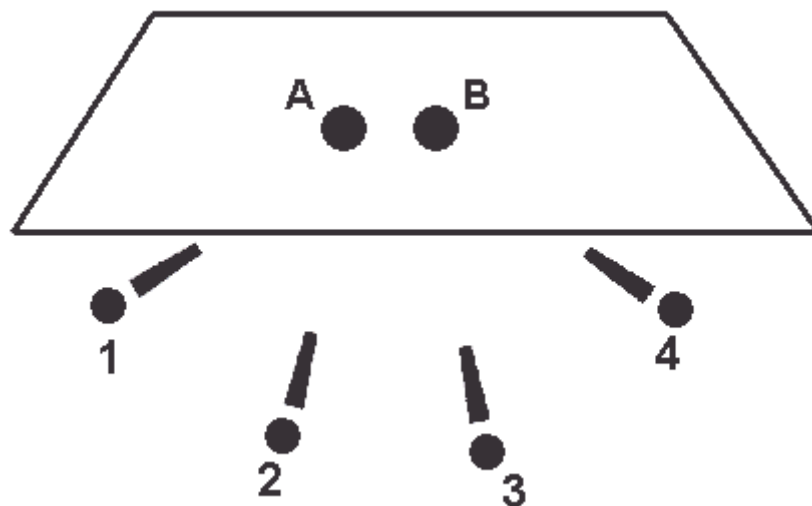


Soap: On the Cutting Edge of Innovation

The writing wasn't the only aspect of *Soap* that pushed the limits of television in its day. According to director JD Lobue, his predecessor, Jay Sandrich, was one of the first to use what was known as the "4-camera iso" technique.

In a 2-camera iso (short for "isolated") setup - the norm at the time - only two out of four cameras would be hooked up to two different video recorders at any given time. If it was a two-character scene, for example, you would have tape continuously running on Jessica and Chester - each to a separate tape machine - with the technical director (TD) editing the show while taping was in progress. However, with this setup you couldn't be taping a master shot or shots of any other characters without switching which cameras were iso'd, and the TD would have to do this all on the fly.

With the 4-camera iso technique used by *Soap*, you could have four cameras feeding to four separate tape machines continuously, giving the video editor maximum coverage for assembling a completed scene in postproduction. An AD would still be telling the cameramen what shots were wanted. (This is essentially the same setup you have with film work where each camera has its own film roll.)



Soap's 4-camera "iso" setup, unique in its day, provided maximum coverage of what transpired on stage.

The director would tell the associate director which of the cameras should be recording at any given time; the AD would then pass this information on to the camera operators who had to time their shots just right. Explains Lobue, "So you had to really make sure those 'isos' were switched properly so that you had the setup to a joke and the joke itself isolated so you could extend or shorten the time of those camera cuts, because you couldn't guess how the audience was going to react. Sometimes a joke would play better in the dress shows than the air show," in part because different audiences were used for each. For instance, one camera operator had to be sure he recorded Danny setting up a joke - and whatever audience laughter that setup inspired - and the second camera had to capture Burt's response, and stay on Richard Mulligan long enough to record the extra little facial expressions or other reactions he tended to spring on his co-workers at the last moment. This gave the director and video editor enough material to splice together the best scene.

Lobue estimates that only about 25% or 30% of an episode was made of footage from the recorded dress rehearsal or “dress show.” “So if you had a 2-shot [where two interacting characters appear at the same time on screen] the first time you shot it, you’d go to singles or close-ups the next time you shot it, and all that stuff was intercut.” Not only did this give the editing team more material to draw from, it also acted as insurance if, for example, an actor’s line was obscured by audience laughter.

Once *Soap* became successful, the network bought enough equipment so that all four cameras could record simultaneously, giving the editing team a lot more material from which to cut a scene together. Says Lobue, “That was new and different in terms of videotape production.”

Yet for all its cutting-edge innovations, some of its methods were admirably old school.

“Most people who have looked at that show on the air swore that it was shot on film, but in fact it was shot on video tape,” says associate producer Marsha Posner. “Before we started shooting, we went to Frederick’s of Hollywood and bought some black stockings and we put the stockings over the lens of the camera, and that gave us the look we wanted. When people saw that show on the air, they swore up and down that it was shot on film.”

Recalls Lobue, “We scrimmed the filter wheels in the cameras to give it a softer look. I didn’t know they came from Frederick’s (I’m sure this would have made Jerry Falwell cringe), but we knew they were like silk. We went for a film look; we did more cross key lighting and softened the look of the hard-edged video.” Admits director Jay Sandrich with a laugh, “That’s a new one on me.”

Page 154 and 155 in the book:

“SOAP The Unauthorized Inside Story of the Sitcom that Broke ALL the Rules”

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