

The Top Ten Sins of the Boom operator.



So, you're the new kid in town, the "green" student on your 1st professional production. Or perhaps you are filling in for someone who's sick.

Either way, as a newbie to the position of "director of interactive microphone placement", you must gain the respect of those around you; and appear to be both comfortable, and in control, of your job requirements.

Here's how NOT to do it!

Sin # 1 – put the mic in upside down/back to front/not right!

Sounds silly, I know; but believe me it can happen.

Most people, when looking at a location film mic, would pick up that it's generally longer at the front of housing than at the back. *I guess this is because it spends most of its time hanging in a downward position – and is better balanced when the pivot point of the housing is rearward. Also the acoustic interference tube (the "long" bit) is in essence a hollow tube, whilst the microphone capsule (at the back) is where all the weight is.*

True for most mics, but not the 'Sennheiser MKH 50' with 'Rycote - pistol-grip' housing. This little beauty is in fact a **very short** mic (compared to shotguns) and believe it or not – longer at the back of the housing.

The housing still has all of the characteristics that let you know which end is the back, and which the front. The adjustment knuckle is on the same side, cables still enter the housing at the back, etc, etc.

However, when placed under pressure, adjusting to the rapid-fire/2nd unit/pick up/TV show style of shoot (and despite multiple warnings from the mixer), it is still possible to feel rushed, and throw the mic into position... upside down.

Quite possible to get halfway into the take without realizing that you have indeed stuffed up, and glance over to your mixer to see that priceless look of confusion.

Very possible to ride out the take in the wrong position, let the director call "cut, fantastic – moving on please" and go red-faced as the mixer fumbles to make up an excuse for why we all need to re-set the previous shot.

It **can** happen, and once it does, it'll never happen again – trust me.

Sin # 2 – put the mic in shot

This one's pretty self explanatory.

Don't do it; unless you've put the mic in upside-down, in which case – drop it in so far, that they have to call cut, and go for another take.

It's a common misconception that the boom operator is always the one at fault if the mic happens to skirt beneath the top of frame.

I'd like to stand in our defense for a second and remind people that there is also a person who is constantly changing the camera's framing – and their decision to tilt up and provide more headroom... on the one and only take... after many rehearsals at a safer framing for mic position... can cause much anger directed at the boomie.

Of course it's also possible that the boomie may have nodded off during an extended CU of dramatic and emotional intensity... slowly dropping the mic... it's body rapidly approaching the top of frame... (This is to be avoided at all costs)

Sin # 3 – aiming the mic incorrectly ("off mic", including missing cues)

The "Shot-gun" style of microphone used on most film sets (in Australia at least) is fantastic for reducing the amount of external noise (unwanted sound) from being recorded.

This also makes it doubly important to keep the microphone accurately pointed in the direction of the person speaking.

Actors move, it's one of the reasons we love them so much. Not only do they move their bodies, but they also whip their heads around (generally to look at something or to speak to another person).

Alas they are not robotic (well most of them), and cannot repeat all of their moves precisely. Not too much of a problem you may say? Well if you constantly have to pre-empt this movement, you begin to appreciate those in the acting community that can replicate their movements exactly. All it takes is one misplaced head whip for their words to be missed entirely.

It should be noted that the best boom operators seem to be the ones that can "sense" when an actor is about to move, and indeed who is about to speak next! (**ed. – it's called READING THE SCRIPT, and watching the REHEARSALS**)

Honestly though, actors have so many other things to be thinking about: where to go?/what to do?/which side of the lens did I need to look at to cheat my eye-line? At the same time as attempting to appear "fresh" and "in the moment". It's a highly difficult job at the best of

times. So try and cut them some slack, just do your job as best as you can, I mean it is what we're paid to do.

Sin # 4 - hitting people (actors/crew/innocent bystanders)

Can't say that I've ever actually hit a person before. I've had DOP's bump my pole in cramped locations, and I've hit trees/doorways/ceilings/chandeliers more times than my mixer would care to remember – but I've never let a person smack into the mic.

I'm sure that you can appreciate the sheer expense involved in a collision between a high quality microphone and an, often blunt, object – especially at speed; it can't be good.

Update - I recently discovered the precise location for a microphone NOT to be in. On a recent Short Film, the lead actor delivered his lines, and proceeded to kick a football, at full strength, into the mic. Even though he promised me that he wouldn't be kicking the ball in this particular shot... well he was in the moment - and I learnt a valuable lesson. Surprisingly the microphone survived intact and unharmed, it was knocked out of its suspension, but all things considered...

Sin # 5 - I'm being followed by a... boom shadow!

Films need light, and light casts a shadow if an object blocks its path. This isn't so bad. Just make sure that your shadow doesn't move if it's in shot.

Also, Actors have this uncanny ability to start singing Cat Stevens...

Sin # 6 - thinking any particular set-up is going to be easy

You can quite easily fall asleep on most film sets. It takes a considerable amount of time to set up shots on a feature film/TVC (not so much on quickly shot TV shows).

It's best not to neglect the impending shot for too long, or else you may find yourself attempting to boom, suspended from a 50' ceiling due to a lens change, or being lit entirely off the set. In these rare cases, body mics may need to be used.

It takes time to adequately attach them to costumes, and time is the enemy, no matter what you are shooting.

There's nothing worse than the feeling you get when you have clearly bitten off more than you can chew... You stick the mic IN SHOT; and realize that it's not going to work. There's no coverage (additional shots) for this scene, and ADR isn't an option. You need to break the set-up and attach a body mic. Scornful looks are given, and time is indeed wasted. **BAD LLAMA!**

Sin # 7 - relying on body mics too much

I guess that it's professional pride that **should** be kicking you in the butt when you call for a body mic on an easy set-up. Perhaps you're too sleepy from all the waiting, or maybe it's the delightful lunch you just finished; but you really should get off your ass and swing that stick. Remind everyone that you **are** an integral part of the team, worth your pay-check... Unless it's much easier to just leave the body mic on from the previous set-up, and kick up your heels; I mean there is sleep to catch up on.

Sin # 8 - allowing talent to leave with radio mics

This kind of runs on from the previous one, it's bad form to let talent walk around unnecessarily attached to a \$4000+ radio system. Forgetting to keep the faders down when the talent's mic is "live" will get you into trouble with sin #9 (Privacy issues). Talent are also notorious for forgetting that the small electronic item attached to their belt/pocket/thigh is both delicate, and expensive.

Sin # 9 - unintentionally broadcasting private conversations to whomever is on headsets

Not good... Directors, producers, script supervisors (continuity), other talent, agency representatives, sound mixers, the video split – are all listening to what your microphone is collecting, even after "cut" is called. This can be bad if conversations are sensitive, or downright **hilarious** if people are 'in on it'. Either way, it's not cool and shouldn't happen (too much).

Sin # 10 - noisy pole syndrome

It's amusing (and perhaps ironic) that a person entrusted with the collection of clear and usable sound, can; and sometimes will, make unwanted noise during a take.

So keep your moves stealthy and quiet, your pole handling silent and true. Leave your sneezes until after "Cut" has been called, and never, ever, fart during a take.

Sin # 11 - setting an incorrect fish-pole length/ mic angle for the shot (therefore off axis)

Yeah, this one sucks. You feel completely out of control, everything's "off mic", and there's nothing that you can do until the next take. All you need is practice, and soon the number of times you get it right will overtake the number of times you stuff it up, till eventually you'll forget how crap you really were, way back when...

Sin # 12 – improper/relaxed equipment care

...Just the other day I was reminiscing with my mixer over how much I felt like I might actually be getting used to my job, and how green I was in the beginning... I then knocked my pole to the floor, stumbled over a vision cable, and fell into a creek with my wireless kit still attached... Comic timing is a hard thing to learn.

(In all seriousness, I didn't trip and fall into a creek, but I did knock the boom pole to the ground)

Now is probably a good time to talk about electronics and water. It's not good. All microphone leads carry electricity, as do vision split leads, and their introduction to a watery environment is **not** a nice thing to have happen. (Let's not forget ELECTRICAL leads also carry power – lots of it). Water is a **much** better conductor than air, and will lead to components shorting out (or "frying" as it can affectionately become known).

Find out who it was that unplugged then dropped the lead into the water... and **kill** them. It's as simple as that.

Sin # 13 - arguing with mixer/anyone

Do I need to tell people not to fight?

It's not good for your image, the harmony on set, or your karma.

Having said that, people can get riled up and excited over very little indeed. At the end of the day, it's only a movie, not worth getting upset over.

Sin # 14 - making a good cup of coffee

Don't suck up to the other departments, or they will lose respect for you. Be nice, but don't make them a good cup of coffee, or people will expect you to do it forever.

The possible exception to this rule is of course the script supervisor (continuity), make up/hair and wardrobe, the Director/A.D.'s, the boys in the lighting department, team camera, art department, those hard working grips, SFX, props, any form of talent, locations, catering... I guess the only person you shouldn't make a good cup of coffee for is your self, you don't have the time – get back on set!

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Ok, so I went to 14. That's one more than a "bakers dozen" you say?

Well I apologize, but I just couldn't help it.

This document has been created in the spirit of all that is good about the film industry... hard work, fun, and respect for all.

It's not meant to be entirely serious, but many things can be learned from the mistakes described above.

Almost all of the mistakes mentioned are real... and attributed to the author.

Ian Thomson, December 2003

