STAGING:
Pitfalls Facing the Lighting Director
by Bentley Miller

Preproduction is the basis for mounting a production of any scale. This process provides an opportunity for all of the involved crafts to input their knowledge into the equation and avoid problems which might otherwise crop up during a production.

Preproduction time is cheap, compared to the expense of trying to rectify a nagging problem on the studio floor "with the meter running." The preproduction process applies to staging any production, big or small.

In this article we will discuss the three most common types of staging that comprise the bulk of television production done today. They are:

• Area staging, which encompasses large, open settings such as those that would be used for dance numbers.

• A further development or adjunct to this type of staging is the audience game show. This format features a central set on the studio floor, usually in front of, or flanked by, an audience in a raked seating arrangement such as bleachers. Cutaways of the studio audience are often integrated into the program to give the home viewer a heightened sense of the excitement taking place in the studio. A prime example of this type of show that we will discuss is the "talking heads" or "chat show"— *The Tonight Show* is an excellent example of this type of production.

• The constructed set, which can take two forms: either open-ended or enclosed. The open-ended set is comprised of the standard studio "flats" which when erected form an L-shape or a 3-sided box. Action is staged in front of these set pieces, which—with the right combination of scripting, acting, light, camerawork and sound—can portray a quite convincingly realistic setting.

The enclosed setting more often than not involves a location shoot in a real setting with four walls and a ceiling.

This setting, which is typical for dramatic presentations on location, has been made possible by the advent of truly portable cameras. Electronic Field Production, as it is commonly known, has gained wide acceptance and nowadays is the norm rather than the exception. This situation can present unique opportunities for quality lighting if the shooting conditions are properly controlled. If control is inadequate in this situation it becomes very difficult to make the pictures that you desire: the situation controls you, not vice versa. In order to combat control problems such as excessive contrast, overexposure and poor tonality, careful staging must be the order of the day.

The Problem of Excessive Contrast

A classic problem situation is a person with dark-colored skin against a window. Excessive contrast is the obvious problem. The background is excessively bright in contrast with the subject's skin tone. One must be balanced with the other to create a good picture. There are some general approaches to this contrast problem:

• The first solution would be to use a controller, perhaps a neutral density filter, to reduce sufficiently the level of light coming through the window to match the interior of the room.

• One might try the approach of matching the interior light to that of the exterior.

• A third approach would be to properly expose for the window and let the actor be silhouetted against the window; this can be a strikingly dramatic pictorial effect if it is sympathetic to the script and the way in which the particular scene is being played. Camera placement and the arrangement of props and set dressings are critical in making the silhouette

technique work, for a very important reason. Since our subject is in silhouette against the window, our eye will first focus on the subject and window, and then our eye will explore the frame. If we are clear and thoughtful enough, we can place visual pieces that have a dramatic import to lead our eyes from the silhouette shot into the next shot following the action of the story.

THE STUDIO SET

The constructed set, whether open-ended or enclosed, usually does not present significant pictorial problems for the lighting director.

Most problems crop up because of improper or careless staging, or actor/camera placement; for example, when shots are taken from different angles than they were lighted for in rehearsal, or when an actor misses his mark and stops short of or beyond the lighted areas of the set.

Shading

A common problem is the difficulty of dealing with sets that don't have the correct tonality or shading. Sometimes adequate time is not given to preparation of sets—ideally, they should be slightly shaded and subtle wear marks should be introduced, as would appear in a real life situation. (Of course, one shouldn't go overboard with this type of technique, often called aging or antiquing.)

It is incumbent on the lighting director to rectify any lack of shading through the use of shading techniques; flagging and the use of nets or cookaloris can create a mottled, less even background that mimics real life. The use of these techniques separates the amateur from the professional.

There are two types of shading, spatial and temporal.

An example of spatial shading is wall shading, which can create strong visual perceptions. Vertical shading which grows in density towards the floor gives the perception of greater height and width. Shading which is more dense at the top creates the impression that the room is