Feature

How to Survive as a Masquerade Videographer
Stephen Nelson

A veteran masquerade videographer reveals his secrets for preparing, shooting, and post-production of quality masquerade videos using simple equipment and a few basic techniques.

So it's happened. There's a masquerade going on, and your friends have asked you to videotape it for them. It seems simple enough-- you have a video camera and a tripod. What could go wrong? Then your mind drifts back to other masquerade videos you've seen (and possibly even recorded). Despite tremendous advances in video technology in the past few years, the average masquerade video is still a poorly-framed, strangely-colored blur punctuated by jerky camera movements. So what can you do to make a more professional-looking video?

The good news is that you can, really, produce a masquerade video that you can watch with pride-- or at the very least without embarrassment. To do so, you will need to plan ahead. You will need to teach yourself how to use your own equipment. But first of all, you must decide on what is "good".

What is a Good Masquerade Video?

A good video is one that pleases its audience, or at least shows them what they want or need to see. For a masquerade, the audience is largely the costumers who were in the masquerade, and they want to find out how they looked in their costume. If the costume looked good, they want to be able to show this off to friends and family.

As a masquerade videographer, your job is to record, as fully as possible:

The author in, a rare photo of the vidographer at work. Photo from the BayCon 2004 Masquerade.

- The appearance of each costume on display

- The effect of any on-stage performance

- The toastmaster and any other elements of the masquerade

A good masquerade video looks natural. It isn't cluttered with extraneous effects or titles. There are no unexpected camera movements to distract the viewer. In short, a good masquerade video is invisible. You do not want your viewers to watch your video. You want them to watch the masquerade.

So, a good video is:

- *Well-framed.* Each costume should be displayed naturally in the shot.

- *Well-imaged.* Colors should match reality as well as possible, and all shots should be in focus.

- *Well-lit.* The contestant should not appear to be blasting the camera with white light, nor hiding in shadow.

Finally, no matter how good your final product is, it's no good if it arrives too late! If your audience wants to watch your video at a wrap party on the same night of the convention, you should take steps to make sure that your process is streamlined.

The best way to ensure a good video is to minimize distractions. Shooting a video requires all of your attention, and any time that you lose focus mentally might be reflected in losing focus, well, really. So the best video will come from identifying things that could distract you and dealing with them in advance. That way you can stay in the flow.

The Flow

What is this mystical flow, I hear you ask? It's simple, and it should be. Keep the camera on the contestants. Avoid sudden camera movements or fast zooms in or out. Concentrate on framing the contestants properly and documenting what the costume looks like.

If the entry has only one contestant, you should stay on a medium shot of her. Follow her movement, leaving extra room in the direction of motion. Instead of centering her in the middle of the frame, put her in the third of the screen at the far edge of her direction of movement. As the contestant stops for a pose, you can consider zooming in to a close shot to capture more detail. Make sure that you keep zooms and pans slow. Don't zoom at all if you can avoid it. Once the entry is over, position the camera on the entry point to pick up the next entry.

The flow gets more complicated when you have to deal with large groups. In that case, start with a wide shot to capture all the costume entrants. Once everyone has finished entering, you can slowly zoom in to a medium shot to do a slow pan through the group. Some group entries will have split action-- entries featuring separate groups of contestants in separate positions onstage. In that case, it's best to stick to a wide shot to ensure that you don't miss any action.

When panning on a traveling single-participant entry, make sure that you leave plenty of space for the person to 'walk into' the frame.

The trick is to keep your panning as smooth as possible. Make sure that your tripod is not tightened to the point that your pans have to start and stop with a jerk. Unless you have a high-end fluid-head tripod, it's best to keep it on its loosest setting to avoid jitter.

How Many Cameras?

This article will focus on shooting using only a single camera. Future articles will discuss how to coordinate and produce a multi-camera shoot.

There's no question that having multiple cameras increases your options. Still, more cameras don't guarantee a better masquerade video. Ten cameras pointed the wrong way aren't much better than one! Plus, a single-camera shoot, if done properly, will require less editing to turn into a finished product.

Long-Term Preparations

As soon as you decide to record the masquerade, you should start long-term preparation. Unfortunately, this kind of preparation involves the thing that many of us find the most terrifying of all-- talking to other people. The first person that you should contact is the masquerade organizer or director. (If the director is the one asking you to do the recording, that can save you some time!)

Here are some questions that can be important to ask.

- Where will the masquerade be held? Is it possible to arrange to visit there in advance? What are the dimensions of the room? Where will the chairs be? Is it possible to arrange for a riser for the camera?

- Is anyone else planning on recording the masquerade? May I contact them?

- How high and wide will your stage be?

- Will you be using regular room lighting or stage lighting?

- Will there be a rehearsal beforehand?

- How will you be playing music? Is it possible to get a feed from the PA system?

If you can, get into the location of the shoot in advance. See "Walking the Room" before.

Unfortunately, conventions can be pretty chaotic. Be prepared for the answers to all of these questions to change, and have a backup plan.

Camera Placement

Deciding where to put your camera seems like an easy decision, but it's critical to your success.

The first thing you must do is to know your own camera. How wide an angle do you get when the camera is zoomed out completely? How far away from a 20-foot stage must you be to zoom out for most of it? How close do you need to be to get a medium shot ? It is possible to figure out the answers to these questions with some basic geometry (see appendix), but the easiest way is to set your camera up in an open space and find out.

- Have a friend hold one end of a long tape measure. Zoom in to maximum on your friend, then have them walk back until you can just see them in a medium-wide shot . Note down the distance as "maximum".

- Mark out twenty feet, the average width of a stage. Zoom the camera out to maximum, then move the camera away until you can see both edges of the "stage". Note this distance as "minimum".

Once you have your minimum and maximum distances, you can then decide where to place your camera. It's often useful to start with a basic diagram of the room that the masquerade will take place in. Since you want to be able to capture at least a medium-wide shot of an individual contestant, but also want to zoom out wide enough to capture the entire stage if necessary, your camera has to be between your minimum and maximum distances.

Next, find out where the judges' table will be. They are often seated at a table at stage left, at about a twenty-five degree angle to give them a good view of the proceedings. Most presentations will play to the judges, to the audience, or both. Your best option is to choose a location that will give you a good view of either angle.

If you can arrange to get a riser for yourself and your camera, do so. Many hotels will provide risers if you are able to make it part of the room setup order. (This is often called the Banquet Event Order, or "BEO.") You want a riser at least as high as the stage.
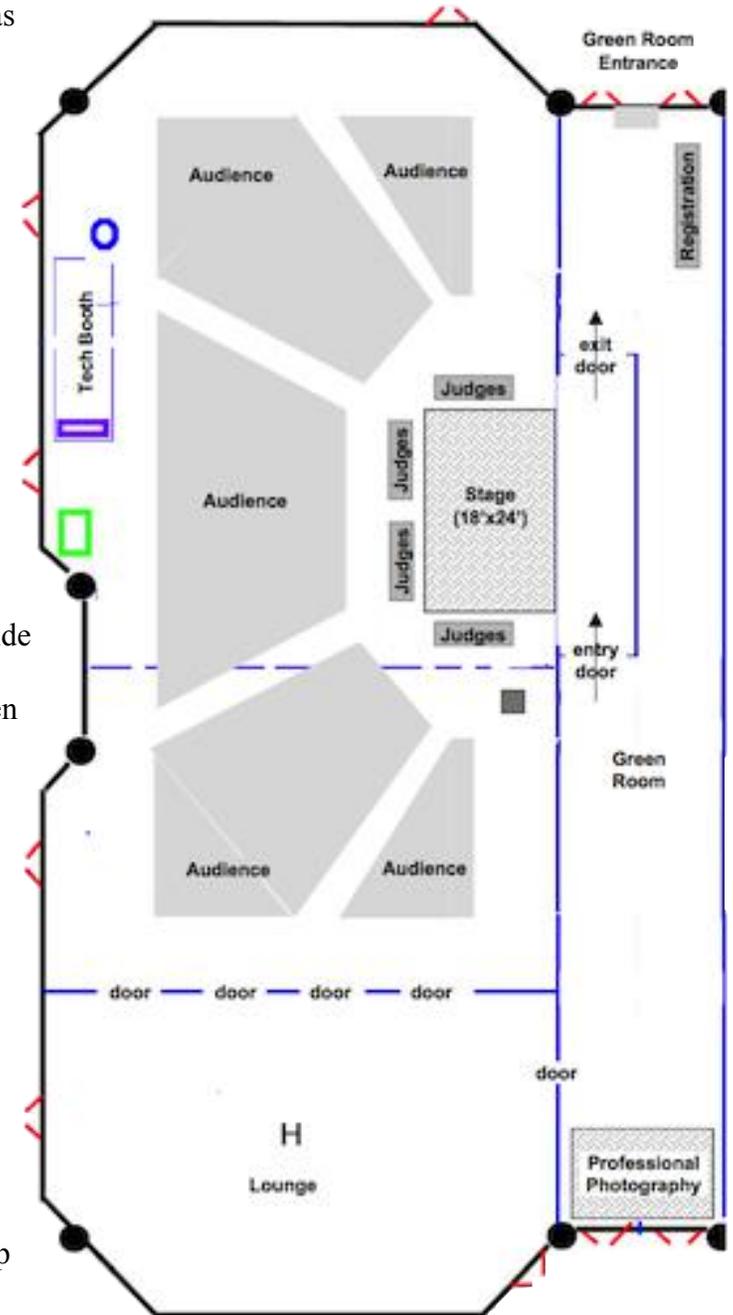
Detailed ballroom layout for planning video placement and angles.

It's also important to make sure that you have power within reach of your camera. Yes, it's always possible to run long extension cords, but you'll save yourself time and effort if you are within six feet of an outlet, and don't need to run cords in areas where people might trip over them.

Of course, it's also important to avoid blocking audience members' views with your camera setup.
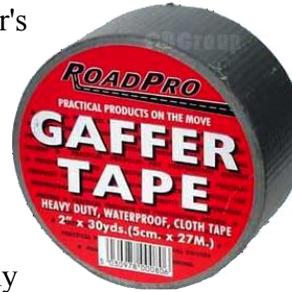
The Night Before

Honestly, working the night before can make or break your video shoot. First, you need to make sure that you have all your gear, and that your batteries are charged. (Do this even if you're planning on running on AC power-- it'll give you maneuvering room in case you need to improvise.)

Make a list of the things you intend to bring to the shoot. These should include:

✔ Camera

✔ Extra camera batteries (charged)

✔ Tripod

✔ Extra flash memory

✔ Extension cord

✔ Gaffer's tape (2 rolls)

✔ Headphones

✔ Multitool

✔ Large white piece of paper

✔ Business cards

A word on gaffer's tape. This tape looks like ordinary duct tape, but can be used on ordinary floors without leaving residue. You can order it from many sources online. I suggest bringing two rolls, since someone always needs to borrow your tape. Write your name on the inside of the spool to make sure your tape gets back to you.

Business cards are handy even if this isn't your business. They are a handy way of giving costuming contestants your email address. If you don't have some, make some!

If possible, you should get into the room the night before the masquerade and walk the room. Bring the Masquerade director with you, if you can, to confirm such minor items as where the stage will be, where the judges' table will be, and that the entire room plan didn't change since the last time you spoke.

You should also figure out the expected general walk pattern of the participants. If you're lucky, you can get the masquerade planner to mark out how they expect most participants to move.

You should also remind the masquerade planner that you will need a list of the entries. You'll need the entry titles, the names of the participants, and at least one contact email per entrant.

Before Shooting

Set up your equipment as soon as you can. If possible, plug your camera into a wall outlet to avoid draining batteries. Use gaffer's tape to secure any stray cords. Test out your setup. Make sure that your camera is recording both audio and video.
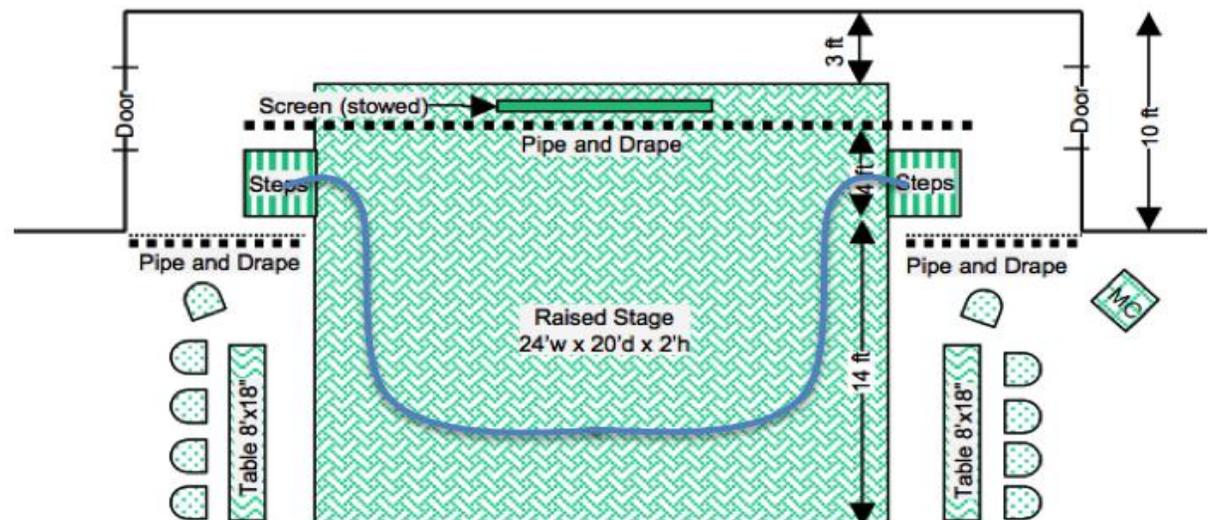
White-balance your camera. You want a good representation of what the costumes look like under ordinary light. Stage lights, or even worse, ordinary room lights, can have a color cast to them that can ruin your image. Your camera's automatic white balance is better than nothing, but if your camera has a custom white balance feature, use it.

If your camera has a custom white balance feature, using it will improve the quality.

Have someone stand onstage, with the stage lights on, holding the large white piece of paper. Zoom in until the paper fills the entire screen, then set the custom white balance. You may need to pick up the camera and move forward to get the entire screen filled.

If you're lucky enough to have a full rehearsal for the masquerade, videotape it. This will both give you practice and give you an easy way to note the movement patterns of the entrants.

Whether or not you get a rehearsal, set aside some time before the masquerade starts to talk to the following people:

- *The masquerade director.* The masquerade director will be very busy, so try to keep it as brief as possible. You'll need the list of entries discussed above, plus any changes.

- *The tech crew.* Find out if there are going to be sudden changes in lighting. If there will be glow-in-the-dark or L-wire costumes, it pays to know about them in advance. There's nothing more disconcerting than a sudden darkness.

- *The participants.* Go through your list of masquerade entries and try to talk to someone from each one. Confirm how they're going to move, and find out if they are expecting lighting changes. Ask if there are any particular effects or stage business that you should particularly focus on.

Last but not least: *eat something*. Hunger and low blood sugar are yet another possible distraction that will make your recording worse.

Shooting

Congratulations! Since you've done all your preparation in advance, shooting becomes a matter of staying in the flow. Keep your movements slow and fluid. If in doubt, stay zoomed a bit out-- it's possible to crop a shot in post-production, but it's impossible to fix a poorly-framed shot.

Monitor the sound with headphones to make sure it's being recorded properly.

Once you begin a shot, stay on that shot. It will be tempting to jump the camera around quickly-- to try to record, for example, both the MC and the masquerade entrants at the same time. Resist this temptation. Your first priority is to record the masquerade entrants, since they are your primary audience.

After the Shoot

Now that the shoot is over, it's time to post-produce the video. How much post-production you do depends on how much time you have and your intended audience.

For the beginning masquerade videographer, it's a good idea to keep your post-production simple. Many computers come with basic video editing suites, and these are usually up to the task. On the Mac, iMovie is a good starting point, and Windows Live Movie Maker is a similar choice for Windows. Start by adding a title screen to your video and some basic credits. Things to put in the credits include:

- Convention name

- Date

- Hotel name

- MC/Toastmaster name

- Masquerade entries and participants

- Crew names

- Yourself, as videographer!

If there are long pauses in your video, you should edit them out. Avoid spending too much time on post-production, though. Costumers are generally more interested in seeing the costuming video quickly than in fancy titles.

In the past, I've burned DVDs for people and mailed them. These days, it's just as practical to do digital distribution. YouTube is an easy way of doing it. However, before uploading the video to YouTube, check with the participants and the masquerade organizer as to whether they object to the video being made public. Making the video unlisted-- which enables you to sent out a link to all participants and allow them to share it as they wish, but keeps it from appearing in YouTube searches-- can be a convenient choice.

Advancing

Now that you've finished shooting a masquerade video, you could find yourself bitten by the bug and want to do it again. How can you step up your game and make sure that your next video is even better than this one?

The first thing to do is to write down what you learned from this experience. Did you have any gear that you didn't need? Did you wish for anything that you didn't have? Was there anything you wished you'd done that you didn't?

Then, you can begin the endless process of gear upgrades. The good news is, there's always a better piece of equipment
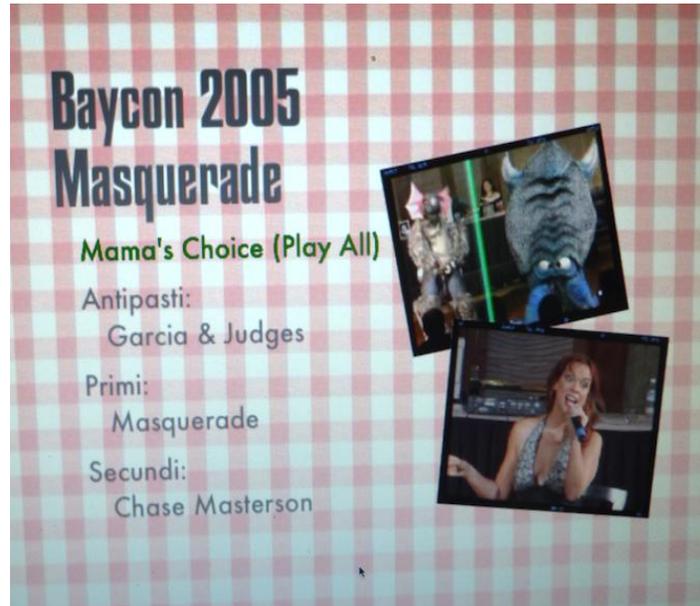
Disk menu for masquerade video added in post-production (above) Disk label for masquerade video DVD (below).
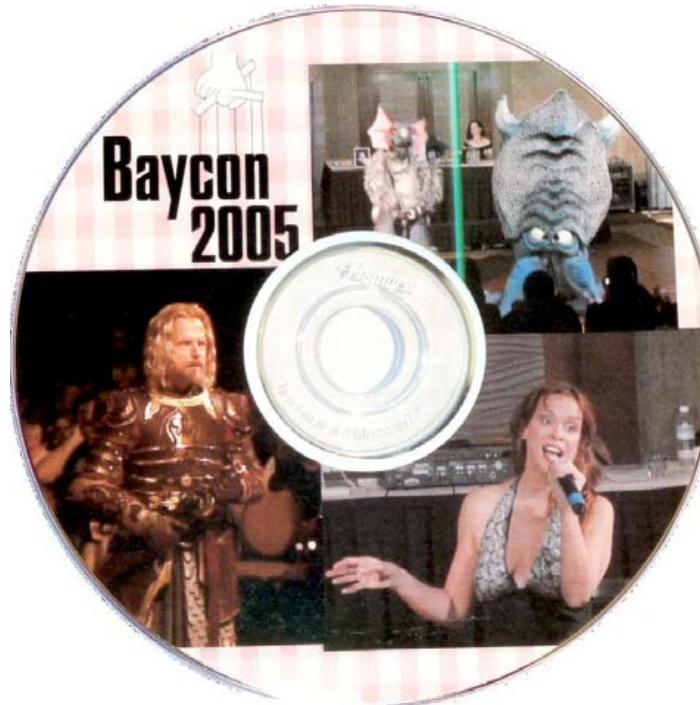
out there. That's also the bad news. Start by deciding on your budget and goals. Personally, I believe that a good fluid-head tripod can be your absolute best investment to improve your videos. Nothing ruins a good video like jerky pans, and even professional videographers would be hard-pressed to do nice, smooth pans on a cheap tripod head.

You may decide to buy additional video cameras. We will discuss this further in future articles, but adding one camera dedicated to the MC, with another locked down on a wide shot, can give you some additional choices in post-production. Theoretically, you don't actually need to buy dedicated cameras for this. A tripod adapter for an iPhone or iPad may give you all you need. However, keep in mind that additional cameras also mean additional time in post-production.

Costume videography can be very rewarding, and it's a rewarding thing to do well. Without the videographer, those masquerade performances last only as long as the show. With some planning, preparation, and focus, you can make those performances last forever.

Stephen Nelson became involved in costume videography in 2002 against his better judgment. He has been shooting costume events frequently since then with an increasing array of gadgets. He is married to Christine Doyle and works as a software engineer. He also sings a cappella and podcasts about tea at [Tea Rage](#).