

STAGING PRINCIPLES FOR TELEVISION

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Proper utilization of good staging principles is one of the most important earmarks of a professional television production. It is surprising to find, therefore, that very little has been written to instruct television directors in good staging practices.

The definition of television staging to be used in this article is quite simple: Staging is the placement of visual elements in the TV studio--both that which the viewer will see and that which will affect how he sees the scene. This includes props (anything in the foreground) and scenery (anything in the background), as well as the talent and the cameras.

Unfortunately, there is no single set of staging rules that works for every situation. The television director must consider staging a production from aesthetic (or artistic), psychological, and practical points of view. Oftentimes, the best psychological effect is not practical to produce with the equipment available. Nor may a very artistic staging be possible with a limited production system. It is the job of the director to consider every aspect of the situation and to reach a compromise which will most closely produce the desired effect.

Staging the Cameras

The positioning of cameras in television production is critical.

When placing cameras in a multiple-camera production, Camera 1 should be placed to the left and Camera 2 to the right (as viewed from behind the cameras). In the control room, the director's monitors and inputs on the production switcher will also be positioned left to right. This creates a perspective uniformity for director and cameramen which will avoid any misunderstandings. (It should be noted that this seemingly "natural" order is actually determined by our western culture custom of reading from left to right. In some other cultures, other arrangements may be more "natural.")

To avoid "crossing the cameras" and the confusion that results, the cameras should be labeled with a large "1," "2," etc., for cameramen and talent to see. Then, if a performer is requested to give his introductory speech into Camera 1, he can locate the camera quickly. In short, consistent positioning of the cameras is important to everyone in the studio.

Physical Barriers

Physical barriers, such as desks, produce the same effect as increasing the distance between people. It is simply a different kind of separation. Much of the success of staging has to do with a proper understanding of the psychological effect of positioning such items, in addition to their artistic effect as "props."

Physical barriers are often placed between performers, and between the performer and the audience. It should be noted that the effect of these barriers upon the TV audience is often greater than one would expect by looking at the object in the studio. Also, a barrier placed for a positive reason may end up being a negative barrier in another, perhaps unforeseen, sense. In other words, one must always consider all resulting effects, or the total pattern.

The most common prop used in staging is a desk or table. A desk or table affords a measure of protection to the speaker--he doesn't have to think of the positioning of his legs or the part of his body which is shielded. A desk or table can also give the speaker something to hold on to, and it allows him to relax. If a show appears on a regular basis--perhaps weekly--a desk can clearly distinguish the moderator from the guest panelists and provide a semblance of permanence and stability. Desks and tables can also be used to hold papers, a water pitcher or glasses.

However, it is important to use barriers in moderation. A large dark desk can be overpowering and should be avoided, whereas a light-colored, low coffee table is not only an acceptable barrier, but a desirable one.

In the example of a large table with three people positioned around it, the table separates them from each other and is a barrier as well between the panelists and the camera (thus the audience). The table in our example is too large and creates an impression of separateness, so it probably is not a good prop to use for an informal discussion.

At times, the producer will want to create a formidable barrier to add formality and authority. A judge, for example, always appears behind a large dark bench. If he were not set apart from others, he--and the judicial process--would lose some of the psychological power which the bench gives him.

How does all this apply to a small studio? During the taping of a speech by the mayor, it would be natural to establish his authority by placing him behind a large dark desk. In the opening scene, the cameraman might frame the desk with the mayor behind it, and then zoom past the desk to the mayor. The cameraman could establish the authority of the mayor again once or twice during the production, and establish it at the end of the show. However, the viewers might be a little tense and not feel as cooperative about accepting the mayor's message if the cameraman were to keep that large desk in the foreground the entire time.

Of course, physical props--or barriers--are important for aesthetic reasons, as well as psychological ones. They prevent a scene from appearing bare and stark. Props and scenery function to fill up space and balance a scene. They help to establish a time, place, mood or sensation. Without any scenery or props (which is a situation referred to as a "limbo setting") all interest is focused upon the speaker. A limbo setting with dramatic lighting might be aesthetically pleasing for a poetry reading, but a limbo setting for a TV cooking class would appear strange and make viewers uneasy.

Staging is, in essence, bringing together the various aesthetic, psychological and practical elements of a production. Camera, monitor and input placement in a logical "1-2" sequence from left to right is a critical practical application of staging technique. An example of aesthetic and psychological application is the physical barriers concept in which props placed between the performer and camera set the mood of the scene as well as give the audience a clue to react by showing distance.