

FRED PUSEY

# DESIGNING FOR COLOUR TELEVISION

Designing for colour television is almost an understatement as there is still a majority of black-and-white television receivers in the British Isles. In these circumstances most current television design is a compromise, as designers are always having to consider the grey scale when they are choosing colours for decoration and set dressings. They have to agree also with the compromise lighting necessary in order to ensure a good picture for black-and-white reception.

A considerable amount of colour subtlety is often sacrificed to the black-and-white screens, making the resultant picture crude and overcoloured. This over-emphasis is especially apparent when programmes are viewed on the smaller screens of portable sets and the small Japanese receivers. It has also to be remembered that certain colours have a similar tone value on the grey scale, which often

causes an area of colour decoration to be lost. This complication frequently makes a designer choose a more crude or less pleasing colour; for example, this is liable to occur when a designer is reproducing delicate Regency-style decoration where the colours need to be pale and subtle. The advent of colour television has helped considerably towards amalgamation between the various sections of the production team. The designer works even more closely with the director than he did before, and the director is generally inclined to take the designer's advice more than he did in the past. This co-operation is especially effective when the director trusts the designer's judgement and ideas from mutual experience in previous shows. Designers in colour are inclined to specialize in style and approach and thus become known to be particularly suitable to design for certain types of entertainment.



The designer and the costume designer must be very conversant with one another's work and co-operate in considerable detail throughout a production. Great caution must be exercised to avoid colour that is too vivid and strong and is consequently 'eye catching'. The colour provided by settings and set dressings generally must not draw the emphasis off the actors whose costume colour must be able to 'support' them in their relative importance. One finds as a general rule that the colour impact of the costume must be greater than the colour impression of the setting. Generally, props and set decoration need to play a 'supporting' role in the final picture. Nevertheless, sets and their decoration must play a 'guiding' part in establishing the mood of the scene in order that it may be available to give lighting wide scope in providing emphasis to reflect general mood and atmosphere throughout a scene, or during short sequences of gaiety and tragedy.

Because of the extra dimension provided by colour, it is found, especially with drama, that settings can be designed with a simpler plan and simpler detail than has hitherto been found necessary. One can create much more mood and punch in a setting by the careful use of colour and thus help the director to tell his story in a simpler and clearer style.

In light entertainment the designer and lighting director can collaborate to such a considerable extent that a large proportion of the décor can be provided by coloured light and projected light often moving through various coloured materials, textures and shapes, thus eliminating a considerable amount of scenery. These effects, exclusively produced in colour must be watched by both the designer and the lighting director as they can be lost on a black-and-white picture, as again the subtleties of colour of similar tone can be lost on the grey scale.

It is generally observed in both drama and light entertainment that a successful colour picture viewed on the control room monitors invariably appears to provide a pleasing black-and-white picture. Designers have constantly to remember that colour is very much an individual taste and they must endeavour not to be too dogmatic in inflicting their own particular idiosyncrasies and preferences in the choice of colour combinations on the public

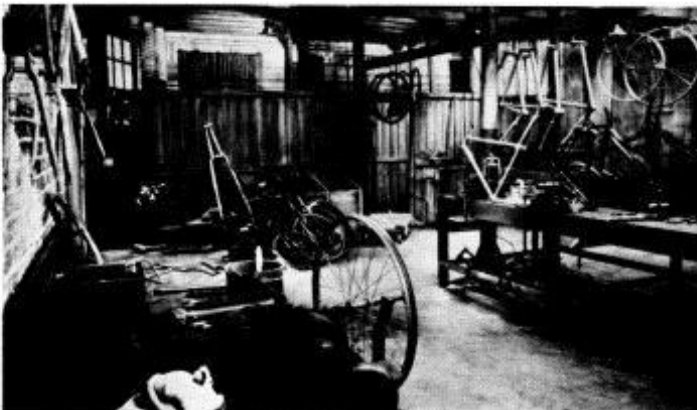
when a more usual selection of colours would keep the balance of the production on a more acceptable level. This controlled choice often strengthens rather than limits a designer's work.

The introduction of colour television has enhanced the work of the designer; it has given him another great dimension and made his work much more interesting and attractive and, of course, more telling on the screen. Although most designers worked in colour before, it was used in an attempt to help the actors to feel more at home in the settings and to help the flow of the production. Then one could get away with providing similar toned dressings which were not necessarily similar or matching coloured ones as they would register as matching objects on the black-and-white screen.

The designer is able to get depth or lightness of colour from the textures of materials which provide subtle variations and add richness to the finished picture. Considerable subtlety of texture is often lost on the black-and-white screen, and when working in colour the designer has to pay much greater attention to detail and be aware of many more surprises and variations of colour and tone when an object or area is shot from various angles. He has to be conscious of the reflection of colours one on another, such as the reflection of floors on walls. For example, a red Turkey carpet on the floor will give white walls a pink blush and, in reverse, red walls can cause saturation of a white or light coloured costume. Another reflection problem can arise when the Chroma-Key backing reflects on accompanying settings. For example, if a designer plans a shot up a street or an arcade, down which an actor has to walk and then enter a built shop front, it is possible to find a blue haze over the shop front plus Chroma-Key reflections in the shop windows. Another thing which has to be constantly watched is colour bleeding; this means that one will find that one has an intense blue set or a gingery brown set surprisingly appearing on the colour monitor. The blue set often appears when one wants a white or greyish colour and it is advisable to find a grey that has brown not blue in its make-up. The gingery-brown effect appears to be created by using colours in the burnt sienna instead of the sepia range. A large quantity of light or mid-oak coloured furniture can also cause this effect, as for example the interior of Number One Court at the Old Bailey. One finds in both examples these pitfalls can be increased by reflection from carpets, bed covers, glossy floor colours, and patterned surfaces and of course mirrors, all of which are desirable to use, but must be watched with a hawk-like eye!

As a practical detail, it has been found in general that when one chooses colour from samples and charts it needs to be broken down from its pure form. It is also necessary to use a lighter tone than one expects to find in the final picture as the system and position and the lighting appear to warm up the various colours provided.

There is a strong tendency to introduce far too much colour or variation of different colours into settings and set decoration. This produces a trying





difficulty for viewers to follow the action when the entertainment is being viewed on the comparatively small screen. On the whole, and particularly for general situation comedy and series of documentary type dramas where the designer is trying to make settings match up with unnoticeable breaks, or with telecine or O.B work and still look as realistic as possible, it is advisable to avoid introducing specific colour in the backgrounds as too many normal domestic objects provide a pattern of colours which reflect one on another creating an acceptable picture in themselves. This also creates a better continuity of atmosphere which does not detract from the often fairly subtle or underplayed characterization.

In set decoration there are numerous pitfalls. Very dark wood graining, dark leathers and coarse dark fabrics which are likely to exceed the lower edge of the electronic contrast capability and reflect very little light, only absorb it. In most cases very dark materials will appear black without any apparent detail. To get dark effects it is advisable to use these materials a tone or two lighter to enable the lighting director to illuminate the desirable detail and quality of rich reflection and the quality of texture, which would have been lost at the dark end of the scale.

Wallpapers are very deceptive and need to be used with considerable care and caution. The 'busyness' of their design always appears to be multiplied and the contrasts of their colours, patterns and textures all seem to be emphasized with much more dominance than is credited by the eye looking at these designs in a book of wallpaper patterns. For drama and most situation comedies, wallpapers invariably need to be blown over with a muting dottle colour to decrease their focus and disturbing patterns.

Because colour television is on 625 lines, designers find that their settings have to be well built and

well constructed on the studio floor with good joints in flamage and good quality joinery. The quality of finish on sets has to be as good as, or even better than for film sets. The colour camera has a tendency to bring the background into focus and, in medium close-up, the pieces of setting in the picture are in sharp focus and need superb finish. Designers could safely accept a much lower standard of workmanship on the old 405-line pictures.

It is a self-evident truth that television is enriched by colour. The Spring or Autumn landscape behind a racecourse can add to the delight of many viewers quite as much as the clear shining variations of the jockey's candylike colours. The skies and weather reflections framing a city football match add to the illusion of actually being there as much as the clearly contrasted colours of the rival team's jerseys and socks. The immediate and increased reaction of the American people against the continuation of the war in Vietnam was soon explained once the blood of the casualties on both sides ran red on the television screens in nearly every home.

For the television designer colour gives opportunities for creating atmospheric states of emotion and subtleties which can affect the viewer very powerfully. The splendours and miseries of the Tudors and the Young Churchills, the murk of London slums and the glittering ballrooms of Belgravia in 'The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes' are remembered as vividly as the actors. Since, as Coleridge said 'everything should contain within itself the reason why it is thus and not otherwise', the designer in colour television has a new challenge to add, suggest and translate, with the director, the subtleties of the script which they are both interpreting to the viewers.

There is an exciting future for design for television, especially when it will be seen, it is hoped, only on sets made for colour reception.