Theatre After Covid-19: Think Tank

Basic Design Advice for Online Performance

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Introduction

Designing for Online Performance presents several challenges. The greatest of these challenges is the necessity to design both the virtual space (how to lay out different video feeds, transition between scenes, display title cards etc.) and design the "real-life" spaces that the performers inhabit.

Designing an entire online performance from scratch is the could be compared to having to build an entirely new theatre for your play, on top of having to design everything that will be onstage in that theatre. Luckily, there are new formats and softwares which makes it so each performance does not have to start from scratch. These different virtual "venues" are laid out [here](), and the grey-area between "performer" and "designer" is discussed further [here]().

Rather than address greater design challenges, this paper will focus on simple ways to improve the video and audio of online performances. This paper is in no ways comprehensive, but rather meant to be some simple steps individuals can take to improve their online projects.

Lighting

Basic Lighting Advice

There are countless videos and tutorials out there to help you improve your lighting on a zoom meeting, but they can all be distilled into these three pieces of advice:

1) Avoid backlighting, always be lit from the front.
2) Natural light (or a light similar to natural lighting) looks best.
3) Try to light from above, not below or directly in front of you

Experiment with different lighting configurations, and when you find one that works, photograph the way the lamps are set up so you can set it up several times. Having the same lighting setup in different shots allows for visual consistency.
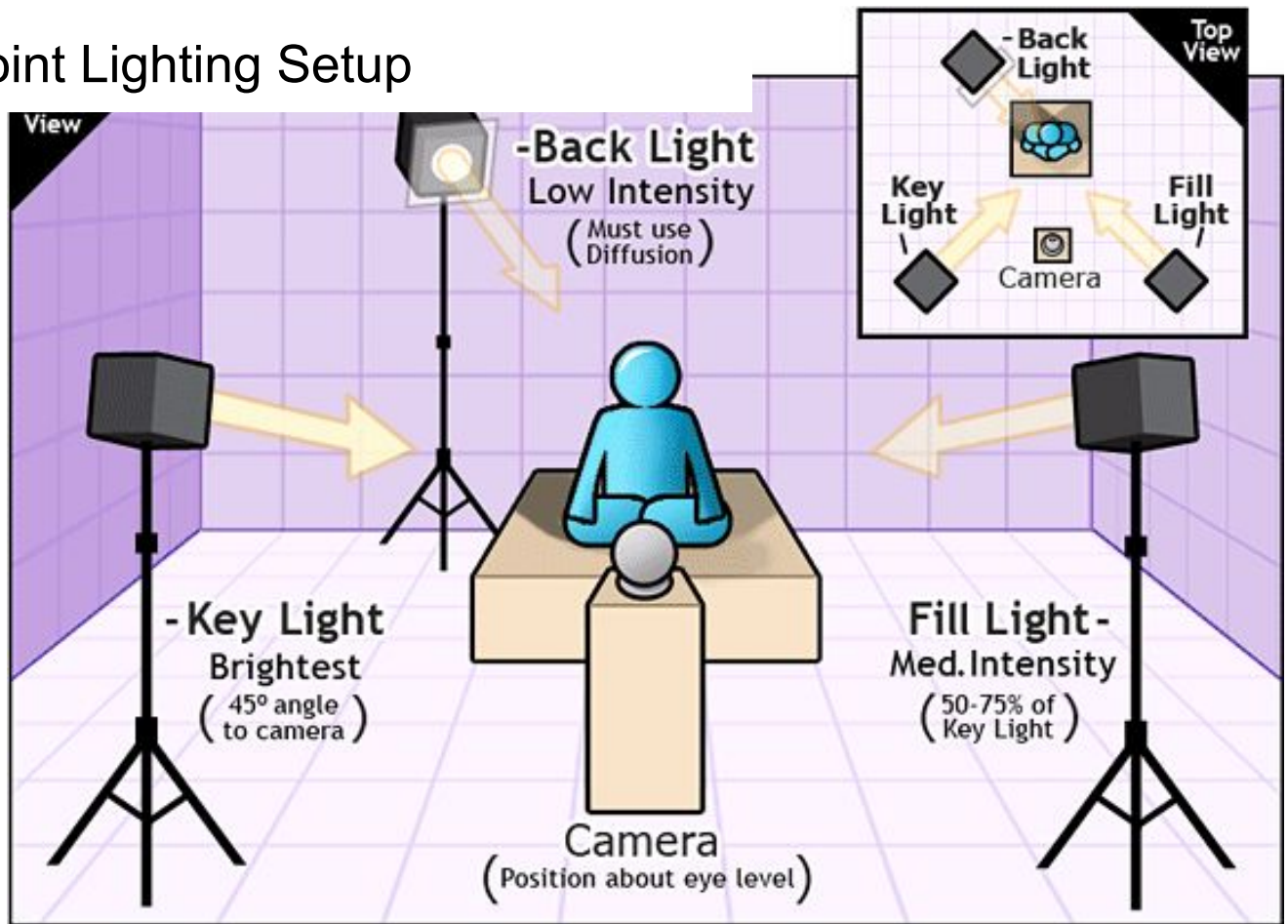
Simple Lighting Setup

The next page contains two examples of traditional lighting setups. Instead of professional lights, these setups can be reconfigured using light from windows, desk lamps, phone lights, or even a bright computer screen. Plain sheets of white paper or poster board can be used to reflect and diffuse light.
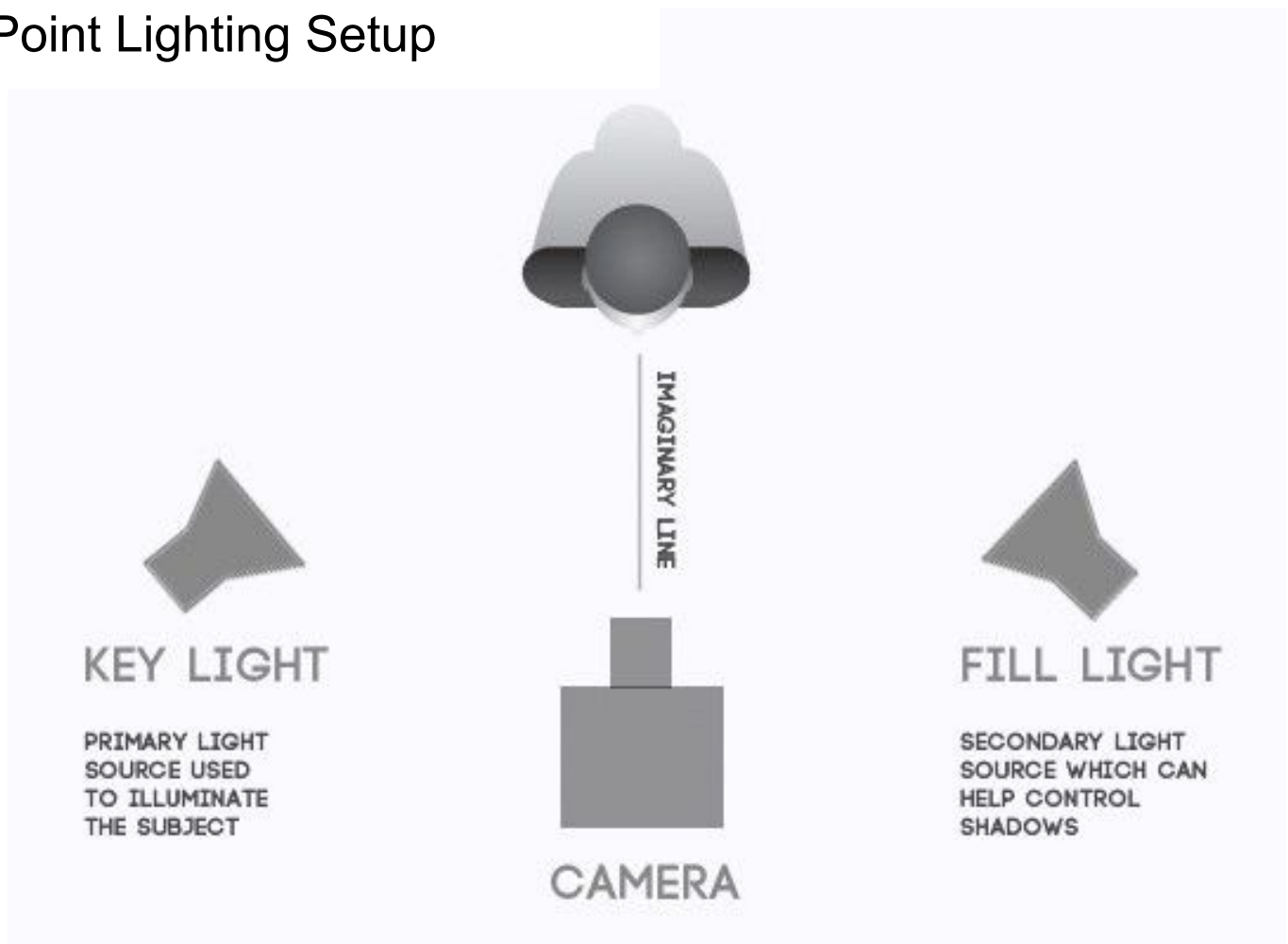
Ring Lights

Ring lights are a relatively inexpensive light which creates diffused lighting and helps eliminate shadows. They are a simpler alternative to the two and three-point lighting set-ups shown on the next page. Ring Lights can be purchased online as well as at retailers like Best Buy and Walmart.

3-Point Lighting Setup

Top View

-Back Light

Key Light

Fill Light

Camera

View

-Back Light
Low Intensity
(Must use Diffusion)

-Key Light
Brightest
(45° angle to camera)

Fill Light-
Med. Intensity
(50-75% of Key Light)

Camera
(Position about eye level)

2-Point Lighting Setup

IMAGINARY LINE

KEY LIGHT

PRIMARY LIGHT
SOURCE USED
TO ILLUMINATE
THE SUBJECT

FILL LIGHT

SECONDARY LIGHT
SOURCE WHICH CAN
HELP CONTROL
SHADOWS

CAMERA

Sound

A Note on Zoom and Sound

Zoom automatically cancels echo, prevents overlapping sound and enhances audio. This is why it is difficult for people to talk over one another in Zoom. These features generally improves the audio of one's recording, but they can be disabled to allow for more natural-sounding dialogue. Those with a Credit Card, Pro, Business or API Partner account on Zoom can enable "Original Sound" in the zoom web portal. This is discussed in detail here.

Using Your Computer's Microphone

If you are planning to use the audio your computer records automatically, there are several things you can do to improve the quality of the sound. The most obvious of these are to be in a quiet place (check for white noise like machines, phones or nearby roads that might be picked up by the microphone). You can also begin to soundproof your recording space by surrounding yourself with sound-absorbing elements like rugs, foam, thick blankets and pillows, and by weather sripping your doors.

Headphones

Headphones are very helpful for online conference meetings, as they eliminate sound feedback and usually come with their own built-in microphone. Airpods, and other wireless headphones, are particularly well-suited for online performance because they provide all the benefits of using headphones while being much less visible than traditional headphones.

Microphones

There is also the option to purchase a microphone and synchronize it with Zoom. There are several conferencing microphones available currently, all at varying price points, so it is entirely up to your personal choice to decide which will best suit your needs.

Video Quality

Preserving Video Quality on Zoom

The simplest steps you can take to improve your video quality over zoom are:

1) Enabling HD in your Zoom Video settings
2) Closing as many applications as possible on your computer
3) Keeping your zoom meeting small

Zoom meetings between two people are automatically 750p, but begin decreasing in quality as additional users join the meeting. Keeping zoom calls to the most essential performers can allow for the preservation of higher-quality video. Another option available for Zoom users is the "Group HD" option, a service for paying users that allows for higher-quality group meetings.

Webcams

Purchasing a webcam will also improve the video quality of your calls. There are several different webcams on the market, but a quick google search can allow you to compare and contrast different cameras to see what works best for you.

Using Your Phone as a Webcam

Another option available is to use your cell phone as a webcam. Several cell phones are equipped with high-quality cameras, and can be configured to be used as webcams. Android users can do so by following the steps here, and iPhone users can follow the steps here.

A Note on Clothing

Patterned clothing can cause strange and distracting effects on camera, and wearing colors too similar to your skin tone or your background can make the image appear flat. Sticking with solid-colored, contrasting clothing can create a more dynamic image.

Space

Framing

[Film terminology](#) can be helpful when it comes to developing compositions in online performance. Asking an actor to begin a scene in a medium shot, and make their way into a close-up, can be more specific than just asking them to approach the camera. Furthermore, using basic compositional tools like the [rule of thirds](#) can create more visually appealing images, rather than having performers be center-shot always.

Basic information on visual composition can be found on Google and in youtube tutorials. On the following page, I have attached a sheet showing various different kinds of film shots.

Plain Backgrounds

Plain background are generally the way to go when it comes to creating a clear image. Encourage performers to organize their spaces, or to use sheets, poster board or drywall to create a plain background.

Green Screens

Green screens can be used in a multitude of ways in online performance. Their traditional use, to evoke sets of spaces the characters don't currently inhabit, can be used, but they offer greater possibilities than just that.

Green Screens can also be used to create an illusion of depth of field (by manually blurring an image and making that your background) and for special effects (such as making a body part disappear by covering it in green cloth).

Framing Images – shot types

Extreme Close-Up (ECU)

Medium Long Shot (MLS)

Interviewee looks into space in the frame
(and towards the interviewer)

Big Close-Up (BCU)

Long Shot (LS)

Moving subject walks into space

Close-Up (CU)

Very Long Shot (VLS)

High Angle Shot (looking down)

Medium Close-Up (MCU)

Two Shot (could be CU/MCU/MS)

Low Angle Shot (looking up)

Medium Shot (MS)

'Over the shoulder shot'

Tilted Frame