

Framing the Stage

The Art of Performance Photography

Learning Resource

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Photo: Jeff Busby. Hydra, Chunky Move, 2000

Framing the Stage

This learning resource accompanies the online exhibition *Framing the Stage: The Art of Performance Photography*. You can access the exhibition at

<https://stories.artscentremelbourne.com.au/framing-the-stage/>

You will need the exhibition open to complete this activity.



The *Framing the Stage* exhibition of photographs talks about two ideas simultaneously: the art of live performance, and the art of capturing that performance in a still image.

The collection of photographs chosen to be part of this exhibition are a mixture of works by Jeff Busby, one of Australia's leading performance photographers, and other photographers whose work is held in the Australian Performing Arts Collection. His notes on the photographs in the exhibition are invaluable in developing a rich understanding of the artist's process and the decisions he makes when capturing live performance in action.

Character & Emotion

In photographing an actor on stage, the photographer is capturing the intensity or dynamism of the performance, and at the same time giving us context about the world that character inhabits.

Read the chapter Character & Emotion and then answer the questions below.

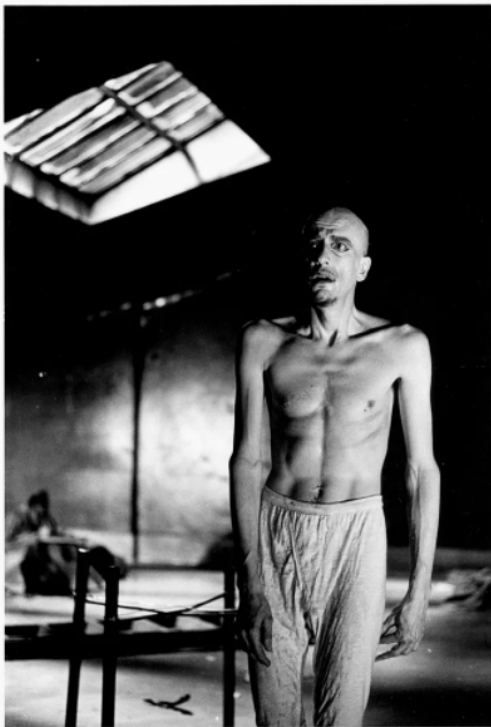


Photo: Robert McFarlane. *The Diary of a Madman*, Belvoir, 1989

What elements are used in this image from *Diary of a Madman* to give us a sense of this character's personality and the world they live in?

How would your understanding of this character change if the image was a close-up, with no background detail shown?

Light & Shadow

Lighting is an essential tool both for a production designer, and a photographer. Playing with light and shadow helps build and release tension, create atmosphere, and a sense of drama.

Read the chapter Light & Shadow and then answer the questions below.



Photo: Jeff Busby. About, Bangarra, 2011

How does the use of darkness and very minimal light contribute to the atmosphere and emotion of this photograph?

Light & Shadow



Photo: Jeff Busby. Brindabella, BalletLab, 2007

Describe the composition and use of light in this image, and how both elements together affect our understanding of the characters.

Space & Depth

When a photographer is capturing a performance, they are making a decision on what to keep in frame, and what to leave out. An audience in the theatre can see the whole stage at once, however their attention will be drawn to different parts of the space as the performance happens. The camera can capture these moments of dramatic significance to great effect.

Read the chapter Space & Depth and then answer the questions below.



Photo: Robert McFarlane. On Parliament Hill, Belvoir, 1987

How does the angle of this photograph contribute to the telling of the story?

What do you understand about these characters, from looking at this image alone?

Space & Depth



Photo: Jeff Busby. *The Misanthrope*, Anthill, 1985

Describe what you think the elements of this image – the characters, set, and angle the photograph is taken from – tell us about the story?

How does the photographer use foreground and background to give us a sense of what is happening?

Movement

Jeff Busby says “The sense that something is about to happen is such an important concept for me. The sense of before and after, even though an image is still”. Think about how a performance photographer might convey a feeling of movement in a still image.

Read the chapter Movement and then answer the questions below.



Photo: Jeff Busby. Are We That We Are, Sydney Dance Company, 2010

In this image, Jeff Busby has used a long exposure to create blurring.

What do you think is the relationship between these two characters?

Who is in the more powerful position? How does the blurring effect help you find your answer?

Movement



Photo: Jeff Busby. Kage, Team of Life, 2014

A still image of movement taken out of context can create an other-worldly effect.

Is this figure being dropped or thrown, rising, or frozen in time?

What do you think happens next?

Stage & Audience

A performance photographer is a conduit between the performance and the audience. The photographer needs to pull the show and the viewer together, to use a visual language that tells a potential audience member a little bit about what they are about to experience.

Read the chapter Stage & Audience and then answer the questions below.

Consider this quote from Jeff Busby:

“The photographer’s role has evolved during my career. When I started out [in 1978] there was a sense that I was part of the performance machine, but over time I have developed the skills to give all the creatives and artists their due.

Being a performer is a difficult profession. A photographer has a duty of care: photographs stick around for a long time. I am very conscious of making sure that no photograph goes through, that is awkward for an opera singer, dancer or actor.”

How do you think our use of photography today, and the fact that every aspect of our lives is able to be captured in film or image so easily, impacts performance, the experience of the performer, and of the audience?