

**The Real ABD and Zs of Independent Film Making**

**By**

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## INTRO

So, you have had it watching inspiring films being made by others, be they 3 and half hour epics that, rightly or wrongly, will remain on the shelves of TV stations long after you, the distributor and the writer of this book have vanished into the next dimension and/or lifetime (requiring of course, a format change every year into perpetuity), or 6 minute videos on youtube that show just how little a self-absorbed moron and/or asshole can say with a microphone and a camera. You have decided to DO it rather than watch it. You have dedicated yourself to expressing yourself and the truths you have discovered in the most expensive yet influential mediums in the world...film. By film, I mean video, as most video cameras today can make any image look like it was shot on film, with far less costs, and without the worry about sending negatives to the lab to find out that the developer of those negatives accidently put them in the wrong bin in the dark room.

There are many ideas about how to make films, and why one can, or should, make them. Such is true, as the creative process, its origin and operation, is different for everyone. But there is one constant today---It has never been easier technically to make a watchable film than it is today. So easy that a cave man could do it, or even more dangerously, a computer programmed by someone who wants to turn the whole world into illiterate cave men. But unless you are a single individual with skills in thirty different areas whose characters are animated, you'll have to make your moving images on screen by working with, yes, real people in what is called, rightly or wrongly, the real world. Which is the good news and the bad news, but more importantly, the accurate news.

It is said that there are three places you get to know who you really are, what you are 'made of' and what your true abilities, and weaknesses, are. In jail, where there is just you, the cockroaches, and the imaginary friends you envision on the other side of the walls, or within them. In war, where it is kill or be killed, or find some way to avoid killing or being killed. And, in its own way, film making.

OK, so, on most sets anyway, the only blood spilt is artificial vampire blood from a bottle or (if SOMEone forgot to bring the props to the production) catsup from the Kraft Services snack table). But in ways felt between the ears, and experienced in the heart and the gut, making films is like making war. You have to race against the clock, change reality, and coordinate people, things and emotions so that at the end of the day you 'win' against Mama Nature, who, despite her smiling face on a sunny day, so often stacks the cards against your attempts to create images that make others feel, see and believe in another 'reality'. The language of film production, even sensitive touchy feely Hallmark Christmas flicks that Santa would roll his eyes as they are way too sweet for his tastes, contains metaphors which are...combative. The camera takes SHOTS. When commencing a scene, someone says (usually in an arousal inducing voice) ACTION. Which is stopped with someone yells even louder 'CUT'. In the editing room, you put together CLIPS. The microphone is put atop of a long spear-like structure called a BOOM. And it is a coordinated action in which there is a director who, ideally, is respected and obeyed, who in return should listen to those 'under' him/her.

Oh, by the way, when using pronouns, the author occasionally will put ‘him’ before ‘her’, or vice versa, staying away from neutral pronouns. Such is the situation with language and our proclivity to still identify people as ‘him’ or ‘her’, rather than, as in many other languages, refer to objects as being male, female or neuter. But, I digress...as will often happen here on this voyage intended to teach, instruct, inspire and...learn, the writer having to do the latter as well.

There are many obstacles to putting the idea in your head into moving images onto the screen. This book will show how this writer has assessed and overcome some of those obstacles to save you difficulties. By way of qualifications, the reader is invited to visit [www.longridgerpress.net](http://www.longridgerpress.net), with links to 25 films done by the writer, on his (ok, there is one of those pronouns again) terms, ranging from 7 minute live action dramodics to 2.8 hour made for tv dramas. Half of them, an hour or more in length, have been commercially aired. And which were done with very little money, in record time.

By way of the stats which you are entitled to know before listening to this writer’s claims, which are not intended as boasts. ALL of the films an hour or longer were done for budgets under \$20,000. The half hour dramas were shot for budgets between \$200 and \$4,500. And there wasn’t a single day when less than 8 minutes of final movie was shot, the record being 40 minutes of final product being shot between a brunch and supertime. And, no, these were not films involving time lapse photography of trees losing their leaves in an autumn storm, or a stoned director/producer/writer putting himself in camera slowly losing his mind as he read the phone book, commenting with bad puns on the names therein.

Fire and form can and must be merged when making films, and they can be. For the most part, fire comes from artists who are weird with big imaginations, and form comes from technical folk (otherwise tragically known as scientists) who are experts in obeying the laws of physics without even thinking about being Promethian enough to challenge them. Both approaches are required to effectively make films, and particularly to make them cost effectively. Which brings us to the first obstacle in making films...the money.

## THE MONEY, HONEY

Orsen Wells said that ‘Making movies is a horrible business. You spend 98% of your time trying to get the money and 2% doing the work.’ With the exception of well funded porn films, or propaganda flicks over-budgeted by corrupt and evil government, this is true whether you are making a \$300 film as a 14 year old by saving your lunch money, or a big time studio-backed epic about...a 14 year old making his first film.

Another stat, which in my observation and experience, is worth relating. Putting aside that funding movies is a great and legal tax write off in many countries, one in ten films makes the producer money, one in ten breaks even and the rest leaves the producer out of pocket. And with increasing abilities for anyone with any cyber-smarts to see any movie she/he wants to without he/she paying anything, film distributors are struggling to figure out how to make money. But this should not discourage people from making films.

If making films is about making a social, personal or spiritual statement, rather than elevating the numbers on your bank statement, it is, I submit, a good thing for the Art, the Medium and the World. A passion-driven film, if preserved in the right format, will live well beyond the lifetime of the producer/writer/director/actor. Socrates didn’t earn a drachma as a philosopher in Athens at a time when many others who pontificated their view of life did. But it is his Works that have survived, though his student Plato. JS Bach was, during his lifetime, a B-level artist at best on the Top Ten 18<sup>th</sup> Century Playlist charts, whose works were mostly ignored soon after his death, but were discovered over a hundred years later, and shared with the rest of us now.

Making films is a gamble, and, as in any chance taking endeavor for a noble cause, you shouldn’t put rent money on the casino table of life. But...no pain, no gain, and nothing ventured, nothing gained.

So...how do you get the money you need? Perhaps a better question is...WHAT and WHO do you need to tell the story in your heart, mind and gut on the screen? The least accomplished film makers are so often the ones who are married to specific images that they are obsessed with putting on screen, with no flexibility for alternatives. If, for instance, as a writer, you ‘see’ 50 motorcycles rolling down the streets of a busy city in rush hour, being chased by 100 elephants, and you INSIST on that being what the camera sees as your opening establishment shot of the inner workings of a law firm on one of the adjacent buildings, you will overspend all of your money and favors on that one shot. Including favors to biker gangs who you will never be able to pay back. With the exception of the 100 elephants, this is a very real story, about a filmmaker who the present writer will and should not name, from whom he learned how to NOT make films.

Using your own money as the ‘first investor’ is both honorable and practical. No smart, sane or non-hypnotized investor would ever put money into something that the creator didn’t put SOMETHING into her/himself first, be it money, loans or sweat equity. And whoever funds the money gets to call the shots, literally, as to how it is made, and what the film will be. Like the songs from both sides of the political aisle say, ‘freedom ain’t

free', and 'God/Buddha bless the child/adult who has the imagination of a child who has his/her own'.

Yes there are funding agencies, some privately and some government funded, but they are less available than in previous years and often portray themselves as having money to give away. But in reality, so many of them are just as broke as you are. Still, they maintain the illusion of being flush with cash so they can keep their jobs as assessors or applications, particularly from applicants who are asked to fork over a 'nominal' application fee, which if they get enough applicants, puts money into their own overstuffed pockets that they spend for overpriced coffee, dope or one night stand 'professional meeting' companions.

I recall a remark in my younger years from a broadcaster at the Toronto Film 'Festival' (festival of course referring to a shark fest where the 'cool' demolish and degrade the 'uncool', especially at 'indy' festivals). At the time, I relied on the people 'on top' of the hierarchy of artistic oligarchs to tell me what a good film is and what a bad one is, and how I should be just like them, rather than to listen to a Higher Authority when deciding what film to make. Said overdressed and up-righted-chinned 'People's Goddess' broadcaster said that 'to get your independent film done with your own true voice, you have to get one of us to like it'. At least she was honest, though so were the Nazis when they said that their ultimate goal regarding the Jewish question was to liquidate that 'inferior' race.

OK, I can hear you say 'sour grapes, you are angry at the people on top because you were not invited to be part of their club or, in reality, you are not as talented as they are.' But, unlike medicine where the ratio of healthy to sick/dead patients in your hospital is a measure of 'good work', the arts are subjective. And what is great art to one person is, inevitably, horrible art to another one. And if you accept that being liked by everyone and being invited to the club where you are adorned with applause and money are two things that will never happen, to anyone, in the real world, I invite you to read on. But more on that a bit later.

## THE TEMPLATE: AKA SCRIPT

Be it consciously written as a beat by beat script with notes for every eyeroll in it or a general idea about what you are going to put in front of camera that is floating around in your head looking for definition, you will be taking a theoretical template with you into production. There are a thousand different books as to how to write screenplays, and ten times more ways to actually do this. The purpose of this 'book' is not to retell what is in those books, or write my own for you, but to relate elements that, universally, should be in screenplays/scripts/applied improvisations, and what should not be in them.

The main reason for relating this is that rightly or wrongly we are conditioned in the 'civilized' world (North America anyway) to some kind of story structure that has to be there if the images are to be inspiring, informative and emotionally moving. What is a screenplay? Be it a two minute solo monolog or a 5 hour epic? The best formula is that a filmed 'story' is....About a main character (or group of characters) who is trying to do a certain task against a specific obstacle that comes their way within a specific period of time, with consequences for failing in attaining that task and gains if he/she/they do. Stories are usually about man(or woman, or, yes trans individuals) against other humans, 'man' against society, 'man' against nature, or 'man' against fate/himself. The main character (protagonist or antagonist who you root for/sympathize with on some level) is the one whose survival or perspectives are most threatened by some event that changes the status quo, and who has to make decisions to move the story along and change the environment around him/her. Sometimes these are bad decisions, but they have to be made and followed through with.

Stories usually adhere to a three act structure in which in act 1 you set up the world of the protagonist/main character which disrupted by a catalyst/event of some sort. Act 2 has the character dealing with the catalyst and the changes in the world around him/her, perhaps more defensively than aggressively. Act 3 is when the main character has to ACTIVELY struggle against something/someone in ways he/she never has before in order to make a change in the world around them or to survive.

This structure is also present in each scene of a film, in which one of the characters has a specific outer goal and inner need that is connected to that goal, working against an obstacle, often put up or personified by other character(s) in the scene. The main character doesn't always have to 'win' the battle of course. But the 'war' must go on.

As for tone of the conflict and resolutions, it can be comedic, dramatic, satirical, farce or tragedy. The big question that most people ask or struggle with is whether a scene, or event in it, is funny, serious, tragic or satirical. The main 'fork' is whether something is comedic or dramatic. The former, if done well, is most effective in moving emotions and opening up closed minds to new thoughts, ideas and ideals. But to make something EFFECTIVELY comedic the most ineffective way to do it is to try to be funny. If one is real, honest and dives deep enough into the matter at hand, the result often IS comedic. And has dramatic undercurrent to move emotions other than mere laughter. Such is what Chuck Lorrie (Big Bang, Mom, etc) said in interviews and within the context of his

brilliant dramedy on Netflix 'The Kominsky Method'. By the way, Kominsky is Mel Brooks' real surname. And as for Mel Brooks, master of comedy, he never tries to please or adjust to the audience. He dives into a piece when writing it, films it, goes with the story and invites anyone who wants to to 'come along for the ride.' His words.

There is also a rhythm to dialog, and action, as in music. Look at a well written and connected to emotions scene when it is shot. The edits between the two characters have a cadence to them, when felt, and timed in terms of how long each clip is. Dramatic and comedic writing is poetic prose, with intrinsic rules of timing that is determined by the players, words and ideas within the narrative. Yes, like Shakespeare.

And regarding comedy, the rule of threes does apply. Fact one, fact 2, then punch-line. It works. And as for comedy, if you are ever doing stand up, or searching for a way to make a mundane thing funny, the formula for it is:

What angers me about \_\_\_\_ is

What scares me about \_\_\_\_ is

What arouses my annoyance about \_\_\_\_ is.

What I HATE about \_\_\_\_ is.

And (the most powerful on)...Why it's hard to be a \_\_\_\_.

Fill in here something that you experience in daily life or some one, such as ...Cops, teachers, or writers of books like this that go on and on about things you already know or don't give a shit about.

But seriously, folk...The elements of writing that should always be in anything worth spending valuable human time watching are:

Intensity, edge, intelligence, humor, heart, truth (true to life rather than imitative of someone else beat for beat).

The five dragons to avoid are:

Lifelessness, boredom, hoaky (easily copying what someone else did), procedural (predictable), and sterile.

As for improvisation, either from a script or in a work where there is no script, it needs a topic or through line to start it off, and keep in on track, providing a beginning, middle and some kind of resolution/new realization at the end. And should be about interaction between people rather than trying to upstage the other schlep or to show off to the audience. And, as in anything else worth doing, have LIFE and EMOTIONAL COMMITMENT to it, and an inner Truth to it all. Where you tell it as it really is, holding back NOTHING from the camera, or your own eyes and ears as you dive deep into the issue, and yourself.

## THE REALITY OF YOU IN RECREATING REALITY

Film making if dramatic, comedic, satirical or tragic, involves re-creating reality with a three act structure involving a beginning, a disturbance of that world, a battle of some sort, and some kind of resolution which is not predictable. If documentary, it's about re-assessing reality and redefining perceptions, with its own kind of artificial story structure in which. Taking Ken Burns' Civil War documentary as example, you create suspense and an unexpected ending, like making the viewer think that the South may have actually won the Civil War. But amidst this unreality which, if done right, reveals truth about the real world, you have to be real.

It is said that one should 'act like an asshole' so you are 'treated like a saint.' Such is the rule in Hollywood and other 'cool' places where it is cool to be cruel. But on your own set, with the people under you who you are asking or paying or begging or cajoling to make your Vision happen, the best way to get people to do their best work is to inspire them. Field Marshall Rommel, love him or hate him, owed much of his success as a field commander to working harder than any of his men, and letting them see that he did. JFK did the same. So does the 'skipper' on any motion picture boat, no matter how inland its sailing course is.

It is said of your enemies that you should 'not let them see you sweat'. With your comrades, as ideally you should have no enemies on the set, you should not show your fear or indecision. Someone has to lead in the Promethian act of defying the status quo to actually get your movie filmed, edited and out there. And...who that person is? A look in the mirror tells you that, or should anyway.

A filmmaker who seeks to abuse, doesn't respect or doesn't listen to people under him/her will not only have a less than optimal product at the end of the day, week, month, but have a hard time getting the same people back a second time, or people that those people know to agree to participating in the film. Promises to non-paid hard working people that 'when this trailer, test film or pilot episode makes it big, I'll hire you all for top dollar!' is more often than not an undeliverable promise, and one that in current times is believed by fewer people each year. But how to compensate people for the time and energy exerted doing what you tell them to do?



## PEOPLE LOGISTICS, NEEDS AND CREATIVE ALLIANCES

There is money as something to solidify an alliance between you the captain of the Good Ship Filmatica and the enlisted men/women on board, which, I think anyway, you have to provide to them. How much? Paying for transportation, lodging or whatever is required to get them to the set is essential, as NO one working for you should be out of pocket. As for how much goes into pocket, in an age of barter and escalating legal minimum wage...the rule of thumb I use is that half of minimum wage for days they are not working anyway is a fair thing to offer. And to keep in mind that some people's work involves the day of production, and some are needed for pre-production and post production. The latter is always many times longer than the days of production, as even with the best editors and editing programs (and footage), at least an hour of human time and energy is required for every minute of final product. And as for pre-production...actors have to spend time/energy memorizing lines, locations have to be scouted out, props have to be obtained or made, and equipment has to be both tested and functional.

As for other modes of showing your appreciation and respect for people who are doing the 'grunt' work carrying out your Vision as a director/producer? One must be courteous to them, compliment them for doing good work when they do it, correct them constructively and respectfully when doing bad work or not working fast enough, and listen to their suggestions. The latter does not involve always applying those suggestions, as others don't see the Work from the Inside the same way you do. And, there is that maxim that a camel is a horse designed by a committee which fares very poorly on a cattle drive.

When recruiting people, it is also useful at times to assess how their being in the film will advance their own desires and professional plans. Those who want to be actors will gain from being in front of camera for the first time. Those who love technology will gain experience working behind the camera. Those who want to become great writers and actors will learn A LOT by assisting in the editing room, or at the very least, observing what the editing process is like. Martin Scorsese, for instance, started out as a film editor.

On set food is another thing you MUST provide. It serves as both a 'thank you' to the usually (though not planned to be) overworked cast and crew, keeping them from stringing you up and getting a shot of you lynched on the rafters with a new title of the film being 'Hanging Director'. It also keeps people fueled up. Keeps them on set, as a half hour break to go to Burger King often extends to an hour, and in the case of 'smoke breaks' off set, results in many actors coming back to set cocained-up, if they show up at all.

By way of food, there are...extremes. On one there is making people bring their own lunch, or making them buy YOU lunch. Bad medicine, as every employer I know (and, yes you are an employer as the director-producer) makes things more cooperative and

productive at work by feeding the staff lunch on a regular basis, and ice cream when the truck comes to the front door.

On the other extreme, there is overpaying a caterer to provide meals and snacks, which often involves overpaying for 'presentation' and food that is wasted, or not to the likes or needs of some of the cast/crew. Or eating to excess. A light lunch is part of a day that starts productive and stays moving, rather than lingering in a siesta after a huge, large and expensive meal. Alcohol makes people feel better, but slows them down and, yes, does make for technical mistakes. I once gave my DOP permission to indulge in prop liquor (very powerful Newfoundland Screech) after shooting a cold winter scene just before sunset. While preparing to get footage of a golden winter sunset, he accidentally erased the heartfelt and warm scene he had shot, and we had to shoot that outdoor people scene the next day. And, of course, actors who say that they have to drink the real booze to feel the part are...less than effective actors once shooting starts.

But as for food to keep people active, satisfied, and on set, everyone has different wants and needs. It is good, when possible, to ask everyone what they want and need, particularly on the run. Inevitably, you will find that you have to provide cookies (some with chocolate, some with other flavors), donuts, bread, fruit, chips, dipable vegetables, individual juice drinks, meat, cheese, coffee, tea, pop (coke, loaded with caffeine), some kind of hot thing during middle of the day (chile often works). And all from discount food stores, and inexpensive brands. Average costs to feed 10 people with normal eating habits is a \$10 for an 8 hour shooting day.

Take out food---it is fast but can break your budget. But as for food preparation, unless you have someone specifically who has access to a kitchen who can prepare food and keep it warm, better to think 'mobile', and clean-upable at the end of the day, as it is bad business and karma to leave a production set dirtier than how you find it.

Another consideration here is people's needs by way of health and moral code. So often on set, this is not taken into consideration. For instance, vegans, be they so due to moral reasons or to avoid preservatives and toxins in food (e.g., Roundup) that make them sick, represented 2 % of the general population in 2014 and now stand at 6%. It's bad karma, bad management, and bad business to let these people go without adequate biological fuel on your production. Then there are those who are allergic to peanuts, who wonder if they what is on the plates is something that will keep them going on set, or get them going to the ER due to an allergic reaction. Just some reasons to ask what people want and need.

## SCHEDULES...TIME BEING MASTER AND MENTOR TO US ALL

Something else to consider in the people coordination thing that is filmmaking is that some people LOVE to try to work against the clock while completing a task, and for others, when they get into the creative zone, forget that there is a time-piece on their wrist or overlooking everyone. A wise director/producer knows that just as one does not have unlimited money, one never has unlimited time. Effective filmmaking is about, moving as fast as you can while absorbing yourself into the Eternal Now of the moment. To, as the Gita says, see inaction within action and action within inaction.

Clint Eastwood is said to always complete productions on time, and within (and usually under) budget. Someone has to 'crack the whip' (as the expression goes) with regard to people to whom 'beating the clock' is an irrelevancy. Often it is the Assistant Director or Production Manager who yells orders and praises to everyone with a really loud voice while the director thinks about the next shot in relative 'solitude'. But, in my opinion anyway, one can and should know how to be one's own assistant director and production manager. Just as one should know how to improvise on the spot if something goes other than as planned.

## AND WHEN THINGS GO WRONG, OR PRODUCTIVELY SIDEWAYS

And there are many things that can, and will, go wrong. Which, some say, is an opportunity to make good things...better. Often in the interviews after the film is released any stories about how these opportunities came up is not revealed to the audience or interviewer. But, it is perhaps useful for the writer/director/producer to reveal some events that happened to, and for, him.

Weather...Mama Nature is portrayed as being a maternal Goddess that protects all of the beings within her domain. And whose kindness is returned by man and woman kind polluting the air, putting toxins in water, and causing species to go extinct long before their naturally allotted time. But 'Mom' has her own mind, and timetable which doesn't match the production schedule written on paper inside a climate controlled office.

On several occasions in the author's film making life, everything and everyone was in place to do scenes involving a springtime setting, to wake up to a foot of snow on the ground, and a weather forecast of more wondrous white powder coming down from the sky for the rest of the week. On one of these occasions, 3 of 30 extras showed up, April 26, in what was otherwise a balmy and green month. Two of them were 15 year old girls who improvised well with each other. Rather than shoot scenes in which rich New Yorkers were made instantly poor and poor ones instantly rich (with changes in their behavior and attitudes to themselves, and life), the idea occurred to put those two girls on a park bench as homeless kids, with my three legged dog between them, talking about what it is like to be comrades in poverty, to be elevated to glee by being rich, then to be competitively cutthroat to each other because they were now rich and wanted more money, providing these two budding actors with key points to mention in the improve. It was the best part of the film.

People. Just as in political realms 'above' us, honor, keeping your word and doing what you pledge to do is as outdated as bell-bottomed jeans or loving, cordial laughter around an 'everyone is invited to be who they are' Thanksgiving table for so many of us. Just because people say they will show up, even when they are promised pay, that does not mean they will. This leaves the producer/director with the dilemma of having to somehow keep the production going, particularly with low budget films or, as VERY often happens, the day or contingency day when it is the LAST day you have access to essential people and locations. And the inability to afford, and physical impossibility, to get everyone and everything in place again. Three incidences come to mind in the author's experience, with different solutions worth noting.

The first was a period piece where all of the scenes were shot, save one set in caveman times. Weather and unexpected people problems emerged, with an hour of daylight left on the last day. Five pages of well thought out script were slated to be shot, but there was no way that one of the actors or the weather was going to make this possible. So, me as the writer-director, did the most bold and liberating thing scribes have to do at one time or another. Re-write on the spot. The lines came to me in a flash, putting together what and who was available, writing the now very abbreviated (and new) lines in my head and

telling them to my co-actor while walking to each sub-location in the woods, then, as in a 2 minutes to go in a football game, yelling out...Action. It was the most comedic, humanistic, and touching scene in the film. Perhaps something I should have envisioned in the original writing. Lesson learned.

Another occasion was when a group of actors decided they would rather tend to a hangover caused by drinking on a Friday night rather than show up on set on Saturday morning. Thankfully, one of the actors had a wife who was a highly skilled thespian who could change her voice to sound different as different characters. With the aid of wigs and wardrobe, she passed as three different characters in the film, saving the film from being cancelled, or not shot at all.

On another occasion, word came to me in the late morning of the last day we had an indispensable location which was not available for us the next day or any days afterwards, and we were already behind schedule. A key actor in that scene, and the entire film, decided to call me at 11 AM that day, saying she can't do the film. It was a situation where she had an abusive situation at home that was getting worse, and dangerous. 20 pages of script involved this character, who was essential to the story. I had the cast/crew take a half hour smoke/coffee break then set to motion calling to get a replacement...Someone locally I knew who was physically ok for the role, but who knew nothing about the story, or production. The script involving her character was condensed, completely rewritten with shorter yet concept-infused/plot point lines, and we went 2 hours into overtime at that location. With the active warp speed cooperation of the actors working with me, and the dedicated/skilled crew (and DOP), it got done, the film saved, making sense and having emotional impact.

A few things about this ability to improvise all of this on the spot.

First, every director/writer should be tested in this baptism of 'fire'. And know how to do it.

Secondly, the writer of this 'book' wishes you only minimal number of times to have to discover this ability within you.

Third, NO one is going to thank you for saving a film by improvising everything the last minute except the silent ever present Mentor between your ears. It's not the place of those working under you to say 'hey, brilliant work saving the production'. The solitary feeling of accomplishment is all you'll get. The good news about such---it keeps you growing and getting better rather than resting on your laurels till they turn into wet fungus-infested mulch.

Of course, there is Completion Insurance, which one can buy in the event that one of the above mishaps or something else happens. Expensive....but a safety net if you dare to need one.

## SPECIFIC ROLES/DEPARTMENTS

### The Holy trio

It is said, and observed, that a great film (or scene within such) is about 1/3 directing, 1/3 writing and 1/3 acting. Each has to be respected and given space to expand and express itself. But with certain 'rules' as to what the limits and expectations are. But to not ignore the ears, music and sound. Yet for now, what is seen and, by voice anyway, heard.

### Director

As for the director...He or she should...direct, knowing what she/he wants, what the film needs, but being open to suggestions. The aggressive and self-destructive extreme of this is a director who rigidly sees a movie in his/her mind and demands that every eyeroll, gesture and raindrop from above fit seamlessly into that vision. This puts severe limits on the actor, whose physicality and inner advanced understanding of the role often do not match the tunnel visioned director. Often this results in the director mimicking how the line should be read, which is not only felt as an insult to the actor (resulting in that actor not providing the best she/he can provide) but reflects a director whose mind can't define or understand the emotions at play in the scene.

On the other extreme is the director who...doesn't direct, who gets walked over and bossed around by actors. Or who doesn't have a plan in mind, making him/herself dependent on others to provide it for him/her. Often, if the director has low self esteem about him/herself, this can happen...and did, to the present writer/director/producer. At times, the captain of the boat has to remind the crew that it is HIM/HER who is paying the bills, and that unless the crew/cast moves NOW to get something done, the sun will go down and the day's shooting is finished. And, despite what people say, the energy and visuals in a scene cannot be continued the next day and be effective. You finish what you start!

And... an egotistical or indecisive director who doesn't listen to or respect the writer, producer (who is paying his/her salary) or others on set can create enemies on set that sabotage the film. In one production I was involved in, the wet behind the ears young director (whose ears were closed to everyone) antagonized the cultural advisor so much that said advisor/co-writer decided to passively sabotage the director and the film. Logging trucks kept driving by the set, interrupting every take, something unexpected, as the location was secured on a weekend. Aforementioned advisor/co-writer said that he would have told the producer and director that all one had to do was to call head office at the mill and the trucks would stop running for two hours out of courtesy, but he didn't. The scene took 10 times longer than expected, putting the production dangerously behind schedule, with less than the required lines being delivered to camera, for a network that paid us to deliver a one hour rather than half hour (as the director wanted to do, and thought was ok) product.

## Actor

It is said, observed, and true, that the emotional essence and deepest understanding of a character is best experienced by the actor, not the writer or the director. Something happens when one puts oneself into the script as someone who plays the character rather than directing the motions or writing that character's lines. This is why so often wise writer-directors, such as Woody Allen, give their actors space to tell them what the lines really mean, and what emotions they do, or can, express. And, when appropriate, give the actors an opportunity to change a line, or two, or three.

HOWEVER, the actor must respect the writing and, as much as possible, work within and with the written word. AND, after discussing their suggestions with the director, deliver what the director says is the final word. In theatre, actors are expected to not change the script, but to work with the words they are provided to say. Not so in the film world, for reasons that the writer here is still baffled by. Bad blood and, unless corrected very fast, bad movies are the result of an actor taking over the director's job, or, in the case of extreme situations, micromanaging the other actors and turning the group against the director.

As for large budget production, Donald Sutherland had big time problems with the director and producer of 'Alien Thunder', informing a young Gordon Tootoosis ('Legends of the Fall', 'North of 60', who was known as 'one take Tootoosis because he delivered his lines perfectly the first time) to intentionally screw up the first three takes so that production would last longer and the actors and crew could get more money.

## Writer

A common practice, rightly (and I think wrongly) on sets is to not allow the writer onto it. One reason for it is that the writer will soon realize that on even low to medium budget sets, in most cases, they spend more money buying muffins for the crew than paying for rights to the script. Another is that if the director is not the writer, conflicts will arise. Another is that many writers have not directed, coming from a literary novel background, and do not appreciate the adjustments one has to make to convert a book to a screenplay, in terms of dialog as well as story structure.

But, there is a distinct advantage to having the, or at least A, writer on set. So often adjustments in writing have to be done to adjust to things/actors who didn't arrive on set, new things/actors who did and cuts in the script that have to be made so that the scene can be shot on time and within budget. The writer provides a black and white blueprint of the story, based on a motion picture playing in her/his head. But on set, the same backgrounds don't materialize. And if every word is delivered exactly as written, it often limited potential of the scene. Sly Stallone, in his younger years, was a thug on a subway demanding money from Jack Lemmon in 'The Out of Towners'. In that scene, Lemmon has had enough of being pushed around by aggressive New Yorkers, and kicks Stallone's character out of the subway car. Sly's line was 'you're crazy'. Instead, he colorfully

exclaimed as perp to the unexpectedly empowered Lemmon, 'what are you, nuts?' The director yelled 'cut' instantly, demanding that Neil Simon's immortal words be said exactly as written. The scene lost impact when Stallone was told to say what was I in the script, and nothing else.

Often directors of lesser vision, intellect and humanity than the writer cut out lines that are key elements of the scene. In a production I wrote the original script for but, for 'racial' reasons the network funding the project required a director 'with a diverse background', we had to hire someone else to direct, there was a line that 'it's cool to be cruel and nasty'. Said line was the key element of not only the scene, but the story arc for the whole film. When the cool to be cruel in real life young director moves his pen to chop out the line (since he doddle around and put us behind schedule, yet again) I, as the writer-producer, pulled him aside informing him that this line STAYS, attempting to put into his arrogant, ignorant, disrespectful head, the tragic reality of that phrase today. He never directed anything again, due to his own inadequacies.



And other, often unappreciated, folk....

### Sound....

To not take for granted the sound people and sound recording. The biggest giveaway of an amateur film is bad sound, as well as the deal breaker for getting a distributor, screening at a film festival, or more than 16 hits on youtube. Sound is an art, known to and developed by people who have a natural proclivity for it. They can detect problems in sound more than the average bear or humanoid can. And a MUST on set it to always have the sound recordist wearing headphones to be sure that dialog is loud enough to be heard but not too loud so that it is distorted, or that it is not overshadowed by street noise in the background, or the rumbling of the stomach of the boom operator. Sure, one can say 'there is always ADR (additional dialog replacement)' but it takes time and ALWAYS looks artificial.

And...with EVERY scene, record room tone (sound of the room with everyone's mouth, and anal cavity, silent) which is essential for editing. As well, suggestion...whatever is recordable on set that doesn't require a studio, please record on the set! Reason one; It takes less time than doing it in post production. Reason two: Background sound where you shoot the scene can't be duplicated anywhere else. And Reason three: Less time in post production, and you maintain 'energy' of the line and recording.

There are many different kinds of mics, devised for different purposes and shots. Some record from a big area, some from specifically where they are pointed. Interfering with sound, in ways we ignore and hit ourselves for not realizing once in post, include wind, traffic noise, the buzz of the refrigerator in the kitchen and fan-heaters that turn on/off at will, without your even realizing that they do.

### Lighting...

Different kinds of filming involve different lighting requirements. Editing programs today can change illumination and hue of a scene far more than in the past, and it is a good idea to use them. More and more, people are going for natural looks, meaning...we shoot faces of actors as the light in the room or sunlight hits them. Sometimes, this is difficult, as in the cowboy hat or farmer visor that casts shadows on the face. A bounce board is always effective for this, which can be produced commercially or made by putting aluminum foil over a circular box that is placed under the actor's head.

The best kind of lighting to shoot in is an overcast sky. No shadows over people's faces whose backs are to the sun, and no bright face that screws up the balance on the mug that is hit by direct sunlight.

## Wardrobe

If you have a period piece and a wardrobe person who is highly skilled and artistic, this is GOLDEN! Most people do not have such. And if doing a period piece, there are those who will crucify you for putting the wrong kind of buttons on a uniform, even though they are not authentic. In *Enemies at the Gate*, the wardrobe person did put on many of the uniforms insignia the Red Army did not use. It doesn't ruin the film, but compromises some its appeal, to some anyway. A little know fact is that footwear, until the mid 1880s, did not include a specific shoe for the right and left foot. So, where do you get footwear today that doesn't fit on the left or right? Another challenge to work with, or around.

If on a tight budget, which we ALL are, there are many outlets for clothing, on line or in second hand stores.

## Hair and Make Up

Hair...the element that defines people in many ways on screen, and real life. It is rare that someone will ask if you want them to cut or color their hair for a film. Dedicated actors and experimental people will consent to this, but most people for low budget films will not. There are hats, and then there are wigs. For wigs, they can slip on you, revealing that they are wigs, particularly in close ups. In an ideal world, there is one person on set whose job it is to look for and correct these problems before 'action' is called. But, there often isn't.

When wearing wigs, it helps to redefine the actor, from the inside. As for make up, how much or little you use depends on the kind of film you are making. And the kind of hair/make up person you have working with you. And how much aging up or down you are doing. But for normal characters in 'normal' settings, make up people can get obsessive with powder, creams and blush. There is also the issue of make up fading or melting as the day proceeds.

As for make up---it can impress, or depress. Above all, if you go for real, do not compromise for 'acceptable'. The camera pics up what the live human eye does not.

## Music....

Something for post-production. But important. If you need to synchronize any action to music, bring it on set with you. Hard to match up in post.

## Continuity and associated methodologies

Continuity problems happen all the time, even in final cuts of big budget films. Meryl Streep has been portrayed in film as coming out of a limo in one outfit, walking into the lobby of the Federal Building in another, and into the courtroom in a third. Sean

Connery in *The Untouchables* has a conversation with Kevin Costner in which his shirt was buttoned on the top for some of the lines, and undone for others.

Then there is the issue of 'axis' continuity errors, which were violated in some scenes of *Road to Perdition* with Tom Hanks. Normally, when person A is talking to person B, on the first clip A looks to screen right, B looking to screen left, and this is maintained. If there is a third person A or B talks to, it gets..complicated. There are editing programs to invert clips to keep axis aligned, but with axis issues...it is important to have A and B at similar angles relative to the axis. Otherwise, you get profile shots of A, and nearly straight front face view of B. In my experience, and logical way of thinking, best to maintain correct axis and angle by whenever possible shooting a scene with two people as one shots back to back, not taking a long break or going to other shots before coming back to the second character in that scene.

A trained and seasoned actor will always do same actions in each take to make the editor's job easier, and so that all the takes can be considered to be included in the final edit. But, when actors get tied into the scene emotionally, or take long breaks between the scene, it often happens that the line where the hand is on the chin for one take is on the side of the chest in another. Or the right hand goes up on take one, the left on take two. Or the eyeline for that line is delivered to the other actor in the scene for that one line and off to the side, or to the ghosts inside the character's head in the second take. Or that the top button on the shirt didn't get fastened again after he/she went out for a smoke break on a hot day.

Continuity people are a special breed of detail obscessers, but even the best of them miss things. There are various ways to avoid continuity errors and keep the editor as your friend, and avoid whipping yourself raw in the back for mistakes you made as director while in the editing room. The blood makes the floor and keyboard very messy.

Firstly: Shoot wide shot first (as rehearsal for the emotions if nothing else and filler in case you need it), then medium shot (as actors get deeper in tune with the scene), then for selected lines (or if possible the whole thing), close up shots. The latter will show the actor in deepest intensity of the emotion. The latter close shot of face will also, unless the hands are at the face, allow you to match it up with other shots where hands are not in same place. AND allow for reaction shots of the actor who the speaking actor is talking to. AND to be sure that the actor who is listening to the lines is reacting to those lines and not just a generic 'anger' or 'smiley' shot. If the actor feeding the lines delivers those lines, for keeps, the reaction on the listening actor is easier to find in the editing room and the facial reactions will better match the scene.

Secondly: Shoot cutaways of things that are 'clean' of any part of the actor that is moving.

Third: Shoot close ups of anything the actor does with his/her hands or feet in the scene. Or the cockroach who snuck into the room watching it all. You may need them for continuity matches and other purposes.

## Shot lists and story boards

There are many ways to organize what you are going to take into the editing room. A popular one is storyboarding. In my opinion, this doesn't work well unless you really, really, really like to draw, and draw, and draw, putting dialogue under pictures that will, in part, represent what you shoot.

## Shooting in sequence.

One way to not forget about a camera angle, entire line of dialogue, from the front end of the script is, if at all possible, to shoot the entire scene, or if in one location, the entire piece, in sequence, if at all possible. You know where you are starting, do not forget anything, and actors appreciate the arc of the piece. As well, you can better gauge how well you are doing for time.

Camera and pixel people balk at this, preferring to shoot against wall A for ALL of the shots in the film against that structure, then go to wall B and do all of those shots. Problem with that is that light changes, and actors change also....and forget their body motions. AND, one loses continuity of emotional impact.

## MAINTAINING MOMENTUM, OBJECTIVITY AND VITALITY

For a project to stay alive, and people in it to remain focused, and effective, the right amount of production time is required. As usual, it's a matter of working between the extremes. One excess is moving to production too fast, before your actors can memorize their lines, and have time to adequately be absorbed into and know the characters they play. The other is starting pre-production too early, which tied people up to a project way too early, making them bored with the project and over-rehearse it to a point that there is no spontaneity in it for them. And, most humans can focus completely on only one project at a time, their process being 'living' the role, plan and project day and night, even when doing day jobs or, yes it can happen, in the arms of a loved one in a romantic encounter. Yes, Vivaldi was in the habit of composing 5 music works at the same time, but such is the exception, not the rule.

As for prep time, rehearsals done by actors each day, ideally at same time of day, in private (or with a patient loved one who runs lines with them) is very helpful and, to great extent, necessary. And at least once a day muttering the lines in a car, or on the way to a plane to maintain memory of such (though in an airport, it is wise to see if there are no Cops around who think you are crazy and already high above the clouds already). There are as many ways to deliver a line as there are letters in the words of that line. Which are best practiced to be felt, connecting motions to words to emotions. There are...extremes again with this. Ben Kingsley said that the only thing he does by way of preparing for a role is to come to the set word perfect. Daniel Day Lewis spent months living in a cabin in the woods alone before doing Last of the Moheicans and stays in character for the entire time on set, with voice, gestures and everything else.

## PROPS---THE KIND THAT DON'T MOVE ON THEIR OWN, USUALLY

As for prop procurement, 'another day, another prop obtained, made or figured out' is the maxim for preproduction which very often works. Rushing to obtain props creates...unnecessary anxiety and ineffective production. Which brings to the aspect of procrastination. Something that should never be indulged in. Ideally, and practically, one should be able to get a full night of quality sleep the night before a shoot rather than put ANYthing off till the last minute, or hang out after hours till the wee hours as is normal. Watching movies, editing them, and writing them are late night endeavors but making them...an early to rise (and rested) endeavor.

But there is something about props that one should realize. With big screen tvs in HD, the smallest flaw or inconsistency in a prop will be seen. Often without being noticed by the eye of the person who made/obtained or used it in front of the camera lens. This is particularly true if the prop is shown in close up. The Made in China label on the Authentic First Nations tomahawk you just bought has to be hidden from the shot, covered, or filed down to nothing. Very frustrating for you when you really want to use that hard obtained hatchet in a close up, or even a wide shot.

## EDITING

The part about making films that most people neglect to think about when planning the budget, or date of delivery. 'That's a rap', said at the last shot of the last day by a duly elected party does not mean everyone gets a DVD of the production the day after. On average, it takes an hour of editing for every one minute of final product. In days of old where one had to literally cut and attach clips of tape together, to the age of non-linear cyber programs, it is a tedious, meticulous and detail impregnated process. To some it is Bliss, to others, a circle of hell that Dante would have put into his description of Inferno if he had lived in present times.

If you aren't an editor, and need to hire one, there are things you can do to make his/her job easier, closer to your Vision and affordable (as you will be paying by the hour). One thing you can do if you have fingers that inevitably self sabotage the carefully constructed and fragile structure of a video editing time line is to do an off line paper edit. This is done by putting time code of the various clips, finding the best in and out points for each line/action (or set of such) and writing down the codes. Such will be a guide that an editor can use to do an assemble edit which is watchable, and then a fine tuned edit where the exact frame to start and stop at are determined, 24 seconds for each frame. The alternative is to give the editor a script, and make her/him find the clips that match the action/words in the script, a time consuming process, particularly for someone who was not on set when it was being shot.

## AND IN/AT THE END...

So, you've put your Vision on screen, and want, or need, the world to see it. There are multiple ways to do this. One is to find a distributor, and let them do the work of connecting artist to audience. A way to do this is of course to send it out to them, or submit to a film festival, so you and the Work can be discovered.

The word 'festival' is a misnomer of course. And 'meritocracy' is often replaced by nepotism by the jury, or the jury having to give gold stars to the films that were pre-funded by the companies and agencies who funded the festivals, and who are paying their salaries as 'unbiased, artistically motivated' judges. Still, one has to try, particularly if you are self motivated and do not ask 'mother may I?' of the 'system' before proceeding to make your film, expressing your Vision so it can illuminate the world. Or at the very least, make the darkness in it more bearable.

Venues for being seen include Vimeo, youtube and other cyber theatres of course. And just because your film doesn't go viral, or get picked up by one of the top distributors at the Sundance Film Festival, that does not mean it doesn't have value.

How will people in the future times, or even next month, be looking at films? Where and with what devices? Such is hard to tell, but one thing is certain...Films that say the truth about or from the times they are created will reveal truths of/about/for future times. And the phenomenon of creative commitment is contagious, be they experienced on a big screen in a large, traditionally built theatre, or through an implant inserted into the brain of the owner of a self-driving car that gets him/her to said theatre. Films, like rotten fish, linger long after the person who made/caught them is gone from the room, set or body. But as for films...they last longer and never lose the specialness of their aroma. As that aroma, if you are committed to it, is Life big L. What you are, what you know, and what you would most like to share will echo during your lifetime and beyond if expressed with a film. One that, hey, maybe in the next lifetime, may inspire you as a viewer who says 'hey, that movie feels familiar', inspiring you to make another one taking off from where it left off. As stated in an old Procol Harum album from way back in the 1960s, 'we're all just taking turns in trying to pass it on'. Please feel free to let the musical coda of that lyric linger on...and on...and on.