



The 4EVER Group

Tim Ryan • (516) 385-4384 • TimR@4EVERGroup.org
9 Beechwood Court • Massapequa • NY • 11758-2401

Steve Wernick • (215) 750-7797 • SteveW@4EVERGroup.org
3300 Neshaminy Blvd • # 562 • Bensalem • PA • 19020-1777



Performance video, a view from the stage

Videocassions, Jack and Judy Wolcott

Overview

For the next hour we're going to look at the challenges involved in shooting and editing performance video, and at some strategies for dealing with them. I'd like you to keep in mind that we're dealing with art forms that, in the case of drama and dance, have evolved over more than 2500 years and, in the case of opera, have a development that is more than 400 years old. Visually, these arts are spatial and dimensional, more closely allied to sculpture than to painting. And in the case of drama and opera they are highly verbal as well. Our cameras and microphones can capture the verbal and musical elements of performance with ease, but we have to work harder to capture the spatial and dimensional aspects of the performance, since the video medium is flat, like painting.

- a. We'll consider what producer and performers expect from a performance video.
- b. We'll indicate what the purchaser of a performance video expects to see.
- c. We'll show how stage shows are created and what is unique about them.
- d. And we'll discuss some ways to shoot and edit to meet the expectations of performers and viewers.

Recitals and Show-cases

Teacher is show-casing his or her teaching abilities by showing off how much each student has learned, or what each student is able to do, so it's important to show each student performing.

Recitals are a topic of their own, although many of the things we're going to talk about regarding performance can be applied to recitals..

Performance

Unlike the recital, the goal of a performance is to present a coherent piece of work – a ballet, symphony, musical entertainment or dramatic piece -- in which what is important is the piece of work itself, rather than the individuals performing in it.

Performer's expectations

Performers want viewers of the DVD to see and experience the piece of work they were in.

They expect some close-ups of themselves, but at the same time want a sense of themselves in stage space, interacting with others. This is especially true of dance performances.

In other words, nothing but close-ups wouldn't be any more satisfying to performers than nothing but cover shots.

Viewer's expectations and preconceptions

The viewer's expectations when watching your performance DVD are colored by a desire to see the show as it happened – as if he or she were actually in the theatre.

The viewer's preconceptions are colored by his experience of performances he has seen on television and film.

The viewer expects to have enough information on his viewing screen to know at all times what's going on. Since viewers aren't free to look wherever they please, as they would be in the theatre, we have to make certain they see entrances and exits, actions and reactions and are constantly oriented to what's going on.

The viewer doesn't want the tricks of the event videographer's trade interfering with her enjoyment of the story, so switches from color to black & white, "time shifting," slow motion sequences and digital transitions are pretty much out.

The viewer may expect to see his or her child, sweetheart, spouse or parent in the performance, but understands that in a stage presentation there are principals and secondary characters, that not everyone is equal and that not everyone will receive equal weight on the DVD.

A good way to make sure that all the minor characters get seen is with CUs in the first production number. Following a wide establishing shot of the entire stage, cut in to a series of close ups or perhaps a slow close up pan of the minor characters.

About Plays and Other Performances (How plays get put together.)

Although I'm going to focus on plays for a bit, what I describe next applies to dance and opera as well as drama.

Although I'm going to focus on plays for a bit, what I describe next applies to dance and opera as well as drama. Faced with time limitations here, I'm making huge generalizations, so bear with me.

Pre 20th Century

- a. Until the end of the 19th century, lighting was the most important controlling factor in stage presentations until almost the beginning of the 20th Century. Almost all plays were performed outdoors until after 1400 a.d. As recently as 1800, candles and oil lamps were still being used. Open gas flame came into use about 1815 and persisted in most theatres until about 1885.

There was no ability to control fall of light, no directionality. Lots of shadows. Virtually all light was concentrated at the very front of the stage.

- b. Beginning in the late 1500s, plays developed that worked in these conditions – dramas and melodramas filled with larger-than-life characters, and comedies that were highly verbal, and relied on witty dialogue and gross physical action such as we associate with slap-stick, rather than nuanced facial expressions and detailed physical action.
- c. Actors lined up in a semi-circle across the front of the stage, so the light from the overhead chandeliers and the footlights would illuminate them. This brought the action of the play very close to the audience: the actors could be seen and heard.
Whoever was speaking would take a step or two forward, say their words, then step back into the line when finished.

20th Century

- a. After 1885, incandescent lighting began to be used in theatres throughout the world. Light, which had previously been only general illumination from oil, candles and gas lighting, could be controlled by lenses, barn doors, flags and the like, and could be projected through lenses in beams anywhere about the stage.
- b. Since people's faces could be seen readily, and in response to an intense interest in heredity, environment and psychology at the end of the 19th century, plays began to be written that focused on everyday people, in everyday distressful and delightful situations, instead of the heroic dramas and broad, often slapstick, comedies of earlier times.

- c. Since it was everyday situations that were involved, scenery began more and more to resemble real places – the rooms, streets and parks of everyday life.
- d. And since it was everyday life that was being depicted on stage, and since they could now be seen anywhere on the stage, actors began to behave in their movements just like everyday folks would behave, walking and clambering all over the stage space, instead of just standing at the front of the stage so people could see them.

The director

To make sure that things looked like they should, relative to the demands of the new plays, the role of the stage director was created. The French call the director *le mettre en scene* – literally the “putter into the scene.”

The director became responsible for the positions of the actors relative to each other on stage, for example, and was the final arbiter of taste regarding the settings in which the actor’s stage lives were to take place, the clothes they wore and the lighting that represented the natural and artificial lighting of their stage world.

Today, here’s what the director does when working on a play:

- a. He reads the plays, breaks it down into scenes – bite sized chunks – and assesses the physical and emotional content of each scene.
- b. Then he may give each scene a name: the “Mary torments George scene,” “Dorothy defends Toto,” “Jean Val Jean confronts Javere.” Naming helps the director keep on track as the production develops. It’s useful to videographers when shooting and editing, too, as we’ll see presently.
- c. Next, the director “blocks” the production. Blocking is the process of moving actors around on the stage. It has to do with both traffic management and physical and emotional relationships. More about this in a second.
- d. Finally, when general rehearsals are completed, the production goes into what are called “technical” and “dress” rehearsals. With the technical and production staff, with whom the director has been working since the very beginning, the director coordinates the work of scenic, lighting and costume designers in bringing their understanding of the play to the stage so their efforts support director’s vision of the play.
- e. Blocking is shaped by two needs. One is *composition*, the other picturization.

1. The goal of Composition is to make sure that the audience is looking at the right part of the stage at the right time;
2. The goal of Picturization is to place the actors on stage in such an arrangement that just by looking at it, without words or movement, a viewer will know what is going on: that an accident has occurred, or that a young man is proposing to his loved one, for example.

The Lighting Designer

Remember that after 1885 light plays a very important role in the theatre. In addition to illumination and creating mood, lighting works closely with composition.

Light often serves to establish the foreground, middle ground and background of a stage scene, just as we so often see it used in 17th and 18th century painting. Take a look at Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, for example.

So as you might imagine, the director and lighting designer work very closely together throughout the rehearsal period and during technical rehearsals. What the director emphasizes in blocking and picturization, the lighting designer highlights and shadows accordingly. And shadow is an important element on stage: the choice by the lighting designer not to illuminate something brightly is as important as the choice to illuminate. So it's imperative that we not attempt to fill in the shadows in post production: it's like Las Vegas – what's in shadow stays in shadow!

The bottom line in all of this is that everything you see on stage is planned, rehearsed and executed down to the last detail. And this is as true in dance and opera as it is in dramatic performance. What you see when you watch a performance is what the artists want you to see. It's there to tell the story, and to evoke intellectual and emotional responses in you, the viewer.

If we want to create an effective performance DVD, we've got to deal with things in our video just as they are on stage

In effect, we're shooting a movie. The catch is that there aren't any scene set-ups, no retakes and, from our point of view as videographers, many scenes that are too bright or too dark.

So as a theatrical videographer we have to figure out how to catch it all on the fly, framing our shots and getting it all right the first time.

* * * * *

Staging: Imagination and Realization -- Modeling

Directors and choreographers create composition and picturization in their heads before starting to block scenes in rehearsal. Most have a pretty good idea of what the performance will look like before ever seeing a piece of scenery, an actor or a light.

Many make use of models of the stage and scenery, provided by the scenic artist (set designer.) In addition to imagining the play, opera or dance with the aid of models, directors move all over the theatre or rehearsal space when staging scenes, either physically or in their mind's eye, so they can check relationships among the performers and make sure everyone in the audience can see what's going on.

Staging: Imagination and Realization -- Blocking

Staging – blocking -- is usually done on the diagonal. Imagine an “X,” the legs of which run diagonally from the edge of the proscenium to the backstage wall. The diagonal keeps actors “open” to the audience and enhances the sense of depth. Scenes important to plot and character development are far more likely to be played downstage left or right than in the middle of the stage.

A camera placed on the center line of the stage records a very flat view of the performers, failing to take advantage of these diagonal compositions. Since video doesn't represent depth very well, shooting on the diagonal tends to yield a somewhat greater sense of depth than shooting head-on. For much the same reason, incidentally, architectural photographers photograph buildings from the corner, rather than full front.

We shoot with two cameras, and whenever possible shoot at about 25-30 degrees off the center line. Since we shoot during a performance, we almost always have to shoot from the back of the auditorium.

One camera shoots Cover shots, the other shoots CUs. The danger, of course, is that one person's idea of a close-up can be another person's idea of a cover shot.

I See What You're Doing: Communication during the shoot

To minimize confusion, we connect the video out on one camera — usually the wide shot camera -- to a monitor placed on or near the other camera – the close-up camera. You can see the set-up below.



This way the CU shooter always knows what the wide shot is covering, and can actually visualize, while shooting, how the CUs will cut into the wide shots in post production, making the editor's job a great deal easier. It's vital, of course, that the wide shot camera always have a shot wide enough to encompass all of the important action, but not necessarily so wide that it encompasses the entire stage.

It's quite possible that both cameras will have essentially the same material in their shot, but the size of the framing and the apparent distance from the subject will be different, allowing for smooth cutting between cameras without the appearance of a jump cut.

Lights: Find Out What They're Doing

How to handle stage lighting is always a problem. We've come up with two solutions that work well for us. When shooting events at the International Children's Festival, one of

our major performance shoots during the year, we are often called upon to shoot performances for which we have never seen a rehearsal, sometimes 4 or 5 different one-hour shows, in different theatres, in a single day.

We ask the light board operator in each venue to show us the brightest setting being used and we adjust the camera iris so the image doesn't clip with this amount of light. Very rarely do we have to make adjustments during the shoot. If we do make an adjustment it's always to both cameras.

For other work we attend a dress rehearsal of a production and shoot short clips of many scenes, bracketing exposures. Back in the studio we look at these clips on a monitor and decide on an optimum iris setting for the show. We always try to err on the side of under-exposing, knowing that this can be corrected in post if necessary.

* * * * *

The Thoughtful Shooter: **Matching the “spirit of the scene”**

In shooting performance video, it's vital that camera operators THINK! We often hear people tell their camera operators “You're shooting “B” roll. Just go and shoot what looks good to you.” This is WRONG! There is no “B” roll on a theatrical shoot.

As a camera operator you constantly have to ask a question similar to the question asked by the director when naming scenes: what is this scene about? How am I going to record this to provide the maximum answer to that question?

The CU camera operator, especially, must constantly ask “How is my shot framed?” “Does my tight composition echo the overall composition of the stage director?” It doesn't have to be identical, but the spirit of the shot must correspond to the spirit of the staging. In other words, if the scene name is “listening to a speaker,” the wide shot shows the speaker and a crowd listening. The CU camera could cut in to a tight shot of the speaker, but a better choice would be a shot that showed the speaker and only one or two people listening, giving the editor the opportunity to cut-in on the comparatively tight shot of the speaker without losing the listening crowd.

The Thoughtful Shooter: Shot Duration.

It's important not to leave an action shot until the action is completed. In dance, this often means waiting until the musical phrase is finished. There's nothing more annoying to an editor than shots that are broken in mid-action. Hang with the shot until changing it makes sense in terms of what's happening on stage. And this is as true for dialogue sequences as it is more musical changes. Don't cut until the *idea* in the dialogue changes.

The Thoughtful Shooter: Orientation

It's important to establish a cover shot for each scene, and to show entrances and exits. Characters who drift into a shot from some unknown point of origin are maddening.

Remember: your DVD viewer needs to see the action and where it's happening, whether dance, musical performance or drama. The traditional progression is Cover shot, MCU, CU.

At times it may be effective to vary this for emphasis. Rules are made to be broken. Opening on a tight shot of a character, then cutting or dollying out to the cover shot can provide a strong element of surprise and suspense. Before breaking the rules, though, there should be a clear and compelling reason for making the choice.

An example I showed in my talk was of Dorothy's arrival in Munchkinland. The scene opens on a tight CU of Dorothy in the doorway of the farmhouse, looking awe-struck at something before her. We have no idea what she's seeing, and neither did people in the theatre as the stage was in total darkness except for the doorway. On the light cue that illuminated the stage we cut to a cover shot of the entire stage, revealing what had so awed Dorothy – colorful, flower-filled Munchkinland. It's kind of like putting the reaction shot before the action.

The thoughtful Shooter: Close-ups

Close ups in drama, dance and opera can be problematic. There are no close-ups in live performance: the CU is the product of film. So when we use a Close-up in performance videos we have to ask the same question a film editor would ask: why am I using a close up?

In performance video, close-ups seem to work best when carefully motivated. By "motivation" I mean when called for by character relationship or by the audience's need to see something in detail, something in isolation.

Cut-in and Cut-away close-ups

Joseph Mascelli, in his book called *The Five C's of Cinematography*, suggests two kinds of close ups: the cut-in and the cut-away.

As Mascelli puts it, a cut-in close-up is always "a magnified portion of the preceding larger scene." It continues the larger scene. So we have a cover shot of a man watching a dog foam at the mouth, then *cut-in* to a close-up of the dog's soapy muzzle.

A cut-away close-up is related to the previous scene, but only incidentally part of it. It depicts secondary action happening away from the center of focus. The cover shot is of a man watching a dog foam at the mouth. The *cut-away* is to two kids observing the scene from behind a wall.

Just as there is seldom a place for special effects in performance video – except perhaps in MTV-type production – there is seldom a place for cut-away shots such as one often finds in wedding videography: no shots of the audience, stage hands, the orchestra or performers waiting in the wings.

When the CU shooter thinks in terms of cover shots and close-ups – both cut-in and cut-away -- in a performance of any kind, the editor is in for some fairly effortless cutting of the finished piece, and the audience and performers have a wonderful sense of “up close and personal.”

Close-up to emphasize motion

In addition to providing what Mascelli calls “magnified portions” of the larger scene, close-ups in dance are extremely important for another reason: motion is emphasized in the CU, minimized in long shots.

In dance, the videographer can control the sense of motion and the apparent tempo in the piece by either following the dancers with a pan, in which case there is comparatively little movement except in the background, or by letting the dancers move past the camera and in/out of the shot, in which case there is strong sense of movement relative to a stationary point.

Character reaction CU's

We must always remember that drama – whether in theatre, opera or dance – is about action and reaction. Getting reaction shots is one of the principal responsibilities of the CU camera operator.

The Thoughtful Editor: Editing the performance video -- Cuts

We never do multi-camera live-switching of a non-studio performance, and we don't think it's feasible to do a live-switched shoot in most situations. You're always behind the cut.

Where you make cuts affects meaning. Coming from a background as a stage director, I name scenes when cutting, just like the stage director does. Naming scenes and cut points helps differentiate your choices when cutting.

Every cut in performance video – especially in dramatic productions – should be in support of the content of the piece. In other words, the cut must be necessary: it must occur because there is a shift of emphasis from one part of the stage to another, for example, or because we need to see the reaction of a character who is outside the framing of the current shot, or because the cut enhances the *idea* of the scene. For really great insights into cutting read *In the Blink of an Eye* by Walter Murch. Then watch *Cold Mountain*, which was edited by Murch. The cuts in this film are so organic to the material that the film scarcely seems cut at all, which may be why Murch wasn't nominated for an Oscar for his work on the film.

The Thoughtful Editor: **Dissolves**

Occasionally, especially in dance and musical theatre, the intention of the work may call for a dissolve. We find the dissolve most useful in three instances:

1. When a cut would be too abrupt for the mood that is being created, or as a necessary evil to cover a jump cut. The dissolve can be especially useful to change apparent distance from viewer to performer – in other words, substituting for a slow zoom pull out, a dolly or crane shot.
2. To preserve continuity when, for example, we need to “insert” a character from one part of the scene into a wider shot of the stage.
3. When the dissolve reveals something otherwise unseen.

The Thoughtful Editor: **Badly aligned dissolves**

When dissolving from a CU or one-shot, always try to dissolve to a matched shot. In other words, always try to dissolve to similar alignments of figures. Nothing is more confusing than dissolving from a wide shot that has a figure in the lower right of the frame, for example, to a CU of the same figure that enters the frame in the upper left.

An Australian editor of my on-line acquaintance once observed that “. . . a badly aligned dissolve is most distracting ([It] becomes a slow jump cut giving you time to work out what on earth is happening.” I agree with her completely.

Conclusion

- a. We're shooting someone else's art form.
- b. Our goal is to convey that artistry to someone who wasn't there at the performance.
- c. We need to think “edit” while shooting, especially if we're shooting close ups.
- d. We need to edit invisibly, so our craft doesn't obscure the artistry of the performance.

* * * * *