

Production Notes on a Low Budget Movie

The *Supreme Kid* is my fifteenth film. Although I've always thought that I've learned some hard lessons on filmmaking from my other films, I learned some harder ones on this one. A ninety minute film is only three times longer than a half hour film, but the problems and complexities are ten times as much, and making it is ten times tougher. Also, this was a fairly difficult production in terms of cast size, the number of locations, and dramatic complexity. The ideal film to make on this scale would be one with few actors, simple locations, and a simple story line, but where's the fun in that? Before I made this film a lot of people looked at the script and said it couldn't be done on that kind of money. I've never had any kind of money for any film and so I don't know any better. Anyway, here are some random notes on what I think are lessons to be learned.

Don't let anybody do anything on your film unless they enjoy the work. If you cannot offer enough money you must offer something else! Hard fun, responsibility, respect, the opportunity for people to enjoy the love they have for their craft.

People will do anything for you, up to the time you begin to abuse their kindness and dedication. Don't take it for granted. A director will work 24 hours a day, because it is, after all, his baby. But he should remember that the other people aren't hearing the same drums, the other people are human.

The reason people can work so long and so hard is that everyone is consistently amazed at what they are doing together, the tremendous amount of energy involved to get the results. It is a good feeling and a shared feeling.

In a film like this, a tremendous pressure builds up in the director, and sometimes the strains will show. There are very negative aspects to this, such as disliking or not caring for what you are doing, or blaming someone else for what they are doing or not doing, usually for something of minor importance. When this happens it is time to relax, time to remember that the people are behind you, and that you will prevail.

There is always the danger when shooting your own material of being too protective with it. As a director you want to throw a scene away, as a writer

you want to shoot it. Since you are a director first, in a situation like this, let the director win.

Different actors need different things, so that you cannot think of them as a group of "actors" but you must think of them as individual actors. Together you can work as a group, with the director like a silent partner.

The nice thing about working with a good actor is that if you can't help him then he will help you. He is always someone to lean on. Good actors always help each other, and this is helping you. I never felt better about a performance as when I would see two actors quietly remove themselves and work it out together, not caring or worrying about what I was doing. I think casting is the essential step in getting a good performance. I must feel absolutely sure about somebody before I give them a part. Later when they are going great guns I look back and congratulate myself on my wisdom for choosing them, much like a football coach whose quarterback has just thrown an eighty yard pass.

Directors and producers of any film face money problems and when I can point out that the lack of money is the biggest problem on a low budget film, they answer that it is the case on other pictures. But this is like saying that the rich have to economize and suffer during a recession. Maybe they do, but it is the poor who suffer more, the poor who will suffer in real ways. That is how the lack of money hurts, in real ways. I can't feel too sympathetic for somebody with a half a million dollars who is making a film. They might think we are in the same boat, but I know they are in a yacht, I'm on a dinghy.

A film maker should be like a girl guide. He should be prepared. Always be solid in preproduction and planning. There is one law to follow, and that is the more time and energy that is put into preproduction the less the grief and problems will be during the production. There is a tendency to get into the shooting of a film right away, and this is probably due to the fact that if you don't, the thing might disappear on you. But every production manager in the business knows that preproduction is the most important stage of the game. Planning and preproduction encompass every level of the film: casting, locations, equipment, props, wardrobe, vehicles, where the restaurants are on location, what time the sun goes down,

how long it takes to go from point A to point B, what has to be constructed, borrowed, or repaired, who gets the coffee and donuts, what setups are to be shot, in which order, and whether you need dolly tracks, lights, another camera, and so it goes. Even when it is all worked out down the line, there will always be more to do. And things will go -wrong on you, mistakes will be made, and things will change. But if you are well in control of everything else, you will be in control of those things too.

Before I started making the film, Penni Jacques and Guy Bergeron came to dinner, and they both offered one piece of advice, which was to work with the people you know. I took their advice and, because I knew my crew, they understood my problems, and knew me enough to work well with me. The underlying friendship and respect of the crew got us through the hard times. Nobody should be hired because they are a friend, but if they can do the job and they are your friend to boot you have a good combination. Listen to the Carole King song.

I don't know what it is like working elsewhere, but in Vancouver the attitude of most people in the industry and even in the community was one of support and help. The only time I dealt with someone who wasn't willing to help, you can be sure behind them was a bureaucracy or an institution. I suppose such people are locked into their own strange goals and events or empires. But with other people, when they wished me well, I felt they meant it, and there was support for the film based on geography and community.

The film is made. I cannot say if it is good or bad, worth the price of admission or not. I hope those of us who read *Cinema Canada*, and therefore demonstrate some care and interest in Canadian film will look at my film and give it a chance. If you like it, good, if not, I don't like your movie either. I can stand back and look at it and like maybe 80 per cent, which is enough. You can go out and work hard for something you believe in, but that doesn't mean they are going to care or give a damn. We all pay our dues, but the dues don't add up to a pension fund. There is no justice or fairness in the film business or any business. You give it your best shot and lay back and roll with the punches. □

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