless and fingertip control on the two handles gave great control of pan, roll and tilt movements. The spring loaded suspension support also allowed significant flexibility in height adjustment with no real effort in moving from chest level to above my head, in one easy transition.

A short walk around the exhibition hall, and within a few minutes I felt totally at home and in control of this unit. The 'impulse purchase' mode almost kicked in at this point. However, I controlled myself and returned to the PAG stand to discuss the possible review of this item with Alan Lavender. Alan was extremely accommodating and arrangements were made for me to collect a review unit a couple of weeks later from their production facility in Raynes Park. In this review I am not attempting to detail the technicalities of the system – these can be obtained from the PAG website – rather my impressions of the unit being used in anger and the responsiveness of PAG to any issues that might arise.

The Review

I duly arrived at PAG's headquarters to pick up the unit and was given a tour of the production facility by Alan. I had no idea how big PAG were, and was impressed by the whole setup.

Alan explained that the unit that I would be reviewing was one of the first production run of 50 units and that any feedback I could give him would be most useful. I didn't realise how significant my later input would



be. I tried on an assembled unit, mainly to ensure that the support belt would fit my 43" girth!! (extension belts are available if required). Alan wanted to show me how to assemble the rig, but I declined on the grounds that anyone purchasing the unit would have to rely on the instructions supplied and I felt it only fair to carry out the review on this basis.

Arriving home, I set about the task of following the clear and concise instructions to assemble the unit. This took all of 4-minutes! The unit comes supplied with a Manfrotto-style quick release plate and this was duly attached to the base of my PD-150. The rig consists of an elongated shoulder mount counterbalanced at the rear with a removable steel plate.

A PAG battery can be used in place of this plate as a counter balance and I chose to use the battery from my C6 unit attached using the supplied Velcro straps. The shoulder pad is pure luxury, with very soft, padded leather attached again with Velcro style tabs that allow for the tidy routing of cables from the battery pack, or any other rear mounted accessory.

From this shoulder mount a horizontal rod leads forward into a clutch unit that controls the position of camera relative to the body and also the movement of the camera itself when in use. The main part of the unit is a combination of short rods and locking devices to ensure correct positioning and operation of the unit. A vertical rod runs through the centre of this, with the



camera mount at the top and control handles at the bottom. The handles are finished with rubber grips (more of which later).

The whole unit is supported not only on the shoulder, but also by means of a 75mm waist belt with a front mounted receptacle to house the main suspension rod. This is a two-part counter sprung rod which absorbs much of the movement and vibration when walking with the camera. It also allows for the control of height of operation. At the top of this suspension unit is a rubber spigot with a brass pin that locates in the bottom of the handle assembly. To finish the fitting of the unit it only remains to utilise the two straps that are attached to the back of shoulder mount. These are passed around each side of your body and locate either side of the suspension rod mount on the waist belt.

In Use

OK, the unit is on. The camera is mounted and balanced. Let's start filming. Oh! A minor detail I had forgotten. In order to use this unit effectively, you will need a remote control for the camera functions! In my case a LANC device that I didn't possess, as mine are built into the handles of my tripods and of little use here. A quick despatch of emails to various manufacturers and suppliers resulted in the offer of three review units (covered in next month's issue). So initially I could only really get used to moving and walking with the Orbitor until the remotes arrived.

I duly received the remotes, one Manfrotto and two Varizoom and went to fit them onto the handle of the Orbitor. This is where I encountered my first minor problem. Two of the remotes had rear mounted rocker switches for zoom control and when mounted on the Orbitor handle the switch fouled on the rubber handgrip. I overcame this problem by attacking the rubber handgrips on an old bicycle with a Stanley knife and placed this under the remotes – perfect!! This was not

an issue with the other remote as the zoom control was surface mounted.

I passed this information to PAG and they have now planned to use a shorter rubber handle grip on future products to avoid this problem.

Now fully operational, I tested the unit for several hours and rapidly became very comfortable with it. However, I did notice that the suspension arm was a little 'notchy' and similarly the central support rod seemed to bind slightly on pan shots. I put this down to the newness of the unit and thought that this would loosen up in use. So having now familiarised myself with the unit and it's various adjustments, it was time to carry out a couple of field tests. The first being an all day corporate event and the second being a wedding.

The Corporate Event

The corporate event was held at Exeter Racecourse, over two floors and utilising about 10 different rooms. My brief was to film arrivals of delegates, reception and also seminar content in a number of rooms.

The seminar programme was varied and delegates were arriving throughout the day. This necessitated being 'ready to shoot' at any time. In general the Orbitor acquitted itself very well. Shots at angles, moving up stairs and even some reverse shots over my shoulder were possible. With the exception of a 30-minute break for lunch, it was worn continuously for 6.5 hours, without adverse effect or discomfort.

However, it was noticeable that the 'notchiness' and 'binding' remained and was not reducing with use. I spoke to PAG the following day, and these issues had also been identified by them on this first batch. The issue revolved around an outsourced part of the manufacturing process and my comments confirmed their observations. PAG duly promised to deliver the revised parts to me prior to my next field test.

The Wedding

True to their word a new suspension rod and central support rod arrived in plenty of time for a very large wedding I was covering. I knew that the church in which the wedding was to take place had only one position from where I could get a reasonable head-on shot of the bride and groom. This was from behind a screen with multiple columns about 8" apart behind



which were the choir pews. It was just not possible to get a tripod in there. As this was a full communion service of about one and a half hours, there was no way I could go hand-held. Additionally, because of the arrangement of the columns in the screen, I had to be able to get the camera in between them, to achieve any sort of quality framing. Orbitor to the rescue.

I wore the rig from an hour before the ceremony to film the arrival of guests and the wedding party. Because of my mobility with the unit, the vicar (an excellent chap) allowed me full access to the aisle for the entrance of the bride, so I was able to capture a brilliant head-on shot all the way in. Similarly, the vicar seemed to be very happy with me using this shoulder mount and allowed me to film up close for registers and blessings – a major bonus. I could never have done this with a tripod. For the exit of the bride and groom I was able to walk backwards all the way down the aisle and out of the church, with a very acceptable walking shot as a result.

The reception venue was only five minutes away, so it was important that I could remove the rig to drive and put it on again quickly at the new location. This worked a treat. I took the rig off and stood it (with the camera still mounted) on the back seat of the car, arrived at the venue and had it back on again inside of a minute.

This particular couple wanted everything covered at the reception, so I was filming almost continuously throughout the day and early evening – a total of about 10 hours excluding the drive and one short break. Even though the Orbitor only weighs in at 2.65kg before the addition of the camera and counterbalance, this length of continuous filming is

really beyond the comfort zone. By the end of the day the support belt was making it's presence felt. This is not a negative reflection on the unit – more an advisory as to how it should not be used.

And Finally...

The Orbitor had behaved perfectly and allowed me to obtain shots that I would never have attempted before. The unit also lends itself to the attachment of other accessories such as TFT displays, radio mic receivers, etc. All of which could be attached at numerous points on the system, all within easy operational reach, and with their weight evenly spread.

At both of these events the weather was particularly hot and, with the agreement of those who had contracted my services, I filmed without wearing a jacket. I mention this because whilst the belt will sit comfortably under a jacket, the two support straps need to run over the top of the jacket, and this could lead to some 'bunching' and perhaps a slightly untidy appearance. I would suggest, therefore, that a black photographers waistcoat might be more appropriate.

In conclusion, the Orbitor is a system that would be a very useful addition to any videographers' armoury. It gives you freedom, flexibility and control over shots that would normally be difficult to achieve. In PAG, you would be dealing with a company that listens to it's customers and believes in that old-fashioned trait of good customer service.

Now, where's that chequebook? At £425 plus VAT this is a real must-have bargain!! ■

Keith Davidson
Keith Davidson Videography

