

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

April 2007. Last night I was at the Borders Bookstore in Cranston, RI. My presence was part of a local forum on filmmaking in the Ocean State. The event was organized by local filmmaker Jon Raben, a remarkable and self-effacing man who created “Italian Americans and Federal Hill.” The film was a huge hit when it premiered last year. Also present were filmmaker, Michael Corrente and Steven Feinberg, head of the RI Film & Television Office.

The event was billed as “Filmmaking Magic in Rhode Island,” and while it addressed many issues that were connected with the growth of filmmaking in the Ocean State, it really was a mini-forum on how to actually take part in what has become a burgeoning industry.

The estimate was that over 250 were in attendance. That's quite a huge amount for a space that was set up to accommodate 30 people.

The discussion was lively and energized and while many questions were answered, a core point became very clear: making a film in 2007 is a different animal than it was ten or twenty years ago.

As film and video production progresses in the twenty-first century, the people and the process involved also evolve and change. From the early 1900s with bulky equipment and shorter stories to the new millennium with smaller and more cost effective cameras that can shoot feature-length projects, the process has become streamlined (well, for the most part). It has also become more democratic, allowing people to work in the discipline who otherwise would have been excluded.

Budgets are now across the board and with the introduction of high definition equipment, filmmaking has become a true democratic discipline.

With that said, there are still basics that have not changed with the direction and organization of any film work—be it narrative or documentary. So, here is a Film 101 on Directing a Film from information I have gleamed, experienced or been taught over the years.

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

Directing a film is the most intensely solitary and intensely collaborative experience you may ever have. On a psychological level, it's about keeping your ego in perfect balance with your need for input, and your vision moving forward with your changing circumstances.

Whether you're running your first independent film casting call or into your millionth day of shooting, keep in mind that a great movie is about catching the audience at every level.

All the most successful directors will tell you: Direct the stories that you know right now. Express yourself in the films. Put your personal vision in the films.

The main questions a Director must answer are:

1. Where do I put the camera?
2. What do I tell the actors?
3. What is the scene about?

KISS – KEEP IT SIMPLE STUPID

People look at the most overriding thing in the frame. Human perception goes to the most important thing. Above all, always prepare the groundwork. See that it allows for the lucky accidents to happen. That's what makes a first rate movie.

Some quotes to inspire: "Just be honest in making a movie. Then you'll find that it's fighting back against you and telling you how to write and shoot it."

"The shots are all you have."

"Directing is like climbing a mountain. It's frightening sometimes and it's usually lonely but you don't have to climb the whole mountain all at once."

"Pick up people along the way who will be a part of your creative team and you will be a part of theirs as well."

"There are no minor decisions in movie making."

"The director is in charge of keeping the wheels turning. Handling the moods and egos, the politics and personalities, the insecurities of everyone on set."

"Tension never helps anything."

As you develop your story and the film production, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the scene contribute to the overall theme?
- Does it contribute to the storyline?
- Is the storyline moving in an ever-increasing arc of tension and drama?

Yes, it's important as a Director to understand each and every line that's in the script as well as how the technical aspects really work. For example, the camera and how it is used — Can make up for a deficient performance; Can make a good performance better; Can create mood; Can create ugliness; Can create beauty; Can provide excitement; Can capture the essence of the moment; Can stop time; Can define character; Can provide exposition; Can make a joke; Can make a miracle; and most importantly, it can tell a story!

SHOOTING THE MOVIE

There are some core things that must be kept in mind when shooting a film which includes being prepared, organized and disciplined.

Established directors will tell you that if your concentration breaks, you know something has gone wrong. Do another take. One of my favorites is that a good day is a day the actors don't get bored.

As the shoot progresses, make sure you review the day mentally. Ask tough questions. The most revealing is asking how you did. Then, did you get what you wanted? Do you need additional coverage? Is there anything you want to reshoot?

Making a movie is like going through a series of battles. If you think you've won, you only will have to fight them over again. Don't fool yourself with wishful thinking.

THE DIRECTOR'S JOB

It distills down to this: To care about and be responsible for every frame of every movie you make. To make the best possible movie you can make.

There's a sensual satisfaction in working in close union with strong independent and creative people: actors, assistants, electricians, production staff, props, make-up, costume designers. All those personalities who populate the day and make it possible to get through that day cannot be devalued.

You gradually build up the psychological situation, piece by piece using the camera to emphasize first one detail, then another. The point is to draw the audience, right inside the situation instead of leaving them to watch it from outside. And you can do this only by breaking the action up into details and cutting from one to the other, so that each detail is forced in turn on the attention of the audience and reveals its psychological meaning.

If the camera is always in one position and you don't cut, you will lose the power over the audience. They would watch the scene without being really involved in it. So they wouldn't understand what the characters are feeling.

If the take is good, move on. Try to improve on something later. Not something that doesn't need or isn't going to be any better.

Look for something that has style and visual energy.

Given time and freedom the actors will fall naturally into their places, discover when and where to move and you will have your shot. The essential principals of cinema have to do with the human need to master and know the world.

Think about the Music and Sound effects the moment you begin directing a film.

Directing is not only creatively handling actors and interpreting the screenplay. It also includes the ability to complete a day's work on time and on schedule. A director who is properly prepared allows for the creative, while planning for the inevitable problems.

A director who is able to think creatively while making instantaneous decisions based upon the pressures of production is a successful director

WORKING WITH YOUR CREW

Playing a prima donna does not win friends nor does it influence people. Being a jerk does not win respect, just disdain. If you want professional reliability from your crew, you must first be a model of professionalism yourself. You must trust your crew reasonably and they will rise to crisis selflessly (and in the same token, your trust in them reflects your confidence in yourself as you hired them.)

Here are some other rules of thumb in working with a crew:

- Have meals and coffee breaks built predictably into the schedule
- Always maintain communication
- Keep the abreast of developments on the set
- During breaks encourage discussion of the production
- Above all encourage involvement
- Shooting should take place in as calm atmosphere as possible since a calm, respectful atmosphere is a necessity
- Choose colleagues carefully
- Encouraging the crew to act supportively towards the talent
- Encouraging solidarity and maintaining professionalism where there are internal disagreements
- If you are sympathetic towards the crews problems, they will be generous when you want their help solving one of yours

THE DIRECTOR'S FIVE STAGES OF PRE-PRODUCTION

There are five stages of pre-production that are involved with narrative film. These include Screenwriting; Production Design; Script Analysis; Cinematography; and Rehearsal

Scriptwriting

What's required here? Dissecting the script and coming up with a game plan; writing down ideas for images for each scene; and looking for connections to your own past experiences

Production Design

What's required here? Scriptwriting answers the "what" questions of the story. Production Design answers the "where and how;" the Director begins the Prep process by having conferences with his Production Designer explaining each scene of the script as he sees it; then you breakdown the script answering how long it will take and how much it will cost. Within production design,

Script Analysis

Once the director is totally prepared, the script is in shape and the locations are locked this is the time to work out the shot by shot plan for each scene. By developing a shot plan, you determine the size of the action, size of the shot, the choice of lens and camera angle.

Cinematography

The Director of Photography's major responsibilities are lighting, exposing the film (or video) and executing the framing and camera movement determined by the production designer, the director and the DOP.

Rehearsal Time

It is the Director's job to create an environment in which the actor can connect with their impulses and find the unexpected and unpredictable in their work together. Part of learning the craft for the director is having a good sense of what will work before the camera roles.

At the end of the day, directing a film is not something that is breezed through or taken lightly. There is one axiom that is true in this business: the more you do, the better you become.

Finally, a recommendation: Here's a wonderful book that will help aspiring filmmakers:

Lorene M. Wales: **The Complete Guide to Making a Movie, Low Budget and Beyond**. Publisher: Longman; Pap/Cdr edition (October 1, 2006). ISBN-10: 0205507220

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blog/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>