

“ON THE TRACKS” with Steadicam Operator Kevin Andrews SOC

by Kevin Andrews, SOC

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When I was recently approached by Director Michael Huxley of Brave World Productions to capture the first 4K footage of a 6,000 ton passenger train in the Royal Gorge, naturally my first questions were not what kinds of shots did we want to achieve, but HOW we were going to get them. Safely.

The perspective was to be in front of the train, preceding it through a 12 mile scenic stretch of the 1200 foot deep Royal Gorge in Southern Colorado. The railroad had arranged a vehicle called a Hy-Railer to act as our camera car. Basically a Chevy Suburban with hydraulic landing gear that allowed it to run on the track. The day started with a safety meeting with a team from the Canon City/Royal Gorge Express Railroad comprised of the train’s engineers, camera vehicle team, and our production team.



Among the safety points discussed, was how the Hy-Railer camera car would have constant communication with the train and that we could actually slow down and speed up the train depending on our visual needs. We would also be able to stop the train along certain sections of the route to prepare for the next shot.

Myself as operator, a Director and DP were also going to be riding in the vehicle. I used a climbing rated waist and leg harness to secure myself to the vehicle since I would be sitting facing out of the back of the vehicle with the Steadicam hard mounted.

After arriving on location and seeing the giant orange train with dual locomotives sitting at idle, I remember thinking, let’s go over the minimum safe distance and running speeds again. After some rigging of the vehicle mount and getting the Steadicam up, we were off and running. The sound of radio chatter coming from the front of our camera vehicle meant that the railroad team were working in sync to keep everyone involved safe.





Since I was facing backwards filming, the vehicle knocked out most of the wind allowing me to get by without using gyros on my sled. As most operators do, you get zoned in on the screen and somewhat lose yourself in the operating, picture, and composition, but a quick glance up reminded me that we were being chased by a very very large object. Around another bend and the train blew it's forward facing horns, more decibels that a human should ever experience, and I remembered what I should have thrown in my kit the day before. Ear plugs.

Since the idea was to capture scenic surroundings without a lot of motion blur, we kept the speeds surprisingly in check. The locomotive and the Hy-Railer camera vehicle always stayed within safe distances of each other set by the railroad's regulations. In the end we got some amazing footage and most important, everyone stayed safe. Communication and pre-planning made a seemingly impossible series of shots possible.

Kevin Andrews is a multiple Emmy winning camera operator currently behind the lens on various commercial, narrative, entertainment, and other national broadcast projects while embracing new technologies and the rapidly changing future of television and cinematography.

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