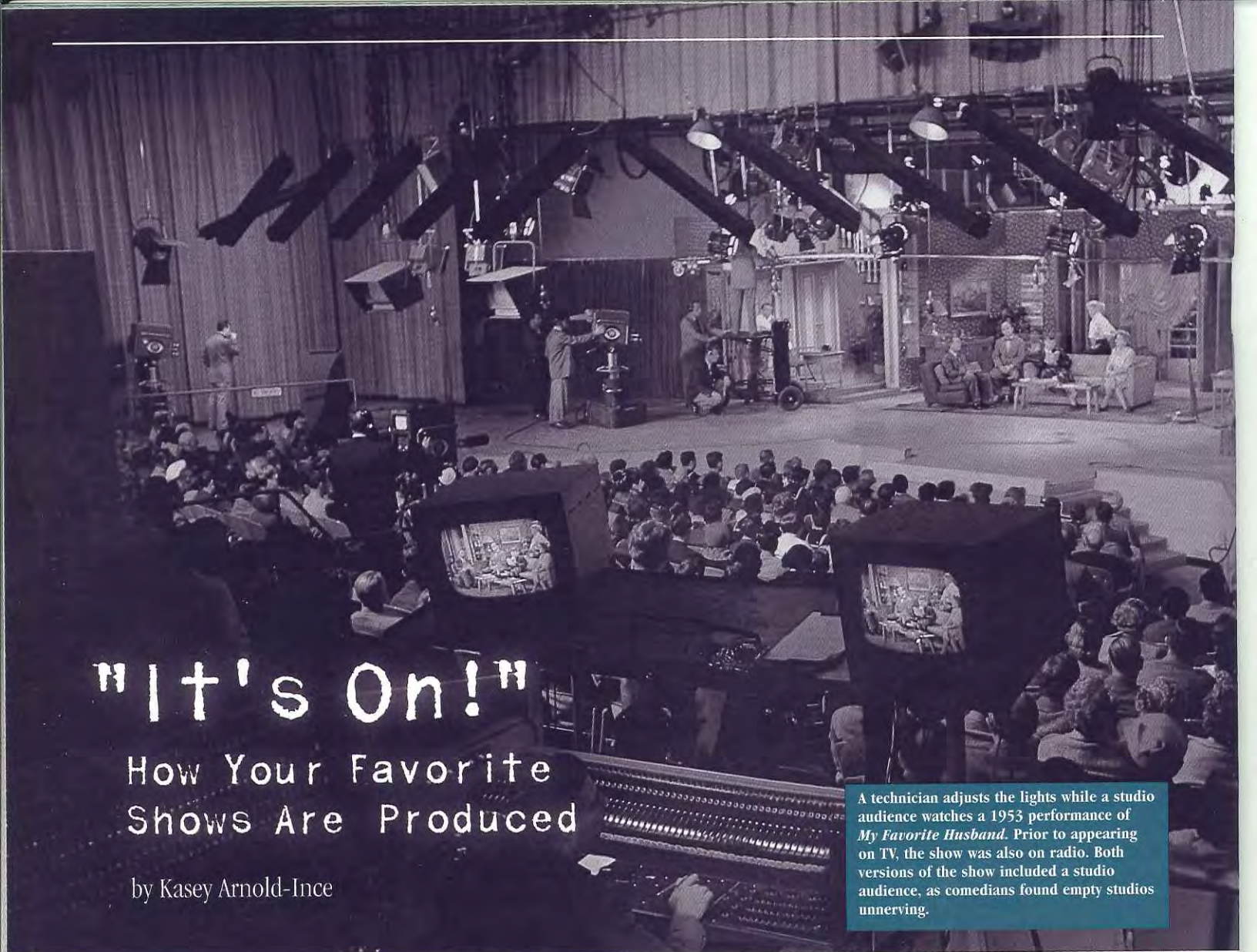


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# "It's On!"

## How Your Favorite Shows Are Produced

by Kasey Arnold-Ince

A technician adjusts the lights while a studio audience watches a 1953 performance of *My Favorite Husband*. Prior to appearing on TV, the show was also on radio. Both versions of the show included a studio audience, as comedians found empty studios unnerving.

**Y**ou're hunkered down on the sofa, watching your favorite TV show. The popcorn's popped, your pillow's tucked behind you, and the family's gathered with cries of "It's on!"

While you've labored steadily for at least ten minutes to get ready for this evening, the show's cast and crew have worked for weeks—writing, rehearsing, building, sewing, taping, and editing—all so you can enjoy a half hour of entertainment.

How does it happen? To find out more about how one of the country's top-rated shows gets to your set, let's go behind the scenes and follow an episode of the comedy series *Friends*, from script to airing.

### And the Show Begins . . .

It all starts on paper. First, staff writers—*Friends* has fourteen—conceive a story idea. One writer is assigned to create the script, which

is revised and reworked several times before it's delivered to the "read-through"—the first reading by the cast for the producers.

To keep the details of the characters' lives consistent, the production continually updates a "bible" that includes "biographies" of the characters and information revealed in past episodes. If the writers need to know how many sisters Joey has, whether Rachel ever wore braces, or why Chandler hates Thanksgiving, they can find it in the *Friends* bible.

During the writing process, executive producers monitor the developing story, making sure it stays in line with the vision of the show, which focuses on the hopelessly intertwined lives of six twenty-something friends.

If the producers approve the story, they hold a production meeting to launch the preparatory period known as pre-production. Pre-production is where most of the elements of the series are put in place so that, by production week, everything is

ready to roll. For instance, if the episode includes the appearance of a guest character (Tom Selleck, Charlie Sheen, and Reese Witherspoon have all appeared), the casting director will immediately start talking with agents or holding auditions. If the script calls for a burnt turkey, a trained capuchin monkey, or a person-sized shipping crate, the properties manager will need time to locate—or create—these items. And what about costumes? If Rachel needs to don a cheerleading outfit, or Joey has to dress like a potato for a commercial he's supposed to be filming, Wardrobe must find the appropriate item—or create it from scratch.

The story's setting needs to be considered, too. Most sitcoms have one or two "standing sets" that are seen all the time—like *Friends*' two apartments and the hallway, and the Central Perk coffeehouse—as well as a temporary, or "swing set," which can be changed to suit the needs of each episode.

## Studio and Control Rooms

In addition to the crew who work with the performers on the sound stage, many other people are busy behind the scenes, putting together the show you actually see on TV.

The activity of pre-production lasts just a few weeks (or on some shows, a few days) before it's time to bring all the elements together.

### Production Week

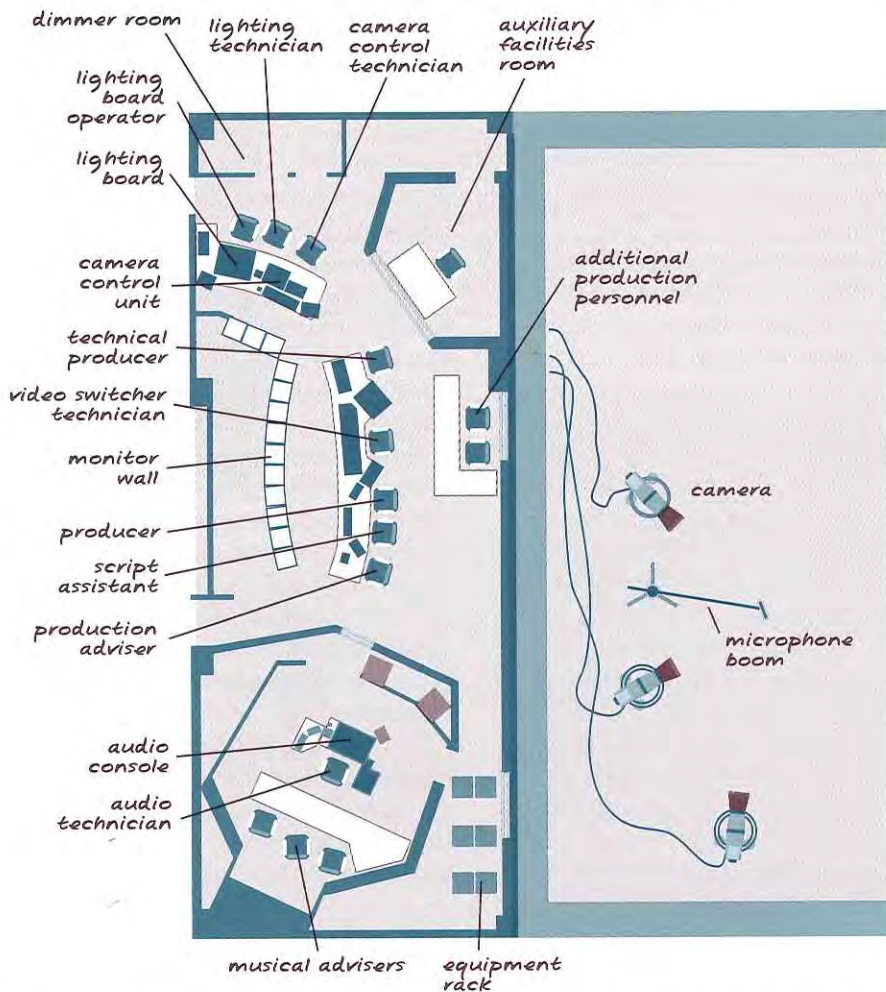
#### Tuesday: Day 1

It's 10 a.m. Cast members Jennifer Aniston (who plays Rachel), Courteney Cox Arquette (Monica), Lisa Kudrow (Phoebe), Matt LeBlanc (Joey), Matthew Perry (Chandler), and David Schwimmer (Monica's brother Ross) are reading the complete script aloud on the "sound stage," a soundproof building with artificial sets. Invented in 1927, when recording sound necessitated a controlled environment for movie production, this is where both the rehearsals and the final performance will take place.

The writers, executive producers, and director (an individual director is usually hired for a single episode) are all there. Everyone's asking questions and making suggestions at the same time. The director listens to the actors, deciding how to direct and shoot the show; the staff writers are madly scribbling revisions; and the producers are coordinating ideas and personalities, and listening for potential production problems. After the read-through, the writers rush off to tweak the script, sending new pages later that day to the actors and staff.

It's early afternoon. The read-through is over and the production staff takes over the soundstage. The swing set—last week it was Ross's office at the museum, this week it's a pool hall—has been delivered. Set decorators embellish it with broken chairs, cigarette butts, and empty beer bottles to give it a sufficiently disreputable look. Up on a ladder, the gaffer adjusts lighting hanging from a grid. Above one of the pool tables, a technician wires and tests a "practical" lamp: Practicals are real working items—like lamps or faucets—that the actors use onstage. In this script, a joke hinges on Ross's stumbling efforts to turn on the pool-table light.

After the read-through, the cast head to Wardrobe for final fittings, then take their scripts (and revisions) home to memorize their lines. Their first script—the one they read this morning—was white, but each additional set will be printed on a different color paper: pink, blue, yellow, green, and so on. Cast and crew simply replace the old pages with the new ones. By the end of the week, few of the original white pages will remain.



#### Wednesday: Day 2

It's nine o'clock in the morning and everyone has arrived on the set. The cast is ready to begin rehearsing, working out their scenes and any bits of physical humor. They'll work with props and costumes as they become available, testing them out, discarding some and trying replacements. If Monica is simultaneously cooking and fighting over the phone with Chandler, she'll need bowls, spoons, and a phone to rehearse with. If the clack of a metal spoon is too loud, a wooden one will be found; if the stainless-steel bowl reflects too much light, it will be replaced, too.

Many of the props come from the studio's inventory; others are found or created for the show. Property masters often have lists of second-hand stores and antique shops for locating hard-to-find items. But the best prop person is a creative jack-of-all-trades who, with little more than a wad of Styrofoam, some duct tape, and a can of spray paint, can concoct an exploding lava lamp or jury-rig a coffeemaker to boil over on cue.

After lunch, the cast does a quick run-through for the producers, the studio, and NBC representatives, who "sign off" on the episode.

They're watching to make sure the material is appropriate for the audience, and that advertisers won't find anything objectionable in the show.

#### Thursday: Day 3

Today, everyone spends a very long day rehearsing—including the crew. Not only does the cast need to know their lines and "blocking" (where to stand, when to move), but the people who handle the cameras and sound equipment also need to learn movement cues and timing.

The director has worked out most of the shots he wants, and these instructions are written into the "shooting script," the final version that coordinates every camera move with the action. The cast, crew, and director go over the episode several times, slowly and laboriously, until everything is perfect, and they're ready for tomorrow's performance.

#### Friday: Day 4

This morning, the sound stage is surprisingly quiet. Occasionally, a crew member comes to make last-minute lighting adjustments or change a pillow on Monica's sofa. Craft Services (see sidebar on page 21) is cleaning the sound stage and setting up a table backstage with coffee

and ample supplies of the cast and crew's favorite snacks.

After yesterday's long rehearsal, the cast is resting at home. They'll come to the studio later this afternoon, lines memorized and ready to perform. At Warner Brothers Studios, tickets for this evening's performance are being distributed. The show will be taped in front of a live audience, then edited to be shown on TV several weeks later.

It's late afternoon and the audience is streaming into the sound stage, complimentary tickets in hand. While they wait, they'll be entertained by a comedian whose job it is to "warm them up" for the show.

Although this episode will only be about twenty-two minutes long, costume changes and the inevitable stops and starts of the production process may result in several hours of shooting. Every time a camera begins recording a scene, the assistant holds up a white Plexiglas slate with the scene, take number, and LED display of the time on it. Later, the editor will be able to see that this is "Scene 3, Take 5, 6:30:00," meaning that there were four previous efforts at shooting this scene.

Before tape technology and video editing, the slate (then a blackboard) was actually "clapped"—a small wooden bar was lifted and slapped down across the top—to make a loud

noise. Later, when the editor needed to synchronize the film (picture) and audio (sound), the slap became the "synch-up" point. Modern video records both sound and picture simultaneously, so the clap is no longer necessary. However, when recording on film, the camera assistant may still use the old-fashioned slap as a low-tech backup technique.

In the early days of television, every show was broadcast live. If Sid Caesar forgot his lines, the scenery collapsed, or a key prop was missing, audiences from coast to coast were in on the disaster. Today's studio audiences are likewise privy to the excitement of live production. If a camera bumps into the set or an actor muffs his line and his colleagues break up laughing, the audience sees it all.

By late evening, the show has been taped from beginning to end, often twice. The cast comes out and thanks the studio audience for participating, and everyone goes home—except the editors. Now it's their turn to get to work.

### Putting the Pieces Together

Over the next few weeks, the editors will assemble the final show that you'll see on TV. Following the script, they'll view scenes from each of the cameras used during shooting, then

use a computerized editing system to assemble the best shots for each scene. As they work, they may start with the wide shots—which show the entire scene and all the actors—then shift to medium shots. When an actor's expression is important, the editor will insert a close-up, so you can really see that baffled look on Phoebe's face.

Editing involves a lot of trial and error, testing shots with one another until the editor feels the scene works well and has the right tempo. Pacing is particularly important when editing a comedy: If a humorous moment goes by too quickly, the audience may miss it. Once the editor builds the episode into a satisfactory format, sound effects, music, and credits are added. When the completed episode has been approved by the producers, it's duplicated and fed by satellite to NBC affiliate stations all over the country. Your local affiliate will air the series, broadcasting *Friends* to your living room TV.

You're back on the sofa, ready for the show to begin—but now you know a bit more about the weeks of brainstorming, planning, and preparation that have gone into its creation. Will you notice more details, catch the bloopers, and see the entire series with new eyes? Stay tuned and find out! ❏

### Two Types of TV Production

Just as there are different types of television programs—sitcoms, dramatic series, news, game shows—there are also different ways to produce television shows. Almost all episodic television (shows that air each week for about twenty-six weeks) build standing sets for their most common locations in large buildings called sound stages.

One production format—the multicamera shoot—is used for most sitcoms, game shows, and news broadcasts. This type of show uses two or more cameras (either film or video), and a three-walled set. Like the set for a stage production, the "missing" fourth wall allows the cameras—and the studio audience, if there is one—to see the performance.

Dramatic shows, and some sitcoms, are often shot with a single film camera using techniques similar to those used to make

movies. Again, the production company constructs a group of sets for the series. These sets, however, include all four walls. Most of these walls are movable, so the camera crew can shoot the room from any direction, simply by removing one of the walls.

How do you know if you're watching a multicamera series? There's always one wall that you never see. For example, in NBC's *Friends*, much of the action takes place in the coffee shop, Central Perk. You see the window facing the street, the back wall, and the side of the room with the bar—but you never see the wall that faces the sofa. Fox's sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*, however, is shot like a drama, using a single camera. How can you tell? Because at some point during each scene, whether it takes place in Malcolm's bedroom, living room, or classroom, you'll see all four walls of the room.

Although television production uses both techniques, the multicamera format was developed expressly for TV. Early dramatic programming was derived from Broadway plays, while sitcoms ("situation comedies") had their origins in vaudeville, by way of radio. Performers and technicians proved adaptable to the challenges of live production, and the traditional stage set, with its missing fourth wall, provided the room necessary for the large, cumbersome cameras and oversized boom microphones. Behind the cameras, in a hidden control booth, the director watched tiny screens that displayed output from the two or three cameras, each with their own angle on the action. The director would determine which view to broadcast, switching frequently from camera to camera to give the audience new perspectives on the action.



Left: While TV may seem to present intimate situations as they unfold, this photo shows what the process is really like. Here, a crew filming the Canadian children's show *Ramona*—including directors, camera, sound and lighting staff, makeup people, and writers—hovers just a few feet away from the action as it's filmed.

Below: To ensure continuity from one story line to the next, television scriptwriters depend on guidelines known as "bibles," which include character and background information particular to the show. To make sure an episode takes exactly the right amount of time, scripts are also written in a very specific format. This annotated page shows some of the conventions used.

We're in Act 2, Scene 14. Every location change starts a new scene. This script will be revised continuously throughout the production process.

"DOWN FROM ABOVE" → REV. 2/17/2000 -- ACT TWO

14 CONTINUED (Note: The penguins remain off camera)

ORTON (beginning to panic) Does she know...? I mean, did she say...? I mean, did she figure out...?

CHARLIE See bible, Pg. 3 That you put an Air Spell on her? Of course she did! Girls rarely sprout wings on their own, you know.

21A We're on page 21A, which means we're about 21 minutes into the action. One page of script equals about one minute of TV time.

AIR SPELLS: Those dealing with flight, the weather, etc. Rarely used indoors or on people unless the enchanter is extremely skilled.

Dialog → Orton knows he's got to get out of the lab before Verbena can catch him.

Action → In one of the rewrites, scene 15 was replaced with 15A.

ORTON (now totally panicked) I've got to get out of here!

He starts for the door... Just then, we hear footsteps. Verbena has arrived.

Alerts the editors that a special effect will be needed here.

OMITTED

15A LABORATORY DOORWAY (OPTICAL)

Charlie WHIRLS around. The door flies open. And there stands Verbena -- wings and all.

Note that Orton and Verbena are interacting: See bible, pg. 11.

ANGLE ON: VERBENA (poisonously pleasant) Hello, Orton -- (a beat) -- Guess what happened to my best dress today?

A beat indicates a momentary pause for effect.

(CONTINUED)

ORTON AND VERBENA: Even though they're twins, Orton and Verbena are total opposites. Orton studies constantly, but rarely gets his spells right. Verbena (the usual victim of his blunders) is a natural enchanter, but never bothers to practice. As a result, Orton and Verbena are constantly at each others' throats.

### Who Are Those People?

If you read the television credits, you'll see lots of interesting job titles. What do all those people really *do*, anyway?

**Best Boy** assists the gaffer with lighting and cabling. (He—or she—is the “best boy” for the job.) There is also a “best boy grip.”

**Boom Operator** uses a long extendable pole with a microphone attached to record the dialog.

**Craft Services** provides critical sustenance and cleans the stage.

**Director of Photography** supervises the camera crew, the electrical crew, and the grip crew in designing the look of the show.

**Executive Producer**—the consummate diplomat—supervises the creative side of the show (including casting and story development), oversees the budget, and helps work out differences between network, cast, and production staff.

**Gaffer** is the chief electrician, responsible for lighting the set.

**Grips** move stuff—camera equipment, lighting, set pieces, furniture, dollies, and cranes.

**Line Producer** hires the crew, negotiates equipment deals, and manages the actual day-to-day job of getting the series on the air.

**Producers, Supervising Producers, and Story Editors** are some of the titles given to staff writers. As writers move up the ladder and gain more control over the product they create, they assume various titles, many of which include the word “producer.”