

1

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the definitive guide to making studio productions. This book is packed full of live case studies, tips, jargon, real-world scripts and exclusive interviews with directors, producers and top TV executives, working in the industry in the UK, USA, Australia and China, to ensure you get off to a flying start.

Having worked in the industry for twenty years, we have honed our craft as programme-makers working for broadcasters such as BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky and Nickelodeon and now, as media educators, we share our knowledge and passion for TV with the next generation of programme-makers. While a lot of our students arrive with some knowledge of how to make a film, the studio environment still holds an element of mystery. This book is a practical guide, providing you with invaluable insider knowledge.

Do you really know the protocol of a working gallery? Do you know the countdown procedure? What 'falling off air' means? Well you soon will!

We have tried to make this book as conversational as possible with many references to television shows you will know to bring our words to life. Watch the shows, follow the book and make your own versions. The more shows you make, the better you get!

Part one of the book gives you everything to get started, beginning with the big idea. Why are some ideas more successful than others? How do you come up with an idea? How does a programme get commissioned? What do you need to create a pilot to sell your idea? All of these are key questions with answers from top programme-makers from around the world.

Then we move on to pre-production planning – all the elements of production management and the various paperwork that is

4 THE TV STUDIO PRODUCTION HANDBOOK

essential to complete for a smooth-running production. We have included templates for budgeting, scheduling and call sheets. We have also looked at how to develop your idea for television. Each chapter includes exercises and top tips to summarise our points for each stage of production.

Part two of the book looks more in-depth at the different genres that you find in the studio. From drama, news, children's and food, to game shows and prime-time talent and reality shows, we have it all covered. In each chapter we look at a very brief history of each genre – this is not definitive (this is a practical book) but more to give you a flavour of some of the key turning points that relate to that genre. From our unique access to the television industry we have packed these chapters with exclusive interviews from the world's leading industry experts, such as executive producers of *Weakest Link*, *The Voice* and *China's Next Top Model*, directors of *Neighbours* and *Top Gear*, a commissioning editor of *Channel 4 News* and a producer of *The Middle*. We have used live case studies of the biggest global brands, including script extracts from *Coronation Street*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *Big Brother*, *Teletubbies*, *Saturday Kitchen* and *The Chase* for you to block through in your workshops – before devising your own versions.

To pull this all together as an *aide-mémoire* we have devised our own S.T.U.D.I.O. checklist, which is relevant for every single studio production. If you follow this you will be on the road to success.

S.T.U.D.I.O. Toolkit

S – Set up

There is a lot of prep done before the crew and production team even arrive at the studio. The director and producer spend hours breaking the script down and working out how to bring the script to life in the studio. The producer needs to make sure all the logistics are handled and the director needs to work out how many cameras to use and if the show has a presenter, which camera they will talk to and when.

The studio set has to be created: it is just an empty shell until the producer and director communicate their vision to the art team

who can then start to work their magic – constructing, building, painting and creating the set.

Do not underestimate how long it takes to set up in the studio. Studio productions often involve large crews, with lots of equipment to get ready. Schedule this time carefully so you are not up against it from the word go. Allowing enough rehearsal time is paramount to the success of a good studio TV production, and this is even more crucial for live productions. Preparation, preparation, preparation. Studio filming days are typically long (10 to 12 hours a day). They may start at seven o'clock in the morning with a production meeting and tech check (technical inspection of the equipment) and not wrap (the industry term for the end of filming) until seven o'clock in the evening. Further details of how a typical studio day is broken down and an example of a schedule can be found in Chapter 5.

Rehearsal time should be built-in to the set-up time. There are three key stages of the rehearsal process in a studio production, and these stages are often referred to as the block-through, the stagger-through and the run-through. The block-through stage provides invaluable time to work out camera angles and moves with the crew, and mark locations for presenters, actors or contributors. The director is typically on the studio floor during the block-through – discussing shots with the camera operators. Studio productions can be single-camera set-ups, more common in drama, or multiple-camera set-ups, with cameras going into double figures for some big-budget prime-time studio shows. You should never underestimate the value of doing an extensive block-through as Simon Reay, Emmy-nominated director of photography (DOP) of drama, factual and commercials says:

As soon as that camera gets put up it all becomes about the camera and the later that happens, in my mind, the better! It's all about the performers in their space and that's what's important – certainly everything I've ever done, you don't need the camera on so early, leave it and leave it and leave it. Let the artists do what they want to do and that should then inform where your camera goes.

Stage two is the stagger-through – in which, as the name suggests, there is a lot of stopping and starting while presenters/actors go over the script and camera operators adjust their positions. Positions

6 THE TV STUDIO PRODUCTION HANDBOOK

are often marked on the studio floor with gaffer tape to help this process. The director is typically in the gallery at this point and communicates instructions to the camera operators over a talkback system. Meanwhile the floor manager (FM), or first assistant director (AD, in drama), is in charge of everything running smoothly on the studio floor. The FM/AD ensures all talent/actors/contributors know where they need to be and all props are in the right place.

The final rehearsal stage is the run-through. This is the last opportunity to make sure everyone knows what they are doing and the show is the correct length. During this stage the action is played out, without any stops. The gallery production assistant (PA), sometimes known as a script supervisor, is responsible for timings. Any necessary changes required to ensure the show comes in at the correct length are made at the end of the run-through and revisions made to the script. To become a PA you need to be confident and organised, as Katherine Morgan, a live gallery PA with credits on *Match of the Day*, *Mastermind* and *A Question of Sport* advises:

You need to remain calm in stressful situations, especially when working in 'live' TV, as things change at the last minute and you need to be able to react quickly and with confidence to relay changes over talkback so everyone knows where they are on the script, what's next and how long is left on each item and on the overall duration.

All shows are given a running time and overrunning is not an option! For a pre-recorded show this is easier to manage as the show is not live and any additional material can be cut out and mistakes re-shot as 'pick ups' at the end of the show. But, as they say in show business, 'time is money' and no one wants to overrun on a studio day as this can be hugely costly for any crew with overtime in their contracts! For a live show there is the risk of 'falling off air', meaning when a show is cut before it wraps up naturally, for example the presenter is mid-sentence and they cut to the ad break. This looks unprofessional and should be avoided at all costs.

This is why, on live award shows such as the Oscars or the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTAs), everyone nominated is briefed before the show, so that they know how long they have to say their 'thank you's' and are strategically placed by the producer for easy access to the stage to avoid long walks that eat into valuable production time.

Every programme has a timeslot and running time, these are arranged in advance by the channel and cannot be messed with. The only real exceptions are big breaking news stories of national importance and popular live sports events such as Wimbledon or the World Cup you will have noticed that during long sets or a penalty shoot-out, the presenter and/or screen text apologise for the delay to the normal running of the schedule due to the overrunning of the game/breaking news story and content may be moved to a sister channel.

So to set up you need to know the length of your show, allow enough rehearsal time and importantly don't overrun!

T – Talent

What do we mean by talent? In TV terms talent refers to the presenter of a factual or entertainment programme, the news anchor, or actor in a sitcom or soap opera. They are often the best-paid member of the studio production especially if they are a known name!

Attaching a big international name to a series (like Piers Morgan, Kylie Minogue or actors Woody Harrelson or Jennifer Aniston) can help to secure a commission, but this has to be budgeted for as Rebecca Yang, CEO of IPCN, distributor of international brands *The Voice of China* and *China's Got Talent* says of the Chinese TV market: 'Celebrity names now account for more than two thirds of the budget in most of the shows, it has gone crazy.'

Talent is one of the most important ingredients for a successful show of any genre. The casting process is key to finding the right talent for your show. Everyone that appears on the show has to gel – your actors or co-presenters need to get on and have on-screen chemistry. This process can take time with auditions and screen tests, and the channel often requiring final approval. Large shows have dedicated casting teams led by a casting producer. Hiring a celebrity can be crucial to the success of a show. Adrian Swift, executive producer of *The Voice Australia* and Head of Content, Production and Development, Nine Network Australia says: 'celebrities get people in the front door – as in it gets your show noticed and creates a lot of publicity for your show and that brings with it an audience.'

Talent is chosen to match broadcasters' brand values. Each channel thinks very carefully about who they want to represent their channel – are they a good fit for the channel brand, have they got what it takes to be the face of the channel? We know what to expect when we see certain names attached to a programme and as such celebrities often work exclusively for a channel – Simon Cowell in the UK airs his shows on ITV, Ant and Dec are the face of ITV entertainment, winners of multiple Royal Television Society (RTS) and BAFTAs for shows such as *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here*, *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* and *Britain's Got Talent*. The audience know what to expect – they are cheeky chappies, likeable and fun, whereas Simon Cowell and Piers Morgan have built hugely successful careers playing the 'villain' prepared to speak their minds, even if it means upsetting the contributors and the audience. This can become a talking point, referred to as water-cooler TV.

The audience always has to be in mind when you choose your talent. If it's a young skewed show you will need to get the right 'type' and this will be very different from someone required for a Saturday prime-time family audience.

Dealing with talent, especially big names, can be tricky. Most producers and directors will have stories to tell you of their run-ins with difficult actors and presenters. In Chapter 5 we will tell you ways to deal with this and avoid potential pitfalls.

U – Unity

For a successful show you need a united front. There are many departments all working together that all need to have a shared vision.

Studio productions rely on teamwork and everyone has an essential role to play, in front of and behind the screens – from the runner, the most junior member of the production team, to the executive producer. Production teams vary in size from as little as five on a small, low-budget show to hundreds for big brands and films. Whatever the size of the production team it is important to have unity and everyone pulling in the same direction and working for the good of the show and to make the best show possible.

So who are all these people that work on a TV show? The production team is broadly split into the 'organisers' – consisting of a production manager, production co-ordinator and production secretary – who will be in charge of the logistics, ordering transport for the key talent to get to the studio and booking any required accommodation. Call sheets will be sent out so that everyone knows exactly what time to arrive on set and how to get there.

The other half of the production team can be referred to as the 'editorial and creative' team and are in charge of the content of the show – what is actually said/done on-screen. Typically, this includes the executive producer, producer, director, assistant producers, researchers and scriptwriters.

In most cases people working in television are freelancers and the production team typically have longer job contracts, as they are hired for the pre-production process. The technical team members are referred to as the 'crew' and are typically hired for shorter periods that allow them enough time to do their key studio roles (floor manager, camera, sound, art department, costume, post-production). The crew consists of a team of people who prep the set and equipment and enhance the technical look of the show. The art department (under the art director) will ensure the design of the set, and make-up and costume will ensure that the talent and contributors look and are dressed the part.

With so many departments and people working on a typical show, you can see how important it is to know your role and understand the role of everyone else to ensure the smooth running of the studio production. We'll look at studio production roles in full detail in Chapter 4 so that you hit the floor running and begin to get an understanding of the career route you would like to follow.

It is important to get the right crew for the job. Often a director and producer hire the same people as they know they are a 'safe pair of hands' and have proved their worth on previous gigs. This is why networking in the TV industry is so important. You have to meet the right people, but not just that, once you are given your opportunity, you have to impress and keep impressing to get hired again. There is a saying in the TV industry that 'you are

only as good as your last job'. It's a very small world and because teamwork is so important, people want to hire those who have a good reputation at doing the best job possible but are also good to spend time with and won't be moody or unhelpful. The hours are long and you often have to go away for periods of time so being likeable, professional and good at your job is important. Maddy Darrall, company director of Darrall Macqueen and executive producer of *Teletubbies* and *Topsy and Tim* has these words of wisdom:

Make sure you work with people who are really good team players, because working on any studio production is intense. They are long days, and it is a large portion of your life and you have got to work with people that you are compatible with on both a creative and a personal level ... the team has got to be right ... it is all about the team, off-screen and on-screen.

So how can you avoid conflict and remain professional at all times in such a difficult and fast-paced environment? Here are five key points to remember that will help you get noticed and help you to get your next studio production gig!

1. Don't play on your phone or fall asleep on the job! It sounds crazy but we've seen runners trying to catch 40 winks! Making excuses about the long days won't wash – you'll either lose your job on the spot or won't get rehired.
2. Do be a team player – ready to pitch in and help out. Ask yourself, 'what more can I do?'
3. Do arrive early and make sure you have read your call sheet.
4. Do be friendly and enthusiastic – no one wants to spend time with someone who is negative or grumpy.
5. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance or guidance. It's much better for everyone that you get a job done the first time round rather than waiting until it is too late and everyone is stressed by mistakes.

D – Director

The director's role is all about communication, fast decision-making and a clear vision. A studio TV director oversees the creative elements of a production and guides the crew and on-screen talent. The director is typically brought on board after the producer and, depending

on the genre of the show, can be involved from the pre-production stage through to post-production. The director must have a thorough understanding of the script and format of the show to bring the script to life. They must understand the tone and the nuances of the show and work with the crew art department, lighting, camera, sound and post-production – to communicate their vision. In the gallery, the director works very closely with the production assistant to ensure all the required material is shot to the correct duration. The director also works closely with the floor manager. The floor manager acts as the director's eye on the studio floor and there must be clear communication from the director to the studio floor via the floor manager. The director also works closely with the producer – providing technical direction in guiding set and lighting plans and costume design. The director may be involved with the producer in the casting process. It is important that the director and presenters/actors respect one another and work well together to get the required performances, so a director will often sit in with the producer on auditions and view showreels and screen tests.

Directors should be highly organised. The director needs to meticulously plan every camera shot and prepare camera cards and a shot list, perhaps working with a storyboard artist to further work out camera sizes and angles. Storyboards are particularly useful for complicated drama scenes.

During the shoot, the studio director is pivotal to the success of the show, leading the crew and talent during rehearsal and sitting in the gallery and calling every shot that they want the camera operators to make. If a shot isn't called it won't be seen on-screen! On low-budget, small shows the director will also double up as the vision mixer – cutting the show as the action happens. Most studio directors start as gallery runners and work up to be vision mixers or production assistants and then directors.

Not all studio shows are edited live or as live so the director also needs to be in the edit for the post-production stage – overseeing visual effects and sound design.

It is a challenging and competitive job, so how do you stand out from the crowd? Jet Wilkinson, a drama director of popular Australian soaps *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* has this advice:

You have to be able to have a voice, make it your own, yet at the same time do it all on time and within the constraints of [the show] ... So it's finding that balance of having your own voice within a huge machine so that you can have longevity in the work that you do.

With so much responsibility a good director needs to be creative, efficient, an excellent communicator and must be able to problem-solve and stay calm under pressure. In a studio gallery environment there is so much going on at any one time – everyone looks to the director for leadership and it's important that the director gives off confidence, knows what they are doing but importantly can relay this to the crew and talent and find solutions to any problems. Contrary to stereotypes about film and TV directors it is not a requirement to shout at or terrorise your crew. Good directors know how to get the best out of their crew and talent – they have authority by being encouraging and supportive and earning their team's respect.

I – Innovation

There is a saying that there are no new ideas, but you can give it a fresh spin. Talent shows have been broadcast on TV since the 1960s, but this genre has been reinvented with new dimensions making the most of technical advances through the use of interactive live viewer vote. Shows such as *X Factor* and *Got Talent* refreshed the brand by bringing the audience something new by showing the audition process and what happened beyond the stage and also emphasising the singers' back stories, adding a human touch to make the audience root for their favourites. With *The Voice* it was the introduction of the chairs and not being able to judge on appearances.

Every genre from drama to news to game shows has to continually think of new ways to cover the same topics to avoid predictability and maintain audience interest and viewing figures. An essential part of being on the editorial side of a TV programme, in development or as a scriptwriter, is thinking of new and exciting ways to tell familiar stories. What are the fresh angles you can bring to an already recognisable format? You have to constantly ask yourself what is unique about this idea, and what will excite the audience and the commissioning editor to get your idea commissioned and

on the screen? David Williams, Creative Director of Entertainment North at the BBC explains what he looks for in a good idea:

I suppose there are a number of factors. It is often not the idea that excites but it's the way into them that is exciting. That might be a technical innovation that tells the story, it might be a mechanic which brings it together in a different way, it might be a slight blurring of different techniques all of which give it a turn of the wheel that make it feel new and exciting. That's not to say that when a new idea first comes through the door it is not a brilliant thing, but often it is about doing what is going to deliver well to an audience when they have an appetite for an idea and delivering it in a different way.

Companies and channels are always on the lookout for the next big hit show. But remember that to come up with original content you need to know what has come before, and that means that you need to consume everything you can get your hands on – watch old episodes of soaps, comedies, quiz shows and game shows, and start thinking about how you can bring a fresh approach to something. What's the unique selling point of your idea?

O – Obstacles

Be a pessimist and think ahead. Anticipate what could go wrong and have a solution ready!

On a TV show it is typically one of the jobs of the producer to overcome obstacles. What's the worst that could happen? What do we have in place to combat that? You need back-ups for your main contributors, and sometimes even back-ups for them! What if your presenter is running late? Can we get the presenter to stay overnight to minimise that issue? Can we set up the night before?

In production it's essential to be a good problem-solver. In the world of TV things will not always go to plan, actors and contributors will fall down, your favourite camera operator might get another gig, you might not have the budget you want for all the cameras – so what are you going to do about it? You have to find solutions and quickly. You have to break down the script and work out the budget and schedule to carefully bring your idea to life.

You need a 'can do' attitude. The magic of TV throws up many dilemmas that the producer and team have to overcome, as Werner Walian, producer of the hit TV series *The Middle* says when explaining the issues he faced filming the show on the Warner Bros. studios in Hollywood when it is supposed to be set in the Midwest (quite a challenge!):

I will have anywhere from 150 to 200 people working with me from costumes to post to art direction to location and basically it's my job when the script comes to me, to break it down and figure out. Right how are we going to be able to make this next episode within the five days that we have to shoot the show? It's very challenging for a show that takes place in Indiana but we shoot here in California. Indiana is very flat and [there are] not too many mountains, no palm trees and lots of corn and then we have to try and create a sense that when we are outside, for the location work, it looks somewhat like the Midwest so those are big challenges!

These are all things we have learnt through experience, trial and error. If you can demonstrate this kind of intuition for programme-making, you will go far.

So remember

- S – set-up time – always prep
- T – talent – make your programme come to life
- U – unity – does everyone have a shared vision?
- D – director – the creative visionary
- I – innovation – don't make derivative – make defining
- O – obstacles – be a troubleshooter and create solutions!

Follow these rules and you will be the kind of person the industry needs. Now read on to get your idea started...