

Films for Television

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IRVING PICHEL, director of more than thirty feature pictures, recently completed his first film for television, *The Pharmacist's Mate*, which is discussed in this article.

DRAMATIC shows on television come in three forms: "live" shows sent out by television cameras as they are performed,¹ films made especially for television, and old motion pictures no longer in theater release. Motion pictures, though popular with viewers, are not ideally adapted to the television screen, save in being visual and in being, if we are not too literal about it, entertaining. The television play is a new thing and the television film bears a much closer kinship to the live show than it does to its parent theater film, as marriage is presumed to be a closer relationship (among adults) than that of children and parents. There are, certainly, family resemblances among all three forms, as well as differences. The live television play imitates many of the traits of the theater film, but it and its filmed counterpart set out to serve a new and special medium, whereas the theater film was made originally to serve a different purpose and to reach its audience differently. The theater film uses film as a medium; the television film uses it primarily as a facility, for the format of the television film is that of the television play, as are many of its techniques. Producers of television films in their use of the camera, their sets, lighting, direction, and acting imitate the procedures of the television studio, not those of the film studio. The reasons for this are in part economic, but only in part. The screen of the television receiver is the real determinant, and economic factors in television production grow out of the inherent nature of the medium.

These considerations became immediate to me in December,

¹ Kinescoped shows are not considered as a separate form, since they are photographed on 16-mm. motion picture film directly from a monitor tube during telecast for the use of network stations outside the range of the originating station. They bear the same relation to live telecasting that a transcription does to a radio broadcast. Film is simply a visual recording.

1950, when I had the opportunity of directing my first film for television. The program for which the film was to be made was—and, with the exception of this one venture, still is—a “live” show, the *Pulitzer Prize Playhouse*. The program originates in New York and uses for material plays, novels, and news stories for which Pulitzer prizes have been awarded or other works by writers to whom these awards have been granted. Its plays run one hour and are telecast weekly. Each play is rehearsed three weeks.

There were a number of reasons for making this particular production on film instead of producing it as a live show. First in importance, perhaps, was the fact that the play chosen for the experiment was scheduled for December twenty-second, the date closest to Christmas. Since the telecast was to convey the sponsor's Christmas greetings and the subject had some appropriateness to the season, it was desirable that all the outlets of the network over which the program is released be able to have the same program on the same date. This is not feasible with a live show which can be seen only on receivers within the range of the broadcasting station from which it goes out or through the coaxial cable. Other outlets may show the program on kinescope film but only at a later date. Other factors were a desire to learn whether a program could be filmed adequately for a sum within the weekly budget, and whether, possibly, filmed plays interspersed among the regular programs might not relieve the pressure on the producers of the series, who had to keep three productions under way.

The play chosen for the experiment was a dramatization by Budd Schulberg of a story by George Weller which had appeared in the Chicago *Daily News* during the war, telling of an appendectomy performed by a pharmacist's mate on an apprentice seaman in a submarine in enemy waters. In Mr. Schulberg's play, this took place on Christmas Eve. Perhaps the setting was a further reason for turning the play over to the film makers, who might be expected to do better with the interior of a submarine than a scenic studio could. We shall have more to say about this later.

Mr. Schulberg's play was, in itself, a first lesson in the difference between a screen play and a television play. It recognized what is possibly the greatest difference between the two media—the fact that the theater screen enlarges while the television receiver reduces. It is too early in the development of television to say that long shots are of no value, but it is clear that, at the present moment, scenes of any considerable scope, involving numbers of people, are ineffective. *The Pharmacist's Mate* told its story intimately, the action was close, and the scenes were automatically confined, since a submarine is cut up into small and crowded quarters. Moreover, perhaps in consideration of the fact that the play was intended originally for live production, the action was continuous although scenes shifted from one quarter of the submarine to another, conning tower to control room, wardroom to dinette to galley to engine room.

My first step in preparation for filming *The Pharmacist's Mate* was to view as many live or kinescoped programs as possible. I had already some familiarity with television studios and their camera techniques. I knew how the cameras were deployed so that, as each scene was played, one picked up a full shot, one was mobile and was used either to follow a moving character or to move into or pull back from a close shot, while a third might be used for close angles. Each camera might change its function according to the way the scene was staged. Thus, the director has available during the broadcast three angles from which to select the best one to go out over the air. Planning and rehearsal determines the duties of each camera at each moment of the performance. He cuts the picture as it is being played, thus having much of the advantage of the film cutter who has angles from which to select, with the important difference that the television director must make his selections on the instant. The shows I viewed revealed some of the handicaps that apply to this operation. Even with fairly extensive camera rehearsal, camera movement and placement must be done with great alertness, so a degree of improvisation is inevitable.

Framing and composition are often catch-as-catch-can so that what one sees on the receiving set is too often a rough approximation of a well-framed shot. Moreover, there seems to be no allowance made for the different sizes and shapes of television screen, each one chopping off more or less of the top and sides of the field shown by the camera's finder. The camera operator knows quite well what his camera is viewing. How much of it a viewer may see he has no way of knowing.

The second step in preparation was to investigate the methods used by producers making film for television. I found in several instances that films are often shot as live shows are telecast; that is, multiple cameras (usually three) are used very much as they are used in television studios. One camera may be used for full shots, one for moving shots, and the third for close angles. Occasionally, during the course of filming, one camera may be cut out and its position changed to a different angle before being switched on again. As a result, the cutter has three or sometimes four angles from which to choose so that the film can have all the variety and constantly renewed interest of motion picture film. This method, necessitated by the nature of live telecasting, was abandoned long ago in motion picture production, save in scenes of violent action where it would otherwise be impossible to match action exactly, or where, for practical reasons, the action can be played only once, or in scenes of great expanse where it is possible to pick up details of a broad action—as long as none of the cameras gets in the range of the others. The reasons for its abandonment as a standard film practice are several. First, it is difficult if not impossible to light a scene equally well for more than one camera. The intensity of light which is correct for one camera may be too great for one placed closer to the action or using a different lens. Second, it is difficult to get equally effective composition for more than one camera at a time. Ordinarily, the cameras will have to be focused more or less in the same direction so that reverse angles and cross angles are sacrificed for angles which vary chiefly in size

or scope. Usually, to place three cameras effectively, to stage the action so that it is equally good for all three, and to light the shot so that it will be photographed as well by all three takes more time than to shoot the three angles consecutively. There are, of course, exceptions. In shooting the scenes in the Old Bailey in *The Paradine Case*, Alfred Hitchcock used six cameras. However, each of these cameras picked up a separate close-up, so that actually six separately lighted and composed shots were photographed simultaneously. The advantage gained by the director in this instance was the sustained playing of the scene, not the manner in which it was photographed.

The *Bigelow Theater*, produced by Jerry Fairbanks, uses the three-camera system,² as do Snader Telescriptions and a number of other enterprises. This is done in the interest of economy since, although three camera crews are required, time is saved. The fact that the angles are not as well lighted or composed as in motion picture film is regarded as a small price to pay for the saving in time. In addition, since the same criticisms that can be leveled at the multiple camera technique apply equally to live television camera work, there is no lowering of the standard of photographic quality. Photographically, film shot by three cameras will be as good as the images transmitted by the television camera. In addition, it still has the advantages cited above.

Other producers of television film, among them Frank Wisbar who directs the *Fireside Theater* productions, use only a single camera. Since this means that each angle must be separately lighted and shot, economy of time can be effected only by limiting the number of angles shot, by simplifying camera movement, and by shooting, as far as possible, only the sections of scenes in each angle which the director intends using in the completed film. In other words, he must cut with the camera, allowing himself a minimum of overlap. This is, as a matter of fact, the method of

² Mr. Fairbanks uses 16-mm. cameras. Most producers shoot 35-mm. film and reduce prints. For certain technical reasons, 35-mm. film is easier to use.

the "quickies." Its successful application depends upon the skill and judgment of the director, who must visualize with a good bit of competence what he wants the final picture to look like, and be willing to forego the choice of angles and the editorial flexibility that a fuller use of film would guarantee.

The third and final stage of preparation for shooting *The Pharmacist's Mate* consisted of fitting the demands of the production into the limitations of the medium in which it was to be shown. These fell into three classifications, economic, technical, and artistic, though none of these is clearly separated from the others. I have already referred to the kinds of sets the film required. If it is true that television is most effective in close shots, it follows that the sets need not be spacious. This artistic limitation is in fortunate accord with the budgetary limitation that applies to television production. Likewise a technical limitation that we faced in being forced, because of cramped quarters, to film the picture with a single camera fitted into our economic limitation and, at the same time, gave us perhaps a better artistic result than we would have achieved with the simultaneous use of two or more cameras.

Nevertheless, the first factor we had to deal with was economic. Our budget was less than thirty thousand dollars. The action takes place in a submarine. Warner Brothers had built for their film *Operation Pacific* a remarkable interior of a submarine at a cost of \$55,000, considerably more than our entire budget. It is conceivable that their set might have been rented. However, film producers are not, at this moment, disposed to encourage or cooperate with producers of television programs. Negotiations with the Warner Brothers studio might have culminated successfully, but they moved very slowly. The alternative was to ask Navy Department cooperation, including the use of a submarine. This was secured. The set problem was solved economically, and it may be taken for granted that the artistic end of complete verisimilitude was also served. There loomed, however, the technical prob-

lem of photographing the action of the play in a real sub. Unless one has been below deck in one of these amazing mechanisms, one can have no notion of how much gear is crowded into so little space. Add to this, not only the necessary players but a camera, its crew, a bare minimum of lighting equipment, and the sound recording equipment and its operating crew, and you begin to visualize picture making under unique conditions. There was no single camera set-up in which the camera was not pushed against a steel bulkhead, barely leaving room for the cameraman to get his eye to the eyepiece. In making several of the shots, a man had to sit under the camera and tilt it back against the camera operator, so that it rested on only two legs of its tripod in order to gain the last inch of space. The ceilings are so low that it was impossible to hang the microphone from a boom overhead and usually the sound man sat on the floor holding the microphone up in front of the players, just below the bottom frame line of the shot. In several instances, he had to lie on his back on the floor.

It was evident at once that the film could be shot only with a single camera using an extremely wide angle lens. This meant that shooting had to be planned with great care, leaving nothing to improvisation. The conditions of shooting and lighting had to be carefully studied in terms of the submarine itself, angles selected, and the order of shooting predetermined so that each camera move involved a minimum amount of work and rearrangement of equipment. The amount of film coverage and overlapping had to be restricted, bearing in mind, however, that we needed enough flexibility in cutting to time the film, not only dramatically, but to the exactly computed length imposed by the one-hour telecast schedule, minus only the main and end titles, the middle commercial break, and the credit titles.

Casting involved no unusual problems and was effected much as it would have been for any other sort of film.

I have said that the script itself conformed to most of the generalizations that can safely be made at this early stage in develop-

ment concerning the limitations of television as a medium.³ The action of the story was not broadly physical. Its suspense was generated by the doubts and fears of the principal character as he undertook an operation he had never performed before upon which depended the life of a shipmate. It was contributed to by a host of objects within the scale of the television screen—a clock that marked the passage of the hour-and-a-half it took to perform the operation, the bent spoons used as improvised retractors, the depth gauges that indicated the effort to hold the ship steady below the surface of a stormy sea, the failure of lights, the continuation of the job under the faint beams of battle lanterns. Its tension was increased by the strained silences in which the task was performed, by the distrust of the executive officer, by the calming confidence of the skipper, and, at one point, it was brought near breaking point by the sound, amplified by sonar, of an enemy destroyer passing overhead, and made all the more frightening by the silencing of the sub's motors. The story was told wholly within the limits of the medium without resort to techniques which are regarded as essential in theater films though, so far as techniques are concerned, everything in the film could have been used in a theatrical film. In other words, it contained only shots which could be seen well on the receiver and did not require the magnification of a large screen.

In production, finally, there was a conscious effort to avoid some of what seemed to be liabilities of the live shows I had watched. These were flaws which stemmed from the relationship between television production and theater production. In some of the shows I had watched, staging strongly suggested the theater

³ "We suggest that television lends itself to the development of a new kind of drama in which action is not, as in the film, predominantly physical, but psychological—both sight and sound serving to give overt expression to the covert operations of the mind. . . . Television, perhaps, lends itself to introvert adventures. It is a medium potentially more intimate and subtle [than film]. . . . Visual language, which, as in great films, informs even inanimate objects with life and meaning by selective focusing of our attention and which, by lighting and angle, can make its silence 'speak volumes,' provides, perhaps, that supplement to words by which alone we may come to apprehend the shrouded fears and hopes and longings of our own subconscious world." Charles A. Siepman, *Radio, Television, and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 357.

with its random and often meaningless crosses and risings and sittings. In the theater, this sort of movement is justified by the need to focus the audience's attention and to give life to the stationary setting. In both television and the screen this sort of movement for movement's sake is obviated by the possibility of changing the angle or the scale of the shot, and by the frequent changes of locale. In these same live telecasts, too, I observed a consciousness of the audience. The playing was accommodated to the position of the camera (the spectator) instead of the camera being placed where it could best catch the action at any given moment. The third theater characteristic was in the playing itself which, as in the theater, was "projected" not only vocally but in gesture and facial expression. In this intimate medium, I felt a sense of embarrassment as I watched actors acting so hard and showing so much. Performances which I might have accepted with admiration from the tenth row in a theater seating twelve hundred became, in the living room, unreal and forced. Even the theater screen, which can observe and project with great intimacy the smallest changes of feeling as shown by the face and the voice, is outdone by the television receiver which brings a player into the very room in which one sits and watches.

Accordingly, we tried to scale the acting not only to the confines of the minute rooms in which it took place—the conning tower or the wardroom of the submarine—but to the rooms in which it would be seen.

As a director schooled in films where vast space is at one's disposal, where an inconvenient wall can be removed to make room for a camera and for lights, it was my good fortune to have as a first assignment one in which the limitations of locale and technical resource were so completely consonant with the characteristics of the new medium.

There are certain advantages in filming television plays which become apparent when one considers the conditions under which a television play is broadcast. Since it must be continuously per-

formed, the television play requires extended rehearsal and there is no possibility of correcting errors as in film. Sets must be contiguous, multiple cameras must be used to achieve changes of angle or scene, changes of costume are difficult to manage so that the plays are bound somewhat to unity of time. The use of film obviates some of these difficulties. It facilitates changes of scene, the use of exteriors, the selection of more interestingly composed angles, and the achievement of more effective and significant cutting, or montage. These are attributes of film itself as a medium. For the rest, for everything that lies beyond these technical advantages, film must adapt itself to the characteristics, so far as they are known, of the television medium. Certainly, one who has worked for a number of years making motion pictures discovers, when he turns to television, that whatever technical mastery of film he has acquired must subserve the television screen and what he can learn about it. The step he takes is more than halfway toward live telecasting.