



Prompt Results

(continued from last week)

I wrote last week about the difficulty in preparing to give a presentation on an NHK 'Commentary' program - trying to find a balance between 'tight' scripting and 'loose' free talking. As I mentioned, I worked out a kind of compromise script, and sent it to the producer to be prepared for the teleprompter.

A couple of years ago, to help when making videos for my website, I built a simple reflecting teleprompter from a sheet of glass and some scrap wood. The lines of the script scroll into view as I speak, and I use a couple of keys on the keyboard to control the speed as I go along, adjusting it faster or slower as required. This home-made teleprompter works very well, and I now used it to practice for this upcoming program. When the day of the taping arrived, I put a copy of the script in my bag for some last minute review on the train, and headed downtown.

I arrived at the NHK building, was met in the lobby, and then escorted through a jungle of large rooms full of electronic equipment, into the studio. After a young girl prepared my makeup, I was shown to the desk where I would make my presentation. And there I had my first large surprise - their teleprompter.

I had assumed that they would have some kind of ultra-modern system for displaying the prompt text, but found that not only was it not modern, it was far more rudimentary than the one I had at home! Their system simply consists of sheets of paper placed on the desk in front of the speaker. A small overhead camera focusses on these sheets and displays the image on a transparent screen mounted on the main studio camera. There is no scrolling at all - the reader has to pick up and move each sheet out of the way at the appropriate moment.

So I would be like a TV news reader; you see them at the end of each news segment, sliding the sheet of paper off to the side, ready for the next item. I was given a special kind of 'tacky' cream for my fingers, so that I could easily slide the sheets of paper without fumbling.

They then explained to me that this program was always recorded 'live to tape'. There were no edits, cuts, or splices permitted at all. If I made a mistake anywhere along the line, we would have to start again from the beginning. We did a short sound check - I spoke the first minute or so of the presentation while they adjusted microphones and camera as necessary - and we were ready to begin. Take one!

The countdown clock started, the introductory music filled the studio, and the production assistant raised her arm. When she made the gesture for me to start, I began ... "Good evening, this is woodblock printmaker David Bull ..." We didn't get more than 30 seconds into it before I heard, "Cut! ... "

I wondered what I had done wrong, but it turned out to be not my error; there was a problem back in the control room. We waited while it was repaired, and then began again. This time, there was no interruption, but as I came to the final page of my script, and signed off, "Thank you very much; and goodnight!" I real-

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ized that the countdown clock was showing nearly two minutes of time still left! It was time to learn how to relax!

Take three was much better; although I didn't manage to hit the clock exactly at 0:00, I came close - it showed 0:15 left when I was finished. The producer came out of the control room, smiling broadly, "It's a take! We can fill that 15 seconds with music. OK everybody, we're done!"

And so we were. As I listened to the playback in the control room while a young assistant wiped off my makeup, I winced a bit to hear some of the small mistakes I had made, but overall had to agree with him that it wasn't so bad. A half-hour later, I was back on the crowded platform of Shibuya Station, on my way home.

Before I left, he said that they might be asking me back again. I sure hope so - it's so much more fun talking about things I want to say, rather than answering the same old interview questions over and over ad infinitum!

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