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High-Definition TV Causes Worry Lines For Stars, Producers

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New Wrinkle: The Technology Puts More Focus on Flaws; Blemish Becomes Volcano

By EMILY NELSON

In her 25 years as a star on television's most popular soap opera, "The Young and the Restless," Melody Thomas Scott has survived seven marriages, a newborn's death and a gunshot wound from a husband's ex-wife. But none of that matches her latest dramatic challenge: high-definition television.

"If you didn't quite blow your hair out straight enough, you're going to see a little fuzz," says the 47-year-old actress. "You can't get away with anything anymore."

High-definition television—which shows pictures that are larger and nearly five times as sharp as those on a regular set—has the image-obsessed television business worried that a growing audience will see more reality than it wants: the wrinkles on once-ageless actors, the cracks in set walls, the brush strokes on painted backdrops. To avoid turning off viewers, Hollywood's illusion specialists in makeup, set design and lighting are finding ways to counter HDTV's less-forgiving eye.

High-definition "really scared the hell out of us at first because the images are so sharp," says Bruce Grayson, head makeup artist for the Academy Awards, which were broadcast in high definition for the first time last spring. "A blemish on a face becomes a volcano."

HDTV seems to be catching on after years of hype but few buyers. This past holiday season, major retailers for the first time cut prices on some models to less than \$1,000—the magic price that boosted personal-computer sales several years ago. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. calls HDTV one of its fastest-growing electronics items, and Sears, Roebuck Co. says some models sold out last month. HDTV sales aren't broken out separately yet, but sales of digital television sets—which can be upgraded to HDTV if they don't have it originally—rose 56% last year from 2002 to about four million units, according to Consumer Electronics Association estimates.

John Wiedner, an architect in Los Angeles, plugged in his new HDTV receiver a few weeks ago and tuned in his favorite local news anchorwoman. "My first comment was, 'Oh my God, she looks horrible,'" he says. "She looks fine on regular TV. On HD, you see every wrinkle." But he still likes her. "To actually see that they're not that perfect, it's actually kind of satisfying," Mr. Wiedner says.

The major networks have gradually

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Melody Thomas Scott

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been adding HDTV to their prime-time lineups for several years in the belief that the technology would inevitably catch on. Networks broadcast shows in HDTV, but only viewers with HDTV sets and feeds can see the improvements over regular TV. That means producers have to make their episodes work both on HDTV and on the standard TVs in most homes. So they are checking shots during rehearsals and tapings on two monitors, a wide one for HDTV and a standard one.

Viewers can expect to see that their favorite shows have added curtains to the windows, the better to disguise backdrops that now look as phony as they are. They'll also see more extras in the background, needed to fill in bigger screens that can show a third more picture than a standard set.

On "Friends," the executive producers told production designer John Shaffner that the actors "need to be as beautiful as possible," Mr. Shaffner says. So he painted the main set lavender, an unusual color for an apartment, but one with special effects on high definition. "All their skin tones, their hair tones, everybody looks good in that apartment," he says.

In earlier seasons, Mr. Shaffner hid cracks in the set with masking tape and paint. Now he applies putty to fill cracks and sands down the repair before painting. During a recent taping, Mr. Shaffner spotted brushstroke lines on the backdrop, a painting of a Manhattan streetscape. So he dirtied the set windows to cloud the strokes. Mr. Shaffner also uses a spray gun to spread a thin mist of paint to look like dust on the set, he says. "We were trying to get that New York feel."

To flatter their stars, cameramen on sitcoms and dramas can use a feature called "skin detail" on their lens, and it's getting more of a workout with HDTV. It involves an adjustable setting that blurs flesh tones but keeps the rest of the scene in focus. On

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Dinair is the originator of Airbrush makeup and systems

"The Young and the Restless," more scenes are now low-lit, or shot in yellow tones to convey softness. "We try to take light off extraneous walls so it has that warm look," says David Shaughnessy, until recently the show's executive producer, who oversaw the transition to HDTV. "The lighting guys are just amazing. There are enough filters in the show so the actors are well-protected."

"The Young & the Restless" also widened a few rooms, mostly small bedrooms and offices, to include more detail for HDTV's bigger picture. The makeup artists on the show are more precise about matching makeup with skin tones, says Patti Denney, the show's head makeup artist. "The one thing is to make sure everything is blended in. I have noticed, in general on television, that a person is made up to just below the chin and then you see this white neck," Ms. Denney says. With HDTV, "now you're really aware they're wearing makeup. If a girl's in a strapless dress, there's body makeup put on, even on her legs."

To prepare for his job making up Renee Zellweger at the Academy Awards, Paul Starr watched high-definition television at a friend's house. He says he was dismayed to see Jay Leno on "The Tonight Show" in "very bright" and "very heavy" makeup. He armed Ms. Zellweger with a powder compact to keep in her purse and reapply to avoid shine. He also counseled her to confine herself to air kisses to prevent smudges, says Mr. Starr.

Mr. Grayson, the awards show's head makeup artist, took the precaution of stationing other makeup artists, armed with concealer, powder, blotting paper, lipstick and eyelash glue, at every stage entrance to check whether performers needed last-minute repairs.

Many makeup artists who work on HDTV broadcasts are trying a new technique for actors called airbrushing, named for the method of doctoring photos. Artists shoot a fine spray of foundation with a gunlike machine that applies a delicate film on the skin's surface. Unlike traditional powder and liquid foundations that are rubbed into the skin to fill and cover wrinkles and blemishes, airbrushing coats skin with a smooth and even mask.

Even executives in sports television, who love the detail of HDTV, have their own worries. This season, ABC resumed broadcasting "Monday Night Football" in high definition, after abandoning the practice following a trial run during the 1999-2000 season, when it said too few people owned the sets. Preston Davis, ABC's president of broadcast operations and engineering, said HDTV's broader picture might let viewers catch players on the sidelines "doing something inappropriate for television."