

FEATURE FILM VIRGIN
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Inspired by a true story.

Script

This is what I get for being impatient. After a couple of paid gigs - both in development hell - I wanted a credit. I was going to be one of those self-starters.

I sounded out FRUSTRATED DIRECTOR, a fellow film school graduate, on my wildly ambitious idea: I would outline a feature-length story for a bunch of actors to workshop, he and the actors would hit the streets guerrilla-styles, and BAM! an indie feature. He loved it. (I could see it now: "Written by Impatient Screenwriter"; I had to talk Frustrated Director down from a "A film by" credit to "Directed by" though - whose insane idea was this to begin with, **bub?** Best to thrash these things out as early as possible.)

Frustrated Director had the connections. The production company he worked for was suffocating his creativity but it had all the equipment and facilities that we would need. He also knew a couple of young 'n' hungry actors who were looking for just this kind of project.

I drafted a twenty-page treatment that had all the clichés I abhorred. I didn't have the luxury of time. I discovered a newfound admiration for those B- to Z-movie screenwriters: that love-triangle between the protagonist, antagonist and the damsel - 's there for a **reason**, bud. Frustrated Director read it, adored it, but suggested that some 'indicative dialogue' be included so that the actors could really get into their characters.

I drafted a fifty-page scriptment. It hurt. A lot. A twenty-page prose treatment is fine when you're just trying to sell your story. But with a script you have to show and tell **everything**. A scriptment was the best I could do with the time available. And I got some 'indicative dialogue' in there.

I decided that this scriptment would be as much as I would write, script-wise. It was time for the actors' input. We were going to work fast and loose.

Preparation

The first read-through of the scriptment was an eye-opener. Interpretations of what I'd knowingly written as cardboard cut-outs gave me a new appreciation for the acting craft.

Dialogue that had zinged in the acoustics of my cave fell to the floor with a croak despite the best thespian efforts. I had to be careful with how I answered questions on character and motivation. Answers like "because I felt like it" or "it was three in the morning when I wrote that" or "because that was the best excuse I could dredge up to lead into the set-piece" did not suffice, regardless of the good will in the room.

I walked away from that read-through - and subsequent ones - with a sense of satisfaction and achievement: no longer was I struggling alone with characters and action; I was now part of a **team**. I wasn't defending my script's shortcomings, real and perceived - everyone's goal was to make it a better creature. Despite my earlier resolve to just add notes to the scriptment and work fast and loose, I ended up writing a full script, revising it a few times along the way.

Frustrated Director introduced me to ENTHUSED PRODUCER. Enthused Producer agreed to provide equipment, crew and cash for unavoidable expenses; the project had stepped up from being a no-budget film to an ultra-low budget film. No one would be paid; everyone would be fed and watered, and would be in for a slice of any action the film made.

He also fired Frustrated Director. "It's a tradition in New Zealand," he persuaded me, "the Film Commish **love** writer-directors." My protests of an attachment to my cave (and wife, children and pets) were overridden with what would become a refrain in the Writer/Director-Producer relationship: "You want to make this film, **don't you?**"

Casting

We already had our leads: MALE LEAD and FEMALE LEAD. They'd really helped flesh out the script; in return, I was going to make them stars.

Now I had to surround them with supporting actors. A trawl through the script elicited twenty speaking roles. Oh. My. **Gawd**. Maybe I should've read at least one of those books on no-budget filmmaking. (A moment of weakness at the local library found me flicking through such a book: it recommended a maximum of six speaking parts and three locations; I had **ten** locations.)

I was urged to properly audition actors for the supporting roles: it's professional; it's courteous; and they're on their best behaviour.

The auditions were another learning experience. Actors competing for the same role found different yet equally

compelling facets in their character. A great audition in the room didn't always translate to a great performance on tape.

I advised all successful and unsuccessful auditioners of our decision and soon discovered why they say, "Don't call us - we'll call you." An actor who'd accepted a supporting role written specifically for a woman had to pull out. I'd burned some bridges on breaking the news to her competitors. A two-o'clock-in-the-morning epiphany: the character could just be as effective as a male; the details of the character's relationships to others would change... but not dangerously so.

Preproduction

Okay. So I was now a multi-hyphenate. I knew one thing absolutely: I would need all the help I could find to get this show on the road.

A core crew was assembled: GRIZZLED DP; HOT DOG ART DIRECTORS (they were a package deal); and MONOSYLLABIC PRODUCTION MANAGER. Monosyllabic Production Manager was the nexus of all communication. It soon became apparent that her availability via first her phone, then her email access, became what could best be described as 'intermittent'.

We had two weeks of preprod and a few meetings. I found myself answering questions and considering alternatives that wouldn't have entered my cave-based writing in millennia. I was more than happy to delegate. I insisted on clear lines of communication, demarcations of responsibilities, and that everyone understood. The buck stopped with **me**. I could see how a director could become the centre of their universe.

Production

The camera's rolling, audio's set and there's a small crowd of people watching a lone actor in an urban landscape. "Action!" I called. Right before my eyes a small moment from the script came to life. It wasn't until afterward that I realised that almost a year of development had led to that moment. **This** was why I wanted in on this industry.

The production schedule was a tight, intense fifteen-day shoot spread over five weeks. When Monosyllabic Production Manager was unable to either do properly detailed call-sheets or be on set as a first assistant director (1AD), I considered buying shares in Grecian2000. I called in a favour and we got ourselves ALWAYS ANXIOUS 1AD. Even though I grew to fear and loathe him in the heat of shooting, a good 1AD is the engine that ensures that Things Get Done. It wasn't until Always Anxious 1AD had to leave for a prior commitment and we cycled

through RELUCTANT LAD and SURLY LAD that I began to truly appreciate his work. Take my word for it, a good LAD is worth killing for.

Most everyone else had day-jobs so I was the only one who knew the project inside and out. There was some pre-production outstanding that was sorted out sometimes only hours before call-time. Enthused Producer was nowhere to be seen on set. I began to feel the true weight and cost of having the buck stop with me. Everyone looked to me on what to do now and what to do next. As I took on preparing call-sheets and finishing off preprod, I realised I had become, by circumstance, a writer/director/producer.

Our Female Lead became unavailable part-way through the shoot: I experienced first-hand those scheduling conflicts they mention in the showbiz news. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place: she'd been involved since the heady script-development days. It was either reschedule an already fragile production schedule around this one person, or recast. I recast.

In the end, we shot twenty-three days over ten weeks. The small army of twenty dreamers that had greeted me on my first day of shooting had shrunk to a hard-core crew of six within the first week. That crew and I - 'my crew' - had finished a journey together, filled with heroic deeds and apocryphal tales, where legends were forged in blood and towing fees. No more was this 'my film' but 'our film' - those stubborn sumbitches had earned it.

Post-production

We had footage **in the can**. Time for BLUNT EDITOR to work her editing magic. By the end of the first day's editing, I knew my place: I was now an Informed Observer. I had to bite my tongue and hide my expressions of pain/horror/embarrassment as the footage was viewed with accompanying disappointed sighs, disapproving tongue-clicks and/or sad shakes of the head. Suggestions had to be carefully worded to avoid curt reminders of footage that was unusable, unavailable or unshot. I missed the deference of the set.

As the film slowly took shape, at times it felt like Blunt Editor was taking the story away from me. But she wasn't: she was rewriting it. No - she wasn't doing that either. She was fashioning a whole new creature that **I** had written and then shot. A sleeker creature. A creature that looked and sounded and **felt...** like a real goddamned **movie**.

Our movie.