

# INSIDE THE SCHWEPPE'S COMMERCIAL

How We Used Virtual Production to Build Three Worlds in Two Days

DP John Mathieson DIR Susannah White



Scene from 'Schweppes Commercial' - DP John Mathieson, VP Supervisor Quentin Jorquera

Earlier this year, I was brought on as Virtual Production Supervisor for a Schweppes commercial directed by Susannah White and shot by legendary DP John Mathieson. A high-concept spot, visually ambitious, that needed to be executed with a tight turnaround. The idea was to take viewers from a NASA mission control room to a vast Martian ceremonial hall and, finally, to a private room with a view onto the Martian surface — all in a single commercial.

Over just two days, we shot the virtual production elements at 10-Dots Studio in Bulgaria. The team there later told us it was the smoothest shoot they'd ever hosted and I believe that's down to the work we did in pre-production.

We were tasked with creating full-scale cinematic environments that would normally require flying a crew out to Namibia or Argentina, or building massive sets. Instead, we built them virtually and shot everything in a single location. The NASA set, for example, consisted of modular desks and stairs on wheels. We rolled them in, shot, rolled them out, and transformed the space into something else entirely.

Same volume, radically different atmosphere.

Most of the creative work had been done quite upstream. My role was to ensure that the desired effects, especially the sense of scale, could be achieved inside the LED volume. That's where the tech viz was crucial. Working closely with production designer Will Htay throughout, he helped us figure out how to design and light the sets to preserve that sense of depth Susannah was going for. We also had to make sure the actors were far enough away from the wall the RGB panel light wouldn't contaminate John's lighting. Though the studio was large, we had to stay flexible. It took a while before we even knew which sensor and lenses we'd be working with, and that uncertainty had to be accounted for early on.

One of the things I'm most proud of was how we matched the virtual and physical floors. Will designed a virtual step that blended seamlessly with the real-world set and the shape of the LED Wall. After grading on-set, there was no visible separation. The reflections were real, bouncing from the

LED walls onto the floor, which meant there was no post work needed and no compromises. That realism was vital for a Schweppes shoot, where glass, liquid and transparency are front and centre. The backgrounds through the bottles looked perfect.

John Mathieson was incredibly fun and easy to work with. From the very beginning, I made sure to involve him closely in the VP process. It was his first time working in this kind of setup. I was genuinely impressed by how quickly he adapted to the LED volume. I think my background as a DP and gaffer helped a lot there, because we spoke the same language and once the trust in the tech was established, things moved quickly and smoothly. We did have one hiccup when trying to rig a 6-by-6 black fill directly above the camera, which nearly broke our Mo-Sys StarTracker Max system, which tracks from the ceiling. That's when I realised I should've pushed harder during prep for that encoded Arrihead!

A key turning point in the shoot came from a quiet moment I insisted on having with John, even before his official pre-light. I wanted to go through

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VP Supervisor Quentin Jorquera stands behind DP John Mathieson on set of 'Schweppes Commercial' - PHOTO Julian Froment

the backgrounds inside the volume, together, make changes, relight and adjust things to match his eye. That moment really helped build trust. From that point on, he had full control and everything just lined up beautifully.

There was also a moment on set I think really illustrates how virtual production can feel strange at first, until it clicks. John, being used to traditional setups, instinctively asked me to pivot the virtual background for a camera move. What actually happened was that he was checking his next camera position by physically moving himself, which is exactly what we all do as DPs. You look with your eye first. But since the camera was on a dolly and tracked with a Mo-Sys StarTracker Max system — and not him — the background naturally didn't update to match his viewpoint. If we had been working with a Vicon or OptiTrack system, I could've just handed him the crown to let him look around freely in real time, but that wasn't possible in this case. This was one of those moments where versatility in tracking systems really mattered.

Once John understood how the system worked, everything moved smoothly.

Having already determined and checked each camera position during tech viz, shifting the dolly to the correct next position was quick and accurate. That's when you know virtual production is doing what it's supposed to do, when it stops feeling like technology and simply becomes filmmaking.

John and I worked closely with Will Htay throughout, especially when it came to deciding what needed to be physically built, versus what could stay fully virtual. Will's experience with LED volumes made him an ideal creative partner. Then we were able to use the tech viz to block every shot and trim the builds down to only what was absolutely necessary. Everything else was repositioned, reused, or cheated. That's where the real production efficiency comes from.

The commercial was produced by Ridley Scott Associates, with Emma Cairns and Wilders, plus Laurent Thomas. The virtual content was created by Digital District, with whom we collaborated closely for both VFX and Virtual Art Department work. It was their first time tackling virtual production for LED volumes and understandably,

it came with its own set of challenges. That included a few hiccups when it came to creating high-quality assets that could run smoothly on the wall at the right frame rate. Together with the team at Ten Dots Virtual Production Studio, we did some great work to optimize everything. In the end, I think we pushed the gear to its limits, while still achieving an incredible level of visual quality. Beyond the creative and logistical gains, I also think this shoot showed how VP can support a more sustainable approach. Normally, a production of this scale would involve multiple international locations or large-scale set builds. Here, we brought everyone to one studio, shot everything in two days and kept the footprint lean and efficient.

For me, this project represents what virtual production should be: invisible when it needs to be, powerful when it matters and always serving the creative vision. It's about helping directors, DPs and designers focus on the image, not the compromise.

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