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# The Still Photographer

## (Stills/Portrait Photographer)

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### Duties

The Still/Portrait Photographer's primary job is to interpret the project in single frames which accurately represent the story, production value, stars, and feeling of the show. These images are used to publicize, entice, and seduce the potential audience into watching the show. Whenever the public is exposed to images other than video or film regarding a show, they must be shot by the unit still photographer.

The still person will work both during actual filming/taping, during rehearsals, on or off the set. He or she will shoot available light but is also capable of doing fully lit shoots with either his own lighting or in conjunction with production.

More specifically, the still photographer takes production stills that the publicity department can use to promote the film or television show in press kits and various print media and the increasingly important DVD stills galleries. This includes characteristic shots of each scene, shots which show the actors acting together, shots which give a feeling of the look and atmosphere of the show, good character shots of the actors, shots of the director directing, special effects being rigged, special make-up being created, anything which could be supplied to the regular or genre press or used later on the DVD to promote interest in and expand knowledge about a production.

But beyond that, because the Still Photographer is the only person on the set authorized to take photographs, he or she may, if time allows, serve some of the photographic needs of the crew. This may include (but is not limited to):

detailed documentation of the sets (in case they must be re-created at a later date);  
historical documentation of the production (including guests on the set and the crew at work);

photos shot specifically for inclusion in the production as photographic props - Sometimes the still photographer is called upon by either the prop or set department to create shots of the actors or sets for use as set dressing or hand props which are integral to the storyline. These jobs may only be performed by a union still photographer. Only a union lab should print these for those departments;

merchandising reference shots (especially on science fiction or other genre productions where shots of props, costumes or sets may be turned into toys);

and possibly (though rarely now) continuity shots to help wardrobe, make-up and script supervision when requested, although continuity has largely been taken over by each department using small digital cameras. When it has been approved by the producer, it is permissible for a designated representative from each department to take their own continuity photos as long as there is a full time Photographer on the production. Only these pre-approved crew members may use digital cameras on the set to prevent the unchecked proliferation of people shooting photographs which jeopardizes set security and creates a chaotic atmosphere around the talent, hampering our ability to do our job.

Because of the extreme challenge the still photographer faces at trying to obtain his shots, Hair and Makeup should only capture their continuity photos in the makeup and hair trailer. When the AD sees the set time being eaten up by Hair, makeup, wardrobe and props shooting the actors on the set prior to filming, they understandably feel that no more time can be afforded to the still man to get the shots he needs. A paparazzi situation can ensue creating confusion and hurt feelings which could be avoided if the still photographer's position as the sole photographer on set was recognized.

Crew members from any department who are attempting to create a portfolio of their work need to contact the publicity or photo department to obtain official stills from the production. No producer wants to see his project represented by an amateur photographer creating unauthorized unapproved photos.

Diplomatically, if there is any shot requested by a crew member which will not jeopardize set security and is allowed by the producers, it is sometimes a good idea to have an extra camera handy to accommodate such requests. This is entirely optional, but can help forge good relationships on the set.

The Guild is always happy to receive pictures from the still photographer of the camera crew at work for the monthly newsletter, **Camera Angles**, and **International Photographer Magazine**. The Guild publications are an excellent way to have your work seen by other members both of Local 600 and by Producers and other production personnel and our publication policy is to only use the work of our union still photographers.

### **DIFFICULTIES:**

In shooting production stills, the Still Photographer always needs a place to shoot from which gives a "clean shot" without light stands and flags or fellow crew members in the background. Sometimes only very specific angles will work to produce a usable picture, and it is very important that the rest of the crew understand this and attempt to accommodate those needs. A Still Photographer might only be able to shoot a usable still from one place, while a Script Supervisor might be able to see the scene well enough from a number of places. Sometimes having a Camera Assistant move a few inches one way or another or having a light stand or flag adjusted slightly can make the difference between getting the job done and not getting anything at all.

Sometimes the Director or AD will allow a few moments when a scene has been completed for the Photographer to take key shots from the video or movie camera's point of view – this requires asking for extra cooperation and patience from the actors to perform key moments once again, and is very difficult to do if crew members obliviously walk through the frame or begin to strike lights or sets.

On multiple camera shows (sitcoms, for instance) the Still Photographer must be especially careful to be aware of the code marks on the floor which show where a camera is going to move next. Don't be afraid to talk to the dolly grips and if unsure stay back until you see the rehearsals. During the production, it is vital that you not be in the way of the Dolly Grips who will be constantly moving and repositioning cameras throughout a scene and who must find their marks on the floor, where you might be standing. Be very aware of which marks are for which scenes so you do not block them from the Dolly Grips' view.

When a set-up shot is required by the publicity department, a member of that department should be present to help inform the actors and direct the set-up, but as this can not always be guaranteed, letting everyone know about the situation as early as possible is important so it can be included in the schedule.

Many problems can be avoided by negotiation before a show begins and by making sure you have good communication with the publicist and making sure the producers understand what you will need to do the job properly for them.

### **Still Photographer: PROTOCOL**

To be successful on the set you have to be both a creative photographer and a diplomat.

When arriving on a set for the first time, it is very important that the Still Photographer introduce himself or herself to the key personnel. It is absolutely essential to have the cooperation of the Director, the Assistant Directors the Director of Photography, the camera crew, Gaffer, Key Grip and the actors. They need to know who you are, why you're there and what specifically you may need during the course of the shoot. As part of the camera crew, you fill out a time card in order to get proper credit for your hours for Motion Picture Health and Welfare. If for any reason, the production resists giving you a time card, call your union rep to intercede for you.

If the 1<sup>st</sup> AD knows in advance that a particular setup is crucial to the publicity department, they can plan ahead for an appropriate time to do it and warn the actors and crew to be prepared for it. If the actors and crew know in advance that you usually run in after a take to grab shots, they will continue to act, stay out of the background and keep lights lit for a few minutes after hearing "cut."

The Key Grip can be a great ally when you need an emergency ladder or apple box. It is very important to be present for blocking and rehearsals to know where likely shooting spots will be and to coordinate your moves with those of the Dolly Grips (or camera peds) and it's always a good idea, particularly on a multi-camera show, to work out a warning system with the Dolly Grips, so that if you are about to be blind sided by a fast camera move, they can give you some warning rather than risk both injury and ruining a shot.

It is also very important, if you should need to use a strobe or flash of any kind (as with a Polaroid camera or when documenting sets or diplomatic shots with guests using a strobe) to yell "FLASHING!" before taking the shot so the electricians will know that the ensuing flash of light does not represent one of the stage lights blowing out.

It can also be very helpful to be briefed before hand by the publicity department or the Producers as to any idiosyncrasies the Director or actors might have and thereby avoid any embarrassing show-downs on the set. The Publicist should work closely with you to assure that everyone knows exactly what is needed and to help

set up shots with the actors when a special set-up is called for. Likewise, you can be of tremendous help to the Publicist by using your expertise in recognizing and recommending the shots which will reproduce best when the Publicist must pick out the best possible production stills for the press kit or publicity release.

### **EYELINE**

While most professional actors are used to stills being taken during a scene, some are easily distracted by a still camera. Always be aware of the actor's eyeline in a scene. This is where the actor is directing his attention (the other actor in the scene) and is usually on the opposite side where the first AC or focus puller is situated. If you find yourself in the actor's eyeline stand still and if possible keep your face down. At cut, back up and take position on the other side. Often the assistant is in your way but if you ask he will usually give you a shot either by moving in or out from the camera.

### **EQUIPMENT**

Almost all still photography on the set is now done digitally. On rare occasions, film may still be used.

**Film Cameras:** To work effectively on a set, the still photographer should have at least two 35mm cameras housed in custom blimps, in order to shoot as silently as possible during takes. It is wise to have an extra camera body fitting in the same system in case of jams or breakdowns. A full complement of lenses would include: 28 mm, 35 mm, 50 mm, 85 mm, 105 mm and 135 mm. Sometimes a 200mm might be useful, but it generally does not open up far enough to accommodate the low light levels on many sets. A monopod can come in very handy when using a long lens, especially in low light situations. It is a good idea to keep an extra 35mm camera handy with a strobe attachment for dealing with things occurring off the set, out of the lights, and to deal with diplomatic photos requested by producers, actors, crew members, etc. This camera can also be used for set documentation. It is wise to have both incident and reflective light meters, a jacket with lots of pockets for lenses, and a good supply of sharpies and envelopes (for marking film cans and to package exposed film for the lab with whatever labeling is needed).

**Digital Cameras:** Not only do you need to provide the digital camera and lenses and flash cards (which the production company should supply, as they often do with film), but you may also need to provide a laptop computer, CDs, DVDs, a disc burner and often a portable printer for creating last minute photographic props. The photos must be downloaded and either burned to CD/DVD or transferred to a portable hard drive for delivery. The union lab for the production should do all numbering, converting, labeling and printing. The production company should not expect these functions to be done by the still photographer.

A wardrobe of dark clothes comes in very handy on dark sets to lessen any distraction to the actors. (A Still Photographer can be a very easy target for a distracted actor looking for a scapegoat.)

It is also important to find a safe place for your equipment which also provides easy access. This might be the camera truck, camera room or some other place which the Director of Photography and/or Assistant Directors may be able to help provide.

Ideally, the producers should also provide insurance for your equipment, whether film or digital, and make sure you have a safe place to keep all of it on the set

### **RENTAL**

It is the Producer's responsibility to pay for rental of your equipment, and the base rate generally used by the photographers of Local 600 to cover the rental cost of two 35mm camera bodies, an appropriate set of lenses, 2 blimps and a light meter, is around \$150. a day (from a rental house this figure would be closer to \$250./day), although it might be more depending upon the extent of the equipment you provide. Extra cameras, strobes, cameras with other ratio formats, tripods, backdrops, etc., all would justify higher rental charges to the production company. Providing them with a price list from any local rental house will assure them that they are receiving a bargain by paying your daily equipment rate.

If providing digital equipment, the rental can range from \$250.00 to over \$500.00 per day depending on the extent of equipment and extra services provided (potentially including lap-top computer, CD burner, and printer as options). If you provide prints for the production, you should charge them per print (generally around \$10 and up depending on size) and cost of burned CDs (generally anywhere from \$8 to \$15.). Negotiation on these extra expenses has become a large part of our job. Episodic Television generally pays from \$150 to \$250/day for digital equipment rental.

An alternative to burning the CDs/DVDs, if you are working on a big-budget studio motion picture, is to ask the studio's lab for some external hard drives, put your images on them and send the drive to the lab which will

transfer and send it back to you. With two or three drives in rotation, it can save you a great deal of time and hours of CD/DVD burning. Some photographers simply turn in the flashcards, but only if the company has provided them initially.

Any work done after wrap to transfer and/or process the images for the production company must be compensated, but any manipulation, numbering, labeling or printing of images is rightfully the work of the lab, not the photographer.

### **GENERAL NOTES**

**When getting a job call, always call the union office in your region** to let them know about the job. Keep track of the expenses you incur, including number of rolls of film shot, as well as your equipment rental which you bill back to the production company...this may be of help to the Guild later if it becomes necessary to double check the costs involved with a show to determine if it qualifies for the low-budget agreements or not. You may not accept less than the union minimum for the type of production you work on, and you should fill out a time card to make sure you receive credit for the hours you work toward your health care and pension. If you have any problems on the set with the production company ignoring safety rules, or trying to undercut the union contract in any way, do not hesitate to call the union office to let our business managers handle the problem for you. They are THERE to protect your interests and make sure you are not abused.

If you have a problem, do not hesitate to call your Guild representatives.

#### **STILL PHOTOGRAPHERS as defined by the Basic Agreement:**

Operation of all still cameras used for the purpose of performing work covered by this agreement shall be performed exclusively by Still Photographers covered by this agreement (except for pre-production location identification still pictures or pre-production still pictures made away from the Producer's premises for identification purposes only, for set design or decoration, but not for publicity purposes...)