

When Size Matters

Actors come in all heights, but sometimes they need to seem ... a different height. That's when productions get crafty, turning to a range of time-tested techniques and devices.

STANISLAVSKI WAS RIGHT: “There are no small parts, only small actors.” When shooting a television show, however, small actors occasionally present a challenge: how to make them appear larger than life on-screen. Fortunately, there are various ways to boost an actor's stature before the cameras even start rolling. Known in the industry as “cheats,” these practical effects involve no green screens or post-production digitization and are as simple as they are effective.

One method is as old as moving pictures: the low-angle shot. Placing the camera below eye level, lens tilted up, makes an actor appear taller and more imposing. What can be Kryptonite for shorter actors is a full shot with head-to-toe coverage. The default fix? Don't do it. This is where blocking and staging come in. Use the bottom of the frame to cut the actor off at the knees or higher. To amplify the illusion even further, the director might tell the DP to move the camera in close, focusing on the actor's face and keeping props and peripheral characters in the background. Using this method, Peter Dinklage dominated many a *Game of Thrones* scene.

Positioning an actor on stairs is another cheat. Conversely, if a scene calls for a two-shot featuring actors of strikingly different heights, digging a trench and placing the tall person in it (yes, this is really done) will level the playing field. But moving dirt at union scale isn't cheap, so producers on *The X-Files* found a better solution. David Duchovny, who played Fox Mulder on the long-running sci-fi series, is six feet tall — 10 inches taller than co-star Gillian Anderson. Study the series and you'll notice that in every standing two-shot, Duchovny is slightly slouched. (Anderson also wore chunky heels.) The real equalizer, though, was the “Gilly-Board,” named in Anderson's honor.

Still in use on Fox productions, the Gilly-Board is an aluminum platform covered with outdoor carpeting, which

provides traction and dampens sounds that sensitive mics pick up. This solved the eyeline-match dilemma, but it proved to be an occupational hazard. “Sometimes I forget I'm on the box. Like, I'll have this very serious moment in a very serious scene, and I'll turn to the camera and fall right off,” Anderson told *US* magazine back in 1997.

Incorporating forced perspective into production design can also fool audiences. It's impossible to detect, but some sets have doorways that are 10% smaller, a subtle tweak that makes an actor appear taller on-screen. To pull this off, two versions of a set are built: one downsized, the other constructed with standard 80-inch doorways.

The opposite scaling effect has been used in Prime Video's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. In the first season, The Stranger (Daniel Weyman) falls from the sky, lands in a steaming crater and is discovered by Nori (Markella Kavenagh), a young Harfoot. To show how small the halfling Harfoots are, two different-sized craters were constructed in a hangar in Auckland, New Zealand: a large one that made Kavenagh look miniscule, and another that perfectly accommodated Weyman's six-foot frame.

Elevator shoes, or “lifts,” are another way to add inches. They're as inconspicuous as chameleons in the wild, and TV stars wear them both on set and on the red carpet. They can add several inches of height without any TMZ reporter being the wiser.

You'll find the best lifts at Guido Maggi, a fancy boutique on Milan's Via Fiori Chiari. Stylists, personal assistants and costume designers (never the stars themselves) make the pilgrimage there to place orders. With premium models starting at \$1,600, the bill adds up quickly. “We are the Lamborghini of elevator shoes,” boasts creative director Emanuele Briganti. “We invest in R&D to improve comfort, use premium materials and hire the best artisans. It's a custom product — lots of actors wear them.” Asked to divulge names, he cites the tyranny of



This scene between Nori (Markella Kavenagh) and The Stranger (Daniel Weyman) from *The Rings of Power* showcases size-altering “cheats” at work; (below) a pair of Guido Maggi Chelsea boots like these can make you four inches taller, with no one the wiser; (opposite) it would be difficult to find a TV production that doesn’t have a few apple boxes lying around, given their many on-set uses.



NDAs: “I’m contractually prohibited from mentioning any celebrities who wear our shoes.”

He’s being modest. These are more than shoes — they’re engineering marvels, capable of adding up to six inches (boots only) and supporting 660 pounds. The “sweet spot,” Briganti says, is 3.1 inches.

Set props such as bookcases and tables are routinely downsized to make actors seem taller in comparison. Editors can help by making quick cuts in certain scenes to make height differences less noticeable. The same goes for lighting technicians; casting long shadows greatly enhances the perception of height.

Using tall body doubles (shot at a distance and from behind), costumes with slim silhouettes, giving sight lines to your actors that are higher than the shorter actor’s eyes so they’re always looking up at the lead character — these cheats date back to the pioneering Lumière brothers. Still, they endure.

But the most common cheat of all has been around forever: the humble apple box. During the early Hollywood

years, long before *The X-Files*, when SAG-AFTRA were just letters in a bowl of soup, actors would stray from the cameras to eat lunch. To keep talent tethered to the set and prevent delays, studios would send sandwiches and apples to all their soundstages and locations. That food arrived in wooden crates which, when empty, turned out to be ideal for propping up everything from lighting equipment and camera operators to petite actors like Gloria Swanson and Mae West.

Matthews Studio Equipment, a Burbank institution that bills itself as “The Original Hollywood Grip Company,” is famous for its purpose-built apple boxes. You won’t find a grip van in town that doesn’t have a dozen stacked inside. According to the company’s Martin Torner, these sturdy, nine-ply boxes are a perennial best-seller. The standard “Full Apple” (\$79) will raise a romantic lead eight inches in the frame. “Everybody says, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll fix it in post.’ But it ends up costing 10 times more to stretch the actor with computers than just tossing a box on the floor,” Torner says. “Everyone talks about the cameras, lenses and lights, but nobody talks about apple boxes. They’re so important — you couldn’t make a show without them.”

—RENE CHUN

