The Blank Canvas
By Heff Munson

It’s time to trot out the old cliché of the stereotypical painter who begins work on a blank, white canvas.

That’s because, in an odd way, it applies to TV Studio production.

The old cliché fits because it doesn’t really match reality in every case. Some painters might deliberately work with a gray canvas, or a colored canvas, or a canvas prepared in advance with gesso or some other substance that provides the texture the painter desires.

The point is that stereotypical assumptions don’t always apply in painting, and they don’t apply in TV production either, especially in a shared-access studio. Your TV studio isn’t really a blank canvas at all.

The critical thing when preparing to set up a TV studio for a shoot is to look carefully and see what kind of canvas you’re going to be working with. Here are seven things to look for:

1. The Lights on the Ceiling
Are they in positions that will facilitate your production, or will some of them need to be moved? Maybe the previous show left you with perfectly-positioned back lights, or maybe not. Maybe there’s a colored gel that got left by mistake, but is perfect for what you need. Maybe there’s a key light that needs to be redirected. No matter what, the previous occupants, even if they cleaned up perfectly, will have left you with something to start with.

2. The Safety Chains
Take a separate look to see if there are any safety chains that are not attached to a light. If you look up (or even down) and see an unconnected safety chain, it’s like biting into an apple and seeing half a worm. The other half of the worm could be an unsecured light that might fall and sustain damage, and the thought that the impact will be reduced if the light lands on your head is but a faint consolation. You’ll want to have a chain for every light, and a light for every chain, just to be safe and sane.

3. The Walls and the Two Cyclorama Curtains
Maybe the black cyc will be covering up the gray cyc you want to use, or maybe one or the other will be covering the green wall you want to use, but they are going to be somewhere, that’s for sure. Maybe they’re pulled tight and you want “Nice Curtainy Folds”, or maybe they aren’t stretched far enough to provide a complete backdrop for wide shots. Again, your studio canvas isn’t really blank.

4. The Floor
It’s easy to forget about the floor until one of the camera operators is trying to execute a smooth online truck and bumps into a discarded pencil or a piece of broken clothespin or a wad of tape. When in doubt, a careful sweeping is a good idea.

5. The Eyes of Your Audience
Yes, I’m talking about the cameras, along with their wheeled platforms. The first thing to check is the position of the various locks. There’s a nice red latch on one side of the pedestal that must be released in order to raise the camera, but there’s also a nice black “LOCK” bar that should also be released. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn’t, so it’s better to make sure before you start tugging. There are locks that control the tilt and pan of the camera as well, and they should also be checked. Finally, there are the wheel locks to check to either enable or inhibit movement as desired. The idea is to know what you’re working with.
Everybody knows about the lens covers, so I’m not going to insult anyone by even mentioning them. Oops, I just did.

6. The Portable Accessories
Cables, Diffusion, Gels, Frames, and Headsets are likely to vary widely from show to show, so they are the mostly likely to suffer damage, if only through ordinary use. You just want to know where they are, and if they’re in good condition.

7. The Risers, Chairs, and Desk
Not much to say here, unless they’re missing. It happens once in a while.

I have confined this article to the studio itself. The control room is another matter, and I may write a separate article about audio. For now, it’s enough to say that I have found this practice of a preliminary review of the supposedly “Blank Canvas Studio” to be helpful in identifying and avoiding problems later on, or needlessly summoning Staff when a camera doesn’t elevate or otherwise behave as expected.

Naturally, if you do encounter a serious malfunction, AIM has Equipment Problem Reports available, and future producers will thank you for using them.

I am deliberately avoiding a sermon on the importance of a thorough and conscientious cleanup after a shoot. Realizing that the next user will have all of the preceding factors to consider should be enough of a reminder, and if the condition of the Studio is improved after your occupancy, then you have earned the title of Swell Person.

Thanks to any reader who got this far.