



The Checklist to Prevent: *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

By Phil Cooke

Every winter, church media producers across the country begin a time honored and terrifying ritual: "The Church Christmas Pageant". These local, church sponsored theatrical presentations are usually videotaped for archives or bookstore sales, and although everyone begins the process with high hopes, they often leave media producers weeping, or screaming hysterically promising never to do it again.

Most producers reading this have already started working on this year's presentation, and in an effort to help you keep both your sanity and family intact, here are a few tips from the Phil Cooke Pictures archives to make this Christmas season a little more jolly:

- 1) **It's never too early to start your preparation.** Year after year, producers wait until the last minute, thinking "*I'll let the Music Director do all of his work first.*" Nothing could be worse. Start planning now. Get your hand on a script and music as early as possible, and start thinking about staging and shooting. Certainly things will change, but experienced producers and directors know it's easier to change an existing plan than create one from scratch at the last minute.
- 2) **Bring your crew into the process early as well.** Start generating excitement and ideas from your volunteers and crew members. They usually want to offer suggestions and ideas but are rarely asked. Remember - you don't have

to take all their ideas, but being a good listener motivates them to be a stronger part of the team and creates a better attitude.

- 3) **Help the Music Director understand the difference between "stage lighting" and "television lighting."** What's the point of going to the trouble and expense of shooting the Christmas musical if your end product's video level won't register? Help the Music Director understand the limitations of the camera. Don't be obnoxious or "know it all," just work with him or her and help them understand. Also - be sensitive to the spirit and vision of the Music Director. Supplement the lighting where necessary, but do your best not to "blast" the stage and ruin the dramatic experience.
- 4) **Create a Shot List.** Most church TV Directors try to "wing it" and hope they can stay on top of things during the performance. Don't take chances. Create a shot list during the rehearsals, so when you get to the actual performance, you can relax a little and concentrate on the timing of your cuts and dissolves. Certainly there will be changes and adjustments, but that's minor compared to all the screaming and yelling you'll have to do if you're not prepared. And speaking of that....
- 5) **Stop Screaming and Yelling.** A screaming director is a director who has run out of ideas. Every crew member on your team loses a little respect for you the minute you start yelling. Learn to control your temper, and guide your crew through the program with encouragement, strong leadership skills, and creative ideas and suggestions. I've often advised young directors to read Dale Carnegie's classic book: "How to Win Friends and Influence People." It's the best book on this subject I know, and it's filled with insights and techniques for helping you achieve your goals through other people.
- 6) **Know the Difference between "cuts" and "dissolves."** Cuts and dissolves to a professional television director are like periods and commas to a writer.

They are the visual grammar that makes the scene work. They express two completely different feelings and emotions, so don't mix them up. Remember - cuts are sharp and make the scene move. Dissolves are softer, slower, and on the "warm and fuzzy" side. Understand how to use them effectively, and your programs will instantly make a giant leap forward.

- 7) **Shoot at Least One Rehearsal.** During the actual performance, you can't get the camera onstage and get the unique close-ups and angles you really need. So I always suggest you shoot a dress rehearsal. That will allow you to put a camera onstage, backstage, or within a group of actors to get a unique angle or perspective. Don't overdo it, but it's a great way to find powerful shots you can intercut into your final edit.

- 8) **Have a De-Briefing.** Don't dare release the crew without a short meeting on what worked and didn't work during the night's taping. You can learn a great deal by discussing the shoot with the crew, and find out helpful information for the next night.

- 9) **Toss out the Normal Rules about Shooting a Church Service.** A Christmas program is completely different from a Sunday service, so why aren't you changing your camera positions? Set the camera angles for each project you shoot, and never leave them in the same place for everything. Those cameras are the gateway for thousands of people to understand that presentation, so use them effectively and in the right places.

Remember - the Christmas season is a time of joy, not tears. So start thinking now about a successful and effective way to tape this year's Christmas play or musical presentation. Some churches spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on their shows, and it's the one time of the year when you'll be most likely to get non-Christians into the building.

Give them something to remember during the program, and also give them something on video to take home and enjoy for years to come.

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