

Steadicam Merlin Vest and Arm

By James Elias

6 years ago I had a rather large box arrive from the States. I was only 15 years old but I knew what was in it would change the way I made short films. It was a Steadicam JR and I'd never been more excited – It was like Christmas come early! I couldn't imagine it getting much better.

3 years ago I met up with Robin Thwaites from Tiffen (OpTex at the time) at "Broadcast Live" in London and he said to me "James, you must try this. You'll want one". He handed to me a very small, stylish all black metal version of the Steadicam JR I'd come to know and love. Having bad memories of the doomed "DV Steadicam" I totally dismissed its many new features over the JR.

It wasn't until I really started to use the Merlin a year later did I realise how much better it was. Gone was the idea of turning the whole rig upside down to mount and dismount my camera (which was a real pain in cold weather!) and in came a stylish metal dovetail. All the hinges are rock solid so there is no chance of vibration getting through them. All the trim controls are metal making the trimming amazingly precise – you can put the thing down, lift it up and its still level.

So, OK I admit, the Steadicam Merlin really did grow on me – but I do still miss the screen that the Steadicam JR offered. When you start to get really balletic with a Merlin, you will realise how much use a monitor on the front would be.

Along comes IBC 2006 and I got the chance to work with the master himself, Garrett Brown, the inventor of the Steadicam. He revealed to us his secret plans for an arm and vest system for the Merlin. A few months later, prototypes started appearing on the Tiffen Booth at tradeshow in the US and UK. One of these found it's way to me a few weeks before NAB 07.

The vest is amazingly light and all the adjustments are Velcro and tool-less. The Velcro adjusts to fit a wide range of operators making the vest very easy to use. The height of the vest can be adjusted by loosening four screws on the spar of the vest and it simply slides down and tightens again when you've got the desired level. You'll also find the all important socket block on the vest for mounting the arm and adjusting the lift angle, which is a feature available on the bigger Steadicams (yet for some reason was missed on some of the older lightweight rigs like the SK2 and Mini).

The arm is fantastic and is essentially a scaled down Flyer arm. Aside from being very cute to look at, it has a fantastic 28-inch booming range across dual-sprung sections, that's only 4 inches less than the most expensive G70 arm! And like the more expensive arms it takes next to no effort at all to boom the arm through its entire range and keep the arm where you want it – you could easily do it with one finger on the handle.

The vest is very comfortable and is just as comfortable under load. It's not as bulky as the bigger vests, nor does it have a hard shell over the back making it very easy to wear under a coat if the weather isn't too good.

The arm performs very well, its very responsive and doesn't lock up at the extremes (though my prototype sometimes did when boomed right down but Garrett tells me this will be corrected on production arms). Its workings are based on those of the new G-series arms. They feature one large spring per section, no pulleys and the weight is adjusted with the load on the arm. You can hurl the rig up and down and the arm follows amazingly smoothly with no clunks or bumps.

For those who are expert JR/Merlin operators, be prepared to start learning again. It takes some getting used to! Learning how to set up the vest and arm is one thing but operationally, it's quite a strange sensation having no weight on your arm anymore and the weight on your hips is minimal. The arm provides some movement restrictions, whilst the arm is fantastic obviously it can't compete with your own arms boom range – so be prepared to revert back to your own arm for some ultra low shots and majestic crane booms.

Running at any considerable speed is also quite a challenge. Having worked with the bigger rigs (Flyers, Archers, Ultras) it's easy to run using one hand to control the rig and the other to aid balance – the Merlin system, being considerably lighter, is a lot less forgiving. The tendency is to apply the same technique, but this makes it very easy to over control the guide. I'm sure a technique can be developed with practice, but for the time being I prefer to run handheld with the Merlin.

It's important to note that I was working with a prototype unit. Tiffen showed production models at this year's NAB. The main difference is that the arms can hold more weight – a total of 15 pounds (compared to 10-11 of the prototypes) so they can work with the new Steadicam Pilot sled. The arm can also break down into two separate sections for portability. Other changes are merely cosmetic; the vest has "Steadicam" on the back and the arms look more rounded on the edges.

If you only use your Merlin with a lightweight camera or only use it with a heavy camera for the odd tracking shot, you probably won't be looking to invest in the system. However, if you do use the heavier cameras for much longer and complex shots, film many takes, covering live events, etc. then the vest and arm would be worth considering. It can look a little daunting so try it out before you buy it and be prepared to learn new techniques. If you approach the system willing and ready to learn new skills then you will be rewarded.

Whilst I do not work for Tiffen, we are considering running Merlin workshops teaching set-up and techniques with the Merlin and the vest and arm. If you're interested in attending one, please contact me at jimmercam@gmail.com.

www.merlinresource.com - www.jameselias.co.uk - www.steadicam.com