

Reprinted from the September 2006 issue of Church Production Magazine

A Simple Approach to Lighting for Video

The most important thing about lighting for video is to light for the camera. Look at a video monitor to judge the quality of your lighting; don't look directly at the stage.

By Greg Persinger

As a lighting guy, one of the questions I get asked the most is “How do I light my stage for video?” Maybe you are in this situation: You have been trying to improve your video lighting and seem to be somewhat stumped as to how to make changes for the better. Maybe you are asking what techniques to use. If so, I will refer you to words of wisdom given to me by an old video director friend of mine.

He always said that when things are not working, don't get fancy or make things complicated. Just get back to the basics and everything will look great again in no time. Usually he was right. So this is where we will begin, back at the basics. First we use lighting for visibility, which is the number one primary goal of lighting, for if the subject is not lit the audience will not see it.

The second reason we use lighting is to call attention to an area of the stage where you want the audience to focus, while not calling attention to an area of the stage you don't want the audience to look at. This is called selective visibility. The next reason for using lighting is mood. Creating mood with lighting can be accomplished in several different ways.

It can be done with intensity, color, or a combination of both. Typically a dark stage gives an audience a feeling of sadness or fear while a bright stage tends to give an audience a feeling of happiness or joy. Likewise dark colors such as blues, purples, and reds can give an audience a feeling of sadness or fear while bright colors like amber, pink, and yellow give an audience a feeling of happiness or joy.

Of course intensity and color alone don't create the emotion but instead are visual cues, that when taken in context with the emotional content that is being put forth from the stage, help make for more powerful communication of the subject.

The last reason for using lighting is for modeling, or making the subject of the lighting stand out from the background or making the subject more visually interesting. Modeling can be accomplished in a number of ways including variations in intensity, color, the angle that the light is projected from, or a combination of all of these.

Now that we have defined visibility, selective visibility, mood, and modeling, let's look at how these basic lighting concepts work in video lighting.

In video lighting we still use lighting for visibility just as in general stage lighting, except the lighting is for the camera's visibility and not the audience's visibility. The camera still requires light to see the subject on stage but because selective visibility is left up to how the camera shots are taken, any part of the stage that might have something that the camera might want to shoot is illuminated. Instead of lighting what we want the audience to see and not lighting what we don't want the audience to see, we generally light the whole stage and let the video director take the camera shots of just the parts they want the TV audience to see. In this way selective visibility becomes a function of the video camera's shots and the director's composition decisions and not a function of the lighting.

The next difference with video lighting has to do with mood. As a general rule, video cameras are not as sensitive to light as the

human eye, so more light needs to be used on stage for the camera to see the subject. Because of this, in video lighting it is not as common to use intensity to set the mood as in general stage lighting.

Also, color is used a bit more sparingly as video cameras don't do as well with colored light—cameras are not as sensitive to all the different shades of color that the human eye sees. Too much color or the wrong color, especially on people, can make for some very bad video images.

The last difference is with modeling in video. Variations in intensity, color, the angle that the light is projected from, or a combination of all of these can still be used to help model the subject and help differentiate the subject from the background in video, but as noted with mood, color has to be used carefully.

The most important thing to remember when lighting a scene for video is that you are lighting for the camera. Be sure to look at your video monitor to judge the quality of your lighting and not by looking directly at the stage. The camera will interpret the scene differently than your eyes, so what might look great on stage may look horrible on camera.

Knowing this, here are some things to remember: In video lighting, the camera wants to see even, consistent light across the whole scene. Any major deviations in the brightness of the light will be instantly seen by the camera and could make the scene look wrong on the monitor. Because of this we generally try to use wash-type fixtures such as Fresnels and PARs to light for video since they provide a more even light coverage.

The key light (primary front light) on your subject should be one color if you are not using only white light. The camera is more sensitive to color and sometimes over exaggerates the colors in a scene making them appear more drastic on camera than it looks on stage with your eye. Using a two color wash, say a pink and blue, as you might do in a theatrical situation tends to turn the subject pink, blue, or half pink and half blue. Typically this is not a desired result. Instead it is better to use all pink or all blue or no color at all.

Also be sure to use backlight in your scene. This helps the subject stand out from the background. Typically the backlight doesn't have to be as bright as the key light and it can be a different color. However, be careful when using color to not make your subject look "cartoonish" by using too strong of a color.

So how does this understanding of visibility, selective visibility, mood, and modeling help us with better video lighting? Hopefully it simplifies the process as it gives a natural progression to follow while lighting a scene.

VISIBILITY Make sure you have lit the things you want the camera to see.

SELECTIVE VISIBILITY Don't light the things you don't want the camera to see.

MOOD Use your lighting to set the mood if appropriate.

MODELING Add additional lighting to add depth, dimension and color.

These are the basic building blocks that are the basis for lighting everything from a single-camera, one-person interview, to a large televised awards show, or a massive production like the opening and closing ceremonies at the Olympics.

Hopefully by learning the basic building blocks, you can go and experiment with your lighting and ultimately improve your video lighting.

Greg Persinger is owner of Vivid Illumination. He can be reached at greg@vividillumination.com



This article Copyright 2004 - 2010
by Production Media Inc. All Rights Reserved

For Subscription information go to
<http://www.churchproduction.com/go.php/subscribe>

To view Church Production Magazine online go to
<http://www.churchproduction.com/>