

A Gaffer's
PERSPECTIVE

on

INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING



INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

**PRACTICES, TECHNIQUES
and
TRICKS of TRADE REVEALED**

RICK M. LORD



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

*A Gaffer's Perspective on Independent Filmmaking:
Practices, Techniques, and Tricks of the Trade Revealed*

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Introduction

The fact that you're reading this book is testament that you can be reasonably sure the fascination and lure of filmmaking comes from deep within. To command your very own movie production is a drive that overwhelms you like a bad cold, but where does one begin?

If ever there was an industry that travels down the "Catch-22 highway," it's the motion picture industry. Unless you have moviemaking experience in your past, how will you ever have moviemaking experience in your future? How does one get experience? Allow me to introduce you to the ways of the no/low budget, independent film.

Lights, camera, action, and your dreams are finally a reality! The script has been re-written so many times the letters on the keyboard of your laptop are worn to the point of non-recognition. All of the pre-production details have been accomplished with every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed and now there's only one thing left to do. Put it on film, digitally speaking that is...

It's 4:00 AM and the call sheet reads "Day One" of twenty-three. You're running on pure adrenaline due to the fact that you haven't had but fifteen minutes of sleep within the past twenty-four hours. The art department is still meticulously dressing the set and tweaking props and furnishings. The actors are sitting in make-up while you, along with the DP, gaffer and key grip, are choreographing camera positions and making final lighting tweaks.

A shout goes out to one of the PAs to bring you a double shot "venti latte" and as you take your first sip of the life-enlightening elixir, the talent, at last, walks onto set. After a few exchanges of light dialogue, you place the actors on their marks and begin blocking rehearsal. Make-up also steps in for final touches, and then the call

from the first AD to roll camera is heard over the entire set. Camera speed, sound speed, and now the time has come to bark your first command of the production, "Action!" You're on your way to making your first independent film.

Producing an independent film can be a lot of fun. There's no sweeter glory than experiencing days and days of movie making at its best. There's no reason the experience of making an independent film has to turn into a stringing together of miserable days of conflict and countless technical snafus.

In conscious defense, no one exits the womb with a director's viewfinder and a light meter in hand. Everyone in this industry starts from somewhere and has to go through the pains and angst of his or her very first production. For whatever reason, there's that deep down propensity to believe the very first film you produce is going to be "The One," the one that has you standing at the podium thanking all the little people who made it possible. Yes, there are those few individuals that shoot out of the gate with a piece of work that grabs the masses, but for most, it's just a "pie in the sky" daydream. After working on my fair share of independent films as a gaffer, I've seen it all -- some good, and others, not so much. Poor planning, bad scripts, and lack of experience have doomed many a production. I cannot tell you how many filmmakers quit after their first film

After the experience of having a first production go so horribly awry, they'd rather find themselves driving dump truck in Grafton, North Dakota, never to return to filmmaking ever again. This does not need to be the case. Independent filmmaking can, for the most part, be fun and rewarding. That is, of course, if serious attention to thorough preparation is made.

I've had some of the greatest experiences of my life as a gaffer. It is my opinion that this position has the greatest viewpoint of the overall filmmaking process. The opportunity to see first hand what makes for a great production is, itself, an awesome gift. To invent, create and experience the filmmaking process satisfies not only the artistic side of

the brain, but the technological side as well. Notwithstanding, it's the experiences I have had over the years that have exposed the truly gifted as well as the truly troubled.

Over many decades, the business of filmmaking has been refined to an absolutely scientific process. In other words, there is a proper way in which to carry out all necessary tasks to accomplish such an endeavor. Almost anyone these days can pick up a camera and call him or herself a filmmaker. However, this is a dog eat dog business and it's only those who have learned to apply the fundamental proven-to-work-processes to the art and business of film making, who stand a chance in experiencing success.

As far as film schools go, I couldn't tell you for sure whether or not it is money well spent. I do know there have been plenty of interns who have crossed my path and have walked away discouraged. Their comments are many times the same. "I didn't learn any of this in film school" There's obviously a difference between book smarts and street smarts. In other words, what is learned in the classroom and what is learned on the set are often two different worlds.

Does a degree in filmmaking help? I'm sure it does, but so does knowing how to head wrap a BJ. I've often suggested to those that wish to enter into the movie making business, try it first and see if you really like it. Where would you like to see yourself five or ten years down the road? Getting hired as an intern Production Assistant is as easy as feeding a cupcake to a monkey, and as an intern one can observe and gravitate towards the positions that are of greatest interest and plan, from there, a career choice. If then your chosen position requires getting a degree in filmmaking, great. Be forewarned, a degree in this industry is many times not worth the paper it's printed on. Sad but true, success many times comes down to the "it" factor. You either have "it" or you don't.

This book is dedicated to those no/low budget independent filmmaker wannabe types, who wish to take on Hollywood with their own artistic vision. That being said, there are still those tried and true practices that have been developed over the years that are proven to work.

There's only one way to effectively convey the processes that do work... Share with you the bad processes that don't work. Many of the examples I refer to are from some productions that have tried the unconventional approach and failed. I have also created scene and story scenarios that, by design, are to lead and teach. They are examples only, such as the bistro scene, which is referred to throughout the book.

This manuscript is separated into two parts. The first part is devoted to the inner political processes that deem sane movie making practices. It is these practices that also teach what to look for in key personnel that will ensure a greater chance of achievement. In addition, it serves as an introduction to the psychological aspects of filmmaking all must be aware of. Part two is devoted to the technical aspects of the motion picture making processes. By design, part two is to teach the photographic sciences and techniques that are inherent to the process of filmmaking. These sciences, understood and applied, will without a doubt, indemnify the creative.

PART ONE



REALITY CHECK

As mentioned in the foreword, there is only one way to approach filmmaking. Do as those who have marched on before have done or, at the very least, come close to how the big guys make movies. The processes of filmmaking have been around for decades. Re-inventing the wheel or trying to circumnavigate tried and true methods and procedures will only result in one painful frame of film after another. That said, it is also important to understand that the no/low budget, independent film making process does come with its own inherent idiosyncrasies. For instance, compared to the filmmaking procedures that are associated with the huge union-sanctioned Hollywood mega-flicks, the no/low budget rules of engagement are often accomplished by more of a “seat-of-the-pants” approach, which means fewer individuals wearing more hats. In other words, sharing duties with other departments is many times common practice. Money, or the lack thereof, is the reason for this dichotomy. Not only does money determine the degree of overall production value, it determines how many bodies will be on set to do the work at any given time. Money also determines the level of experience that will be associated with any given production. Is it Cousin Eddie on camera, brother Delbert on

sound, and Aunt May expressing her creative talents as set decorator? It takes more than a desire to make a movie. Besides money, it takes tons of logistical planning and more than just a few trained individuals to have even the smallest of chance of being successful.

Big Budget versus No/Low Budget

The independent film market has come a long way over the past few years; it's no longer dismissed as some high school wannabe film project that spits out silver-screen dribble. Independent films of today have become serious contenders, even in Hollywood terms. "Independent" simply refers to a film's non-connection to the typical Hollywood studio-backed project. Nonetheless, the independent film market has become a visual art, not to be taken lightly.

There are more than just a few differences between inner-departmental responsibilities when comparing the major motion picture to the independent no/low budget film. In the major leagues, department classifications dictate what equipment you are free to work with and what equipment you are not free to work with. If, for example, a person in the grip department begins messing around with electrical department things, it's back to the French-fry machine. In contrast, this is many times the opposite when working on an independent no/low budget film. Only on a no/low budget independent film can a PA (Production Assistant) be promoted to focus puller for an afternoon, or the craft service lady fall from a two-story building for the big stunt scene. As crazy as this may sound, it's these departmental line-crossing practices that make the no/low budget film production process so much more fun and interesting to work on. Now take the DP (Director of Photography) and gaffer positions. They also cross each other's department lines much of the time in the no/low budget world. It is often their knowledge and expertise that together paints the scenes with light, makes lens choices, and creates that ever sought after million-dollar camera move. Taking it one step further,

the new DP is many times the owner of the camera. This would then suggest he or she is, no doubt, the writer, director, gaffer, key-grip and craft service person.

For the major big dollar productions, it's the Director of Photography who paints the scene with light. It is he or she who chooses the desired lenses, camera positions, framing, and movement that best tells the visual part of the story for the director. The DP is the one who brings to the project his or her creative interpretation, artistic style and vision. Many times DPs are chosen because of their expressive signature style of cinematography.

So what about the gaffer and the rest of the bunch when it comes to the big budget filmmaking process? The gaffer is the chief electrician, the person who is the head lighting technician. Does the gaffer choose and place lights? To some extent the answer is yes, but usually by the request and direction of the DP. The lights are labored into position by the gaffer's crew of electricians, and the best boy electric is responsible for the proper distribution of electrical power to all lighting instruments. Last but not least, the key grip and his or her department set the stands, flags and scrims that control and shape said light. In other words, it's the big picture productions that can afford to hire experienced key personnel and their crew to handle each of the many departmental requirements.

This brings us to a sad but very true fact. Those who begin their careers in the no/low budget indie biz often fail to learn the correct processes of making movies, unless they have ventured into the larger union productions for a time, or at the very least, read a few books and watched a few videos on the subject. The lack of money to do things the way the big boys do things is certainly challenge number one. This would suggest that having enough money to hire a few key people who know what the heck they're doing will help close the gap between big budget filmmaking processes and the cousin Eddie backyard approach.

As the gaffer on a recent production, I had the same challenges that face most gaffers on no/low budget films, only on a much greater scale.

A director friend of mine, who was also the writer of the screenplay, had a novel idea. He wanted to see if he could film an entire movie without any money to invest into the project. Obviously there would be some money for the absolute must haves, such as food and a few grip and electric rental items along with a Honey Bucket (porta-potty) or two, but no real big money, the kind of money one would expect to spend on a movie production. He had actually written a great script and it was almost a shame to waste it on an experiment such as this. His thought was if the experiment indeed worked as planned, he would have a no/low budget independent film with a huge profit potential; however, this concept would become a very risky undertaking.

Under the Walnut Tree... No Plan for Disaster

Welcome to “Under the Walnut Tree.” While the title has been changed to protect the innocent, this particular production has many similarities with other failed movie making endeavors. The one saving grace for this production was the director, who brought to the table many exceptional attributes not often realized with new directors. It was those keen attributes that kept the project from folding up like a cheap suit on Day One. Even though the director was young and had limited experience, his dedication to perfection and his willingness to accept counsel from those with greater knowledge made it possible for such a production to take place.

The DP was also young and new to the industry. His training was primarily of a video background. Just like many before him, he sported his lighting package of choice, his trusty Lowell Kit. Understanding everyone must start somewhere, he was indeed the typical wedding photographer turned DP we've all come accustomed to working with in no/low budget filmmaking. It was clear right from the start that the entire production was going to need strong support and knowledgeable counsel to ensure the film making process would indeed be successful. Even though it was difficult, it was up to us with more experience to

help by mentoring with quiet, unassuming authority.

As I've alluded to, making a success of any film project without sufficient funds is beyond ludicrous, to say the least; however, add to that a lack of proper planning, and watch movie making go to a whole new level of crazy.

What began on August 9th as an experiment would turn into a complete disaster by August 10th. There was no real pre-production and the schedule had fallen apart almost immediately. No viable reality check as to how to overcome some pretty big hurdles meant there was no guarantee that a successful production could be made. With no solid logistical plan and many key positions dismissed as too costly, the production was crippled from Day One. An inexperienced producer who was interested in title only, also suggested failure. Along with no UPM (Unit Production Manager) and no first AD (First Assistant Director), the production was pretty close to being doomed right from the start.

Unfortunately many no/low budget independent film projects set out on a path of self-destruct because of this very same misguided approach.

There must be a viable concrete plan of attack when setting out to accomplish the task of producing any film, otherwise one might as well head off into the sunset with camera in hand and hope something interesting jumps in front of the lens.

The harsh reality of it all, despite the term of "no/low budget", is that it's going to cost money. The very moment a script is in-hand, the pre-production phase should be well under way. Questions concerning plausibility, logistics and schedules come into play immediately unless only seen through a haze of bong smoke. It is during the pre-production phase that the reality check button is pushed; thus, the first big question arises. Is the story even feasible?

Having no plan is a plan to fail.



THE PRE-PRODUCTION FUNCTION

Interesting fact: Did you know that the new car you've had your eye on first hit the drawing board some three to five years ago? I find it truly astounding that thousands of people had the foresight so many years ago to design and build a viable, desirable product scheduled for today's driver. So the question arises, why should the making of any motion picture be anything less? A goal to create that viable, desirable product should be at the forefront of every filmmaker's mind as well. How is this accomplished? The answer is pre-production.

Going back to "Under the Walnut Tree," the pre-production phase of this film was all but nonexistent. Their initial attempt at assembling a schedule, which was ten days at ten pages per day, was the first big red flag that indicated things were not going to go well. Ever since principal photography began, the project failed to make its pages on any given day. Between screaming matches, and cast and crew threatening to quit, this production was a train wreck before ever leaving the station. There were constant wardrobe, prop and continuity snafus that plagued almost every scene. There were locations that were more difficult to shoot on than if we'd chosen planet Mars. The disgruntled production finally came to a bitter wrap a whopping forty-eight days later. Why all of the turmoil? No pre-production, no plan of attack.

The process of pre-production, if executed properly, will guarantee a successful project from the first day to the very last day. Pre-production begins with the script. From the first day a script is written, purchased or stolen, pre-production is, or should be, running at full throttle. Does this guarantee a money making film? No, but it does suggest there'll be fewer dead bodies and at the very least, a complete film.

The Script

Whether a script is purchased from a professional writer or personally written, the first question to be answered is this: is the story realistic to film with the budget given? If the story opens with the two lead characters aboard the space shuttle Endeavor during re-entry, and the budget is less than the value of a '79 Ford Fairmont, you're likely to be greatly disappointed. Even with all of your close NASA connections, that scene is probably going to be unrealistic to produce. The ultimate goal is to have a workable script to start with, something you can actually accomplish with the meager budget at hand.

Early in my career I was talking with a director friend of mine when I made the comment, "I'd like to write and film a Western someday. Cowboys, Western towns, horses, buckboards and stagecoaches. How cool would that be?" He smiled and politely asked, "What do you have in mind for a budget? Just the wardrobe rental alone will pretty much bankrupt most small towns, let alone the cost of building a small town, Wild West style, that is."

Many no/low budget independent films are written with contemporary, present time settings for good reason. It's going to be difficult converting the modern SUV-laden neighborhood into a pre-WWII era setting complete with vintage-clothed extras and automobiles on a Visa card. It is, for that reason, the present day look with a story line to match is many times the setting for the no/low budget production. Even those concepts can have their fair share of financial challenges. Have you ever wondered why so many no/low

budget film productions are in the dark, literally? I'm not referring to just the lighting, or the lack thereof. I'm also referring to the dark story lines. It's the skimpy, non-existent budgets that create films which travel down the road of film noir. The scenes are almost always the same. They all have that same gritty, urban, back alley, stogie-smoking hooker leaning against a dumpster under a streetlamp, look. The reason for the alley, the dumpster and street lamp look? It's settings such as these, which are designed by society, that won't cost a production a ton of money. They can easily be created by anyone; even the hooker, which would only cost you twenty bucks and a six-pack.

Build it and they will come. Great saying, but is it true? No; however, if you have a decent script with easy, logistical locations, it's possible to scrape together enough funds from friends and family to produce a fairly respectable flick. These kinds of scripts are considered to be more of the dialogue-driven stories. They are the kinds of stories that don't require a bunch of high-dollar, special effects to help carry the audience off into the sunset. See for yourself the number of awards that go to the independent films that are nothing more than dialogue-driven screenplays. If there's no money to produce a car chase scene that can rival something from "Gone in Sixty Seconds," why bother? It's only going to come off looking cheesy.

Be real with your expectations when choosing a script. There's much that can be accomplished with good writing, good lighting and good acting; that is, if you are prepared to do the work. In other words, you need a pre-production strategy that rocks.

So, when does pre-production begin? Pre-production begins the minute it is decided that a script-in-hand is soon to become a movie-in-hand. Relinquish yourself to the fact that the project is going to take lots of work, lots of planning and bringing on as many experienced people as possible.

Breaking Down the Script

After a script has been chosen, performing a comprehensive script breakdown is one of the very first steps in the pre-production process. This is where, on paper, and in great detail, everything from actors, crew, wardrobe, props, locations, and times of day for filming are meticulously laid out scene by scene in neat, easy to understand, color coded columns. The script breakdown is not only the key to developing a realistic schedule, but is also the cornerstone for calculating the budget.

The script breakdown process is when the schedule really begins taking shape. How many total days of principal photography will the project require? How many days a week and how many pages per day will be accomplished? How many individuals will be on the set at any given time? How much food will be required on any given day? What special effects, if any, will be required and on what days? What set/production-design preparations will be required? Are there any picture cars, private property buildings, city structures, private roads, city streets and any other property involved with the story that will need to be secured?

The Producer and the Hiring of the Crew

Once the script is in hand and assuming the director is already at the helm, which is usually the case in no/low budget films, the next thing on the to-do list is to hire the producer. This is the person or persons that will hire the crew, make any necessary connections for distribution, book a “B” list actor or two, and help secure financing. Not too many years ago, it was the producer who was the big cheese, the one in charge; however, these days, that role has since shifted more towards the director. In the no/low budget film making world of today, the producer is more inclined to take his or her directions from the director, where in the past, it was just the opposite. Nowadays it is common for the director to have evolved from the writer’s role. This

makes that person the captain of the ship, so to speak. Notwithstanding, the producer role is not one to take sitting down, no pun intended. In no/low budget filmmaking, the producer is responsible for making sure that things run smoothly and as productively as possible. In other words, his or her job is to produce.

A total dedication to the preparation process should be the producer's ultimate goal. Here's a big warning though; there are many producer wannabe's who are caught up in the glamour of movie making only. They have little interest in taking on the very laborious producer tasks at hand. It's as if they're in it to play the part of moviemaker, much like the way a little girl plays house, providing nothing truly valuable when it comes to actually making a flick. They flaunt their roles only to impress. These types of so-called producers are useless, and frankly, nothing but a cancer to every production they come in contact with. This is a business that requires much hard work from everyone. If a project goes over budget, over schedule and looks like you know what, one doesn't have to look much farther than the producer. A good producer always has a love and a passion for the art of movie making first. They are as concerned with the creative process as the director. Make no concessions; a good producer will indeed secure a most excellent experience.

It is common in the no/low budget film biz, for a director, who is also the writer, to step into the role of producer for a time. This is a hat that the director should only wear temporarily during the very beginning of the pre-production process; only long enough to get a few things set in place. Then the director can pass the torch, so that he or she is able to concentrate on the task at hand.

The UPM

The UPM position is as important as food. Having an experienced UPM on the production team as soon as possible will not only save time, but also save precious dollars. The Unit Production Manager has

the responsibilities of overseeing the budget, the script breakdown and putting together a realistic schedule that can be easily followed.

For the “Under the Walnut Tree” production, there was no UPM, at least one who was ever visibly in action. Again, this is the person who makes the schedule, oversees the schedule and sees to it that everyone has said schedule. In the case of this production, the UPM had been fired and replaced by the producer. This was done all in the name of saving a buck. The producer thought he could perform the duties of UPM as well his own. Maybe the original UPM was not working out. If that were the case, the person in the UPM role should have been replaced. Getting rid of that position altogether was just plain insane. The UPM is the one individual who knows, or should know, the inner workings of scheduling and all day-to-day production requirements. This individual is as important to a film production as the camera is to the production.

There are a few positions and departments that can afford to cut a corner or two for the sake of budget; however, the UPM position is not one of them. A good UPM who takes a knowledgeable approach to all aspects of the film making process will help guarantee the production is a success. Whether or not the film fails at the festival, the video store or the box office, I’ve never heard of it being the fault of the UPM; however, the UPM’s failure to meet the day-to-day scheduling and budgetary requirements can certainly doom the project. It just happens long before the project finishes.

The original UPM for the “Under the Walnut Tree” production initially scheduled the film to be shot in ten days at an astounding ten pages per day. This may have looked doable on paper; however, it left no room for anything going wrong whatsoever. Scheduling a film is an intricate dance of time, seasons, personnel, personalities and logistics. It is a job like none other. The UPM must have the organizational skills like the CEO of a large corporation and the psychological prowess of a clinical psychologist. He or she is as valuable to the production as is an engine is to an airplane.

I worked with a so-called producer/writer/director lady many years ago that would actually write the script in her car on the way to the set. That was another fiasco production that failed miserably. It was a production that involved ten-year-old to twelve-year-old children. Because of her lack of scheduling skills and the fact that the production didn't have a UPM, the movie took more than thirteen months to shoot. Little girls who began the project became young women at production's end. Obviously the movie never got finished, big surprise.

Co-Writer/Co-Director

It is common for a first-time screenwriter to desire to wear the director's hat as well. The reason for this is that selling a script, right out of the gate, is many times more difficult than just producing the thing themselves. What happens when there are co-writers conspiring together to make a film? Now instead of just one writer/director, there are at least two individuals, who may find themselves battling for the director's chair.

The co-writer/co-director team is then established. The old adage, two heads are better than one, is the premise. Does this guarantee a smooth production? No. In fact, when the directing team is divided, which is bound to happen at some point, disagreements over the creative process and who's running the show is usually the beginning of an ugly end. Although, there are many writer/director teams who have made it big in motion pictures. The reason for their success is that they created, right from the start, a defining line between the two roles and it is a line that is never crossed. They established how creative differences were going to be addressed, and who was actually going to give the orders. A team approach can work as long as unyielding rules of engagement are securely set in place from the very beginning.

A short film I worked on many years ago turned out to be an absolute calamity. There were more directors than cast and crew. Everyone seemed to be in charge and it was an absolute free for all.