



FrameForge Previz Studio Usage Case Study

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I have directed four episodes of *Downton Abbey*, including Season 4 Episode 1, for which I was nominated for an Emmy. Here's a scene from Season 4 Episode 2, where FrameForge Previz was an invaluable director's tool.

The Set Up:

Lady Rose's new admirer, Sam - a gardener she met at a tea-dance, pays her a surprise visit, thinking, as Rose led him to, that she is a humble housemaid. He turns up at night, at the kitchen door. Thomas answers the door and takes umbrage at his request for 'the housemaid Rose' - but Anna overhears (she was at the dance too) and saves the day.

The Problem:

There had never been a 'below stairs' night-time 'doorstep' scene in *Downton Abbey* - for good reason: the 'below stairs' set where the interior of the kitchen is, is a build at Ealing Studios. But the courtyard which is supposed to be outside the kitchen door is 65 miles away, at Highclere Castle in Berkshire - the principle location for the show - so we had to do a doorway cheat.

But that's not easy - 4 feet beyond the kitchen door on the built set at Ealing is the studio wall; and behind the exterior door at Highclere is a camera trap only 3 feet deep.

Plus - from a director's point of view, it was clear to me that it would look bad if we didn't see Anna overhear the conversation between Sam and Thomas - she would pop up at the door too conveniently - so the scene needs a set up to establish the relative positions of Thomas and Anna before Thomas opens the door.

Oh yes - and the actor playing Sam was unavailable on the scheduled shoot dates at Ealing.

It was a complicated scene.

The Solution:

FrameForge Previz! I had built the entire 'below stairs' set inside FrameForge, using the measurements from art dept's technical drawings - it was easy to set out the spaces, furnish them and position doors, windows and traps accurately to allow for camera positions and sight-lines that I knew would correspond perfectly to the set on the shoot day.

I used this virtual set extensively on all four episodes of the show that I did - it was a great solution to busy scenes with lots of camera and character movement - exactly the kind of hustle and bustle that characterises the servants' scenes in the show. It meant that I worked fast, and I could give clear notes to a large number of actors about what marks they needed to hit when - I had it all worked out in advance, thanks to my previz.

But in this scene the problems were more acute. These shots were to be achieved many weeks apart from each other, but they had to cut together seamlessly to generate an unbroken rise in suspense for the viewer - I had to use a body-double for one of the actors for some shots (when he was supposed to be facing the camera, too) - I had to know that we could look out through the open door of the kitchen from inside, without 'seeing' the studio wall that was standing where the courtyard should be - and, most importantly - I had to be able to show my team a document that would explain my shots - *and convince them that my solution would work*. This is what FrameForge does for me that no other tool can: even if I could have drawn an excellent storyboard, my DoP would have been justified to question whether such and such an angle can really be achieved with our lens package in the actual studio - but he only had to put his eye the the finder once to see the accuracy with which the previz represents the set.

Here are the frames I generated in FrameForge which fixed the problem - and a set of screenshots from the finished show.



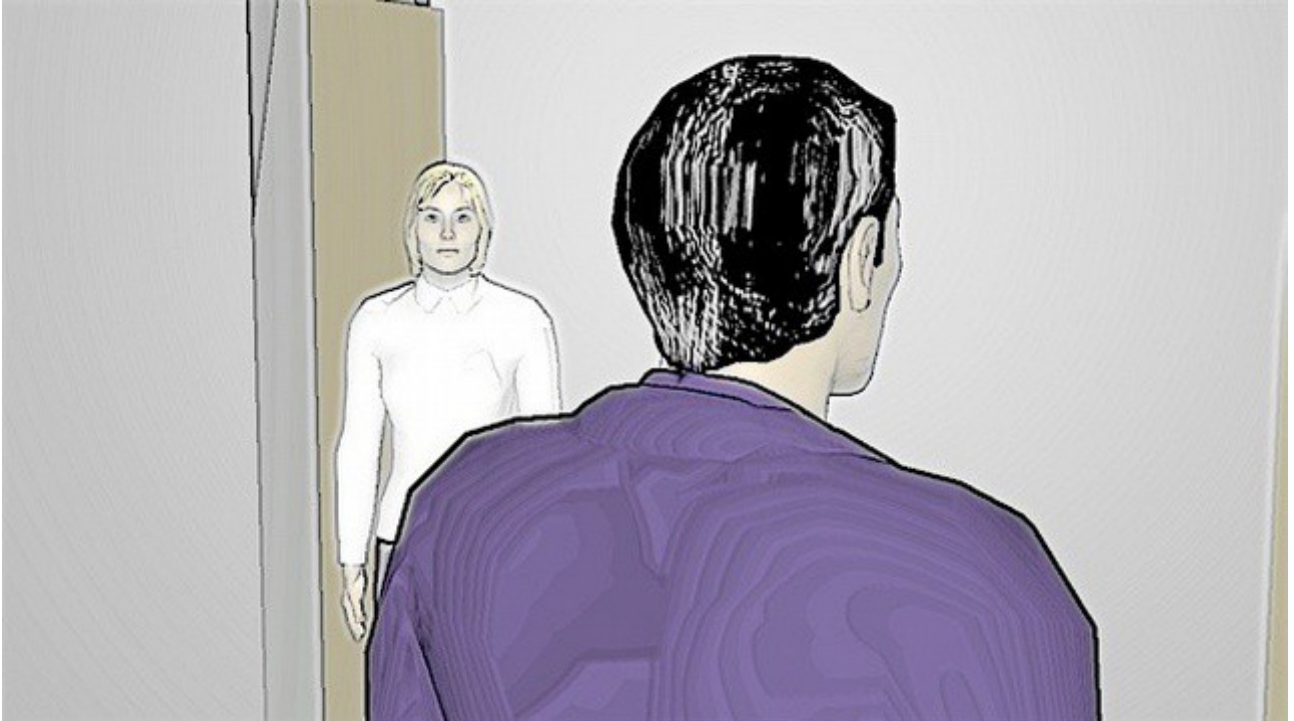
Sam knocks at the door (on location)



OK, so on the night we were able to track in as he neared the door - but it's still the same lens as the previz!



Thomas, in the kitchen (ie on set at Ealing) hears the bell and makes for the door (see how the previz showed me that we'd see the open door to Mrs. Hughes's office over his shoulder...?) so I knew we would see Anna in the frame as Thomas makes for the door - this is what stops the scene being clunky - because we've glimpsed Anna a few seconds before Thomas gets to the door...





so when we cut to Anna in the corridor we understand what the relative positions of the three characters is going to be, which sets up the key moment...





... when Anna overhears the conversation between Thomas and Sam - in the frame below, the door is open straight through to the studio wall, but it's lit for night, so you can't see what's beyond the door in sufficient detail...



...and I could reassure the crew that we would never see Sam (on the day the actor was unavailable) by the simple expedient of having Thomas stand in front of him!



From here on in the gag is pretty simple (and simple to explain, with these images to hand)



Here's Thomas, with Anna in the bg, on set at Ealing (with the camera flat to the studio wall with barely enough room to get the shot!)



...and here's the reverse of that shot, achieved on the same lens, but weeks later, on location; this time the camera is equally tightly packed into the tiny space behind the actor... but I insisted there was enough room to get the shot...





...and I was right!

David Evans
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