



The 180 Minute Hour by Randy West

With all of the new equipment that has been added to television production facilities as technology has advanced through the decades, there is one simple piece of apparatus that was vital since the birth of broadcasting itself that has now virtually disappeared from the studio. The director, his entire production team and a program's talent were all slaves to this almighty mechanism. And its absence marked the beginning of a quantum shift that has affected every aspect of game show production.



That nearly extinct studio stalwart is the clock. In the era before videotape the clock was the heartbeat of production. Programming was live, and measuring time accurately was so important that an electrical impulse from Western Union would precisely reset and synchronize clocks in broadcasting facilities across the United States simultaneously at the top of every hour. That was the origin of the time tone “beep” that was heard on the hour. It now remains primarily a memory and an audio antique that is recreated on some news and talk radio stations.

Dave Letterman and Jay Leno have a clock in their plain view as their shows are produced live to tape. But it's been decades since the clock in CBS' Studio 33, now The Bob Barker Studio, was removed from where Jack Benny could peer over the heads of the audience members to pace his performance. Since the advent of tape the only clock that counts in game show production is in the control room, and it serves a different purpose than getting shows on and off the air on time.





of danger while it created a special aura of unpredictability for the viewer.

In the day when game shows were live, the tension on the set of “What’s My Line?” was palpable when panelists and mystery guests occasionally arrived just minutes and even seconds before their on-air moment. On “I’ve Got A Secret” and the original “The Price Is Right” unpredictable escapades such as animals relieving themselves on the air created unexpected hi-jinx. Knowing that anything could happen at any moment on live television infused the studio with an air



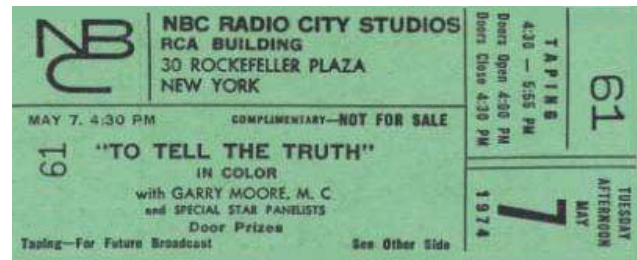
refrigerators falling, props failing, and models driving cars into the scenery. There are priceless moments in which contestants are seen falling at the showcase showdown wheel, fainting at the showcase podiums, as well as chasing, lifting and man-handling Bob Barker. There is magic in live television that audiences find thoroughly entertaining.

With the live-to-tape zeitgeist at “The Price Is Right” I was always conscious of the fact that I was working without a net during the weeks that I filled-in as the show’s announcer. But it’s that live sensibility at the show that has given us so many magical moments of top heavy



At first, using videotape was more about making production more economical and life a little easier. An individual studio could accommodate multiple programs without the need to strike and reconstruct a show’s set every day. With the advent of tape AFTRA, the union that represents broadcasting talent, even instituted a multiple program discount for shows that produced more than one episode in a day to be aired in the same calendar week. The union encouraged the practice as it allowed for its performers to book more work.

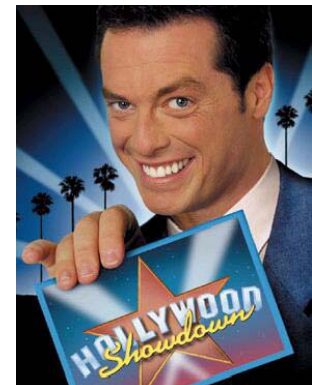
In the early 1970s, "To Tell The Truth" would tape two episodes on Tuesdays and three on Wednesdays, and then be done for the week. It wasn't long before the economics of the business led to a week's worth of episodes being taped in a single day.



Later, we began to see six or even seven half-hour episodes being taped in a day. With well orchestrated pre-production, thirteen weeks of shows could be compressed into 3 weeks of taping. The staff could then scatter to work on other projects while waiting to hear whether the show would be renewed. Shows with longer commitments could still benefit from the economy of scale. I enjoyed the freedom afforded me with the ability to add the announce track to 15 episodes of "Supermarket Sweep" in a single afternoon editing session.



The record in game show production will likely always belong to Bob Stewart who, with Dick Clark as host, regularly produced 10 complete episodes of "Pyramid" live-to-tape in a single day. The efficiency gene in the Stewart family lineage was evident years later as I remember tape days when Sande Stewart, with Todd Newton at the host



podium, could produce the five episodes of "Hollywood Showdown" that were scheduled to take a full day, all before lunch!



But an entirely new model for game show production has developed in the new millennium. It's the 120 minute half-hour that I first experienced when I worked on "Weakest Link". On that show, both writing that was dependent upon the game play and a reach for higher production values resulted in an episode requiring as much as two hours or more to tape. More recently I performed warm-up at the taping of episodes of "Deal or No Deal" that lasted three hours each.

Now, instead of a director cutting live among the feeds from four cameras, a system that still serves “The Price Is Right” so well after 35 years, the desire to capture every reaction and important nuance for fickle prime time audiences has led to utilizing as many as ten cameras. With a majority of those cameras feeding individual tape machines, a show can be assembled in



post production using the very best shots and angles. And to be certain that the most compelling angles and shots are captured, important moments can be re-created on stage and captured several different times. Variations on the line of copy that I’ve read at countless tapings have never been more apropos: “Portions of the program not affecting the outcome of the game have been edited for broadcast”.



This new model for production that’s become common among the latest breed of game shows certainly isn’t rooted in classic television. And it’s more than a variation on the multi-camera system used early in game show production by Ralph Edwards, or the three camera sitcom technique refined by Desi Arnaz that’s still in use today. It’s also not traditional film technique which uses a single camera to shoot a scene from various angles. It’s a new

hybrid, and with it comes a myriad of changes.

For example, with as many as 30 hours of tape from a single episode, post-production facilities run 24 hours a day. Edited episodes are screened and sent back for re-editing. Hosts return to record audio pick-ups of lines that weren’t originally spoken on the set. Joe Cipriano adds his announce tracks to “Deal or No Deal” and “Identity” via an ISDN phone line from his garage in Beverly Hills which has been converted to a state of the art studio.



And with the new 180 minute hour has come the phenomenon of the paid audience. After all, no matter how entertaining the warm-up performer, it's a rare mere mortal tourist who can sit through three hours of stops and starts, or be expected to display the energized involvement necessary for the audience reaction shots. So every day, several hundred show-biz hopefuls are being booked and wrangled by audience companies at a cost of many thousands of dollars. It's become an entire industry unto itself.



This spring, ABC took this new model of production to a new frontier. Los Angeles Center Studios, one of L.A.'s newer production facilities, became home to "National Bingo Night". Weeks of pre-production planning culminated when a huge truck containing a mobile TV control room with sufficient production power to accommodate big awards shows and extensive sports coverage was parked outside an 18,000 sq. ft. sound stage that contained a massive custom designed and fabricated set.

On tape day, the huge crew included ten camera operators for the pedestal and jib cameras that were augmented by three stationary "lipstick" cameras. There was no "line cut" or real-time camera switching.



Instead, all of the cameras were "iso", meaning that the output from the thirteen cameras was captured by thirteen individual tape machines all running simultaneously.



At the end of a full day of production, more than six hours of videotape had been used to record the coverage from each of the thirteen cameras. A total of nearly 100 hours of videotape was then trucked to a post-production facility where a small army of post-production supervisors and editors worked in shifts for days to assemble a finished product that ran approximately 43 minutes.

ABC broadcast the one-hour program on May 18th. The heavily promoted debut of “National Bingo Night” kept almost all of the lead-in audience from “America’s



Funniest Home Videos”, the top-rated show at 8PM. But “Bingo’s” 9PM debut finished in third-place among the networks with disappointing ratings in both total viewers (6.16 million) and adults 18-49 (1.8 rating / 6 share). Winning the time period was a Dr. Phil Primetime Special that attracted 7.76 million viewers, scoring a 2.1/ 7 among adults 18-49. While there were pre-taped elements in Dr. Phil’s show, the hour was produced essentially in real-time on a standing set on a dedicated sound stage on the Paramount lot. Comparing the budgets between the two shows could be a graduate course in broadcast economics.



The new model for prime time game show production is far more costly and demanding, but proponents consider the added expense and complexity to be necessary. These shows have to match the production value of their competition in prime time. The occasionally sloppy camera work of an earlier era no longer goes unnoticed. Having grown up with home

video cameras, today’s viewing audience is more sophisticated than ever. The most recent research indicates that amateur producers collectively edit and post as many as 100,000 videos a day on YouTube.

And with the audience more fickle than ever, overwhelmed with endless choices at their viewing fingertips, programmers cite the importance of fully exploiting every moment of human drama. Those moments of suspense, elation and disappointment are at the core of the basic appeal of game shows. Nobody can ever say that director R. Brian DiPirro doesn’t know how to wring every second of suspense from a reveal.





Clever writing and pre-production planning can create wonderfully unexpected surprises for contestants and for the home audience. And by fully utilizing the flexibility that editing affords a producer, he can be sure to make the most of those preconceived moments. But we must also consider what is lost when the element of true unpredictability is suppressed. Although more than one of the lovely models on “Deal or No Deal” who stand balanced on

high heels atop their narrow plexiglass perches have fallen during a lengthy tape day, those are moments that will never see air in their original context.

While progress is inevitable, it does create a touch of nostalgia for simpler times. After all, those fabulous and unforgettable moments that we all love in clip shows such as “Game Show Moments Gone Bananas” and “The Most Outrageous Game Show Moments” come from shows of an earlier, simpler and more dangerous era when the cameras captured the action in real time and anything could happen.

