

# DANCING WITH THE STARS

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**How Steven Silver uses four (or more!) cameras to shoot *Two and a Half Men* and one gorgeous new lady every single week.**

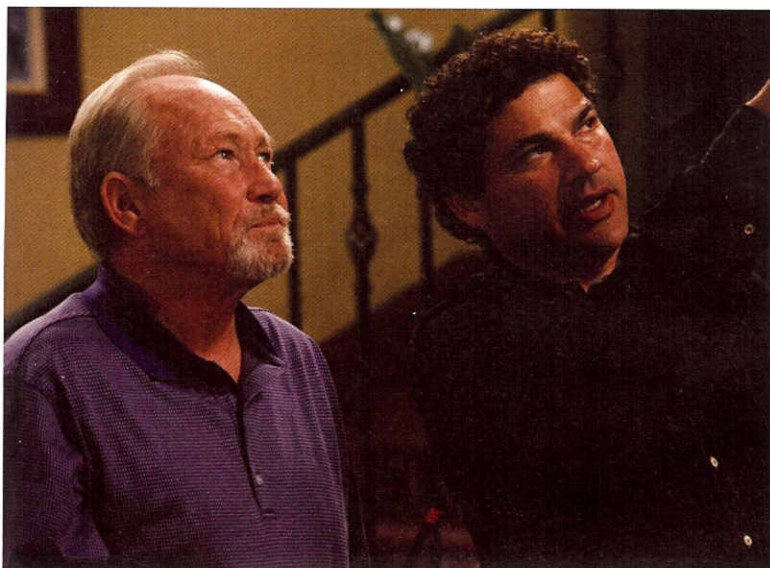
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By Bob Fisher

Photos by Greg Gayne / Warner Bros. Television Entertainment

**S**teven Silver says there was a time when television network executives insisted on producing situation comedies in bright key light, but now that mandate is history. The veteran DP recently completed shooting the sixth season of the hit series *Two and a Half Men*, which airs on the CBS Television network in high-definition format. All those episodes add up to some 60 hours of airtime - the equivalent of around 30 motion pictures. "I've always believed that cinematography for sitcoms need not look visually mundane with bright, flat lighting and laugh tracks that insult the public's intelligence," Silver reports from the set of the popular primetime show. "We do dramatic lighting because there is drama in comedy and comedy in drama. If the audiences don't laugh, we don't add laugh tracks because that feels fake."

*Two and a Half Men* features Charlie Sheen in the role of Charlie Harper, a carefree bachelor who calls a Malibu, California, beach house home. He drives a trendy sports car and has a beautiful new girlfriend in every episode. Charlie's life gets considerably more complicated after his brother Alan and 10-year-old nephew Jake become permanent houseguests. Jon Cryer portrays Alan, and Angus T. Jones plays Charlie's nephew.



Warner Bros. produces the series primarily on sets at the studio's Stage 26 in Burbank, with occasional jaunts to practical locations. One such exterior location involved Charlie's brother being mistaken for a burglar while he was jogging on the beach at night. Using moonlight as his motivation, Silver lit a quarter-mile stretch of Malibu's famed coastline for a chase sequence that included police cars and a helicopter. "Our goal is to take the audience on a journey through Charlie's world every week," describes the DP, who has earned four consecutive Emmy nods dating back to 2004, claiming top honors in 2007. "Malibu is like a character in the story, because it depicts Charlie's lifestyle. I've lived in Malibu for the past 25 years, so I have a pretty good sense of the place."

One of the show's main sets is a living room with a picture window overlooking the beach and ocean. Silver took an 8-by-10 still photo of the Malibu beach, ocean and blue sky and had it blown up to make a 70-foot long transparent backdrop that is used outside the windows to establish a sense of place. Sixteen Source Four projection units light the backing, with a moiré effect on each lamp that keeps the water from looking stagnant. The cinematographer uses angles and brightness of light to establish the time and visually punctuate moods.

*Two and a Half Men* consists of a five-day schedule for each episode, with a different director and leading actress every week. Silver generally spends Mondays in preproduction meetings with the director and getting to know the lead actress. He usually pre-lights sets on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but if there is a very ambitious production schedule, he may be filming pickup shots at least part of the day. Thursdays are generally dedicated to blocking and conferring with the crew. The show shoots on Fridays.

Silver stresses the importance of earning the trust of the new leading actress each week. He says it begins with getting to know the performer, including how she walks and talks, her eyes and body language. "When we meet for the first time, I study her face to decide if there might be need for diffusion or extra soft light," he says. "Then, we have a conversation. I'll ask her how she likes to be filmed, try to make her feel comfortable, and let her know that I'm her new best friend!"

Silver typically sets up lighting with stand-ins. Sometimes the actresses will come on the set while he is prepping and allow him to work with them for the best results.

"Lighting a comedy that's shot with four cameras is like choreographing a complex ballet," he explains. "Front light for one camera is backlight for another one. We use the entire range of latitude that film offers while shooting scenes in both bright light, and near total darkness in ways that look natural and feel organic." The lights are controlled with a dimmer board. Sometimes at the right moment Silver makes someone's eyes glow and hits them with a hot backlight, but he emphasizes that it has to be right for the place and time, in addition to visually punctuating moods.

His regular camera crew includes operators Brian Brockway, Mark Davison, Jamie Hitchcock and Brian Armstrong, assistants Nigel Stewart, Chris Hinojosa, Steve Lund, Hunt Hibler, Meggins Moore and Jeannette Scheibe.



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"Everyone on the crew contributes with their attitudes, skill and talent," Silver says. "We all have to be on the same page. Maybe it's a scene where somebody is coming through a door or into a hallway on the west side of the stage, and we want to make sure the two cameras on the wings cover them. Each camera operator has a specific assignment covering one, some or all of the characters in a shot from different angles. Our blocking is driven by the story, and we are almost always shooting on sets with three or four walls while hiding cameras outside windows, in doorways and other places," he points out. "The reality is that every week is different. Sometimes raking light is best for an actress and the story we are telling. The same raking light can make another beautiful actress look like a witch. We have to decide how we want the audience to see them. Do you want them to feel the heart palpitations Charlie is feeling as he looks at her? Until we make that decision, we're not doing our job."

Silver notes that some performers instinctively know how to find their light, while others turn away from it without realizing what they are doing. He relies on the operators and the rest of the crew to adjust, as well as the flexibility that the dimmer board offers. "We have to choose times to bring the best light straight into someone's eyes, while keeping their facial tones smooth," he explains. "There are other variables, including the color of their hair, their physiques and what we are trying to enhance in the story."

Silver generally covers scenes with four Panavision Gold cameras mounted with 11:1 Primo zoom lenses, though he has used as many as seven or eight cameras and as few as one, depending on the director and his own vision for the scene. "We use dramatic lighting whenever possible, and always in romantic scenes," he continues. "Sometimes I'm working at four footcandles, and other times I'm crashing in big lights at 300 footcandles. The wide range of film provides us this flexibility."

The veteran DP says he typically uses strong three-quarter backlight that looks like it is coming from the window even when shooting from two completely different angles. "We take a lot of artistic license," he confirms. "If I just bang a light through the window, the glass is going to cut the light so much that we won't get the effect that we need for four cameras. We get around that by lighting from above the windows, so we can cover shots from different angles and still look consistent."

*Two and a Half Men* is captured with KODAK VISION2 HD Color Scan Film 5299, a 500-speed negative that is balanced for exposure in 3,200K tungsten light. Silver uses three-perf negative, which trims raw stock and lab costs without affecting image quality. He explains that only three quarters of a 35 mm frame are used when exposing images for airing on television. Another advantage is that it increases time between magazine changes by 25 percent. Images are composed in 16:9 aspect ratio while protecting for 4:3 for markets that haven't converted to widescreens.

"My colorist, Tony D'Amore (at Technicolor in Los Angeles), urged me to standardize on using 5299 film, which is designed for scanning in HD format," he says. "It records details deep into the darkest shadows and brightest highlights, just like the human eye sees them. We can also crush the blacks if a scene calls for truly rich, dark tones. That gives me more flexibility for painting pictures with Tony's help." In fact, Silver often leaves D'Amore phone messages describing his intentions for shots and scenes. They've developed a verbal shorthand to help the colorist visualize what Silver means when he says, "show them the glow in a character's eyes, or make this scene a little darker." If the cinematographer is not totally satisfied upon seeing the color-corrected master, he writes D'Amore a note requesting a few painterly touches before the show airs. 🎨

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## CREW

### "Two and a Half Men"

**Dir. of Photography:** Steve Silver

**Operators:** Mark Davison, Brian Brockway,  
Jamie Hitchcock, Brian Armstrong

**Assistants:** Nigel Stewart, Chris Hinojosa, Steve Lund,  
Hunt Hibbler, Meginn Moore, Jeannette Schiebe

**Still Photographer:** Greg Gayne, Robert Voets,  
Gale M. Adler, Ron Jaffe

**Photo Publicist:** Kathleen Tanji

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