

PRODUCING A FEATURE FILM

General Overview

STEP BY STEP

You have an amazing idea! You love it because it brings a new idea or awareness to the world, or it inspires you, or you laugh out loud! You love it so much or there's a character that you've never seen on screen and you must see this character come to life! YOUR IDEA MUST BE WORTH ALL THE TROUBLE, MONEY, AND EXHAUSTION OF MAKING A FILM SO CHOOSE WISELY.

Making a film will take over your life for at least a year, so choose only that which is either going to make you a lot of money, make you famous, or will emotionally and spiritually satisfy you and inspire you thus making your life rich.

WRITING PHASE

You write the script by yourself and when you finish it, you **register it at the WGA** or you get a **Copyright** for it.

OR - You write it with another writer and you get a **Collaboration Agreement** to establish how you will be compensated and how the rights will be controlled. You set down the parameters of how you will work together.

OR - you hire a writer and have them sign a **Work for Hire Agreement** and sign over **Certificate of Authorship** so that you may own the copyright.

If the idea came from a book, play, lyrics, video, living person, or any other source that has a copyright including an article, you must option the article, book, lyrics, to write a story based on it, and shop it around. If it's based on a living person's life you must buy their life rights for at least one dollar and get them to sign an **Agreement for LIFE RIGHTS**. You basically want an assurance that the person will not sue you later.

OR you read an amazing script and then you option it by making them sign an **Option Agreement** that includes how much you will pay them and how long you have to shop it around and how much you will purchase it for, if you sell the project to a studio and make the film.

Once you think you have an amazing screenplay it would be great to have a reading of it with actors and get feedback.

In a reading with actors, everything that is not working will become obvious. If it's a comedy and there aren't many laughs, well... there you go! Do a rewrite and punch it up. If it's a drama and everyone hates your protagonist, then rewrite it and make them likable. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite as much as possible until you absolutely have the best script possible. Save money by cutting out all your "darlings" that don't move the story forward. It's better to cut and edit the script than after you spent money shooting it and cutting it out in the editing room.

A lot of scripts get stuck at many phases of the film making process, but the writing of it is the most common struggle. You may disagree with the writer who doesn't want to rewrite anymore and you may have to replace them. The person who sold you their rights changes their mind and refuses to tell you their story, etc.

YOU HAVE THE SCRIPT READY

So now you have an amazing script and you shop it around to many investors, production companies, or you plan to produce it yourself and you look around for the money to make it.

FUNDRAISING PHASE

You must choose a director and actors that will help get you get financing. Everyone is trying to get the most famous actors and directors for this very reason and it's so competitive that unless you have lots of connections, this is probably not the route you will take.

Maybe you go to the film market and try to sell the foreign rights to raise money this way. Or you found out your uncle is a Dentist and has lots of money and wants to support your vision and he wants to live an exciting life by calling himself a "Producer"....

Majority of projects get stuck here.... Everyone is at this stage looking for financing.

You must get Financing - there are many different ways to do it but it requires a lot of work and connections. This is the most complicated part. Look at the Financing Sheet so you can see how you can finance an independent film. You may also **hire a FILM REP** (an agent who represents your film) to try to get financing and distribution. Distribution is tied to who you cast. However, there's a catch 22 which means you can't get famous actors until you get financing, but actors won't commit until you have financing and distribution. Distributors will not agree to distribute your film until you have financing or famous actors attached. They want a guarantee this movie will sell by having a strong **PACKAGE**... (A trick that a Latino filmmaker used, is to get a financier to give them 20% of the budget, so they can put it in the bank to show distributors and

actors that they have financing and will get the full amount from the financier once they sign with actors and Distributor.)

So you find investors and you make them sign legal agreements as to when they will get paid back, at what percentage of profit, and how many points, etc. This is very advanced financing beyond my knowledge. Once you have enough money to make it, you can now go into Pre-Production. The minute you decide to go into pre-production you hire a Publicist to make a big announcement and you get social-media going to let everyone know what you are doing.

PRE-PRODUCTION PHASE - six weeks before shoot

If there are no time restrictions because of a famous actor's schedule, or the right season for lighting of the story, or the financiers want their money by a certain time, you can take as long as you need, but the average time is about 6 weeks. Investors always want their money back so if anybody is lending you money, they want it back with profit as soon as possible or by the agreed time.

If you are trying to get into Sundance, you must calculate how long it will take you to do post-production after you are finished shooting to see if you can meet the deadline in August/September. You cannot send a rough cut because the competition is stiff and no one will watch it past the 10 minutes.

In the 6 weeks you need to:

If you haven't already done this - Set up your Corporation, LLC, or DBA so you can get a bank account for your Production Company. Get all your stationary and logos for your Production Company so you look professional. You must get insurance if you are going to rent equipment and work with SAG actors.

Hire Location Scout and Line Producer. Find all your locations - get all your permits from LA FILM WORKS. Set up payroll or figure out how people get paid.

Hiring A Director is crucial - always pick a Director who is respectful to actors. No amount of profit is worth it if any human being is getting abused! Do not hire directors who manipulate actors. This is bad karma that can lead to bad press or actors who will refuse to perform crucial scenes later. Directors set the tone for the shoot. You want someone who is firm, but respectful. They must be punctual and meet deadlines. They must be passionate about your project and make it their own.

Hire ACTORS, and all your Crew and make them sign all the necessary AGREEMENTS. Hire as many women and people of color!!! If there are men with too much ego and testosterone please avoid hiring them so you don't get any sexual harassment complaints. (Spotting predators.) If you are hiring a Female Director make sure all your crew is supportive of that or don't hire those crew people. If you have doubts or bad feelings about anyone, trust the feeling. Your gut and heart are never

wrong! Ask yourself, if I was in the desert and we had very little food and water, would I be okay around this person, or would they take my water and let me die? When you are in a production, you are running on little sleep and patience and anything that bothers you about a person now only gets magnified after a few days or weeks of shooting.

CASTING SESSION - Union or Non-Union - always state if there is nudity or sexually explicit scenes in casting notice before casting sessions happen and if there is pay or no pay. You must have casting session in a public place - never your home. Be clear and specific about what you want. Be kind and courteous to all actors especially if you are not paying them anything!

If it's a Union shoot sign with SAG - attend their free workshops ahead of time on how to work with SAG actors and all the requirements including insurance and how you make payments, etc.

Buy all the necessary props, costumes, special set pieces, etc.
The DP hires all the crew and rentals for the equipment to shoot the film.

Every department has to start working and getting ready for production, actors get measured for costumes, make-up tests, body prosthetics get made, sets get built, any special effects or choreography has to start practice or rehearsals. Composer has to write a song that has to be sung or danced to, etc. Animals need to be trained, etc.

DIRECTOR & DP work together to design shooting list - if there is money you can hire an artist to draw the **STORY BOARDS**

LINE PRODUCER ORGANIZES **SHOOTING SCHEDULE** WITH DIRECTOR - Based on the schedule they have to average so many pages a day. If they don't, the 1st Assistant Director has to push the Director and Crew to work faster.

PRODUCTION PHASE

The first day of shooting, you shoot either your sex scenes so actors don't get embarrassed later, or your easy shots to ease people into the shoot. Depends what tone you want to set on the set.

Always have craft services even if you have a tiny budget. Food is fuel. Not enough food makes your crew lag and you pay more because it will take longer to shoot. Lots of sugar, caffeine, and water!

Always anticipate potential hazards like the weather, people messing around and getting hurt, someone getting hit. So always have a First Aid kit. If you're shooting in the desert, have lots of water and sunscreen, etc. If you're shooting in Mexico, have everyone pledge not to drink alcohol until the end of the shoot so they don't end up in

jail or go missing, etc. (This is a good way to identify alcoholics or addicts and filter them out.) Your job as a Producer is to make sure everyone is safe and there are no lawsuits of any kind, or anyway you are breaking any laws where you will be vulnerable to being taken advantage of by anyone. People will always assume you have lots of money, and greedy people crawl in to see where there is a “chink in your armor.”

ALWAYS RESPECT BOUNDARIES! If you see anyone, especially the Director, not respecting boundaries you must take them aside and tell them to stop and have them privately apologize to anyone they disrespected. If a Female Director is being disrespected by a male crew member who is trying to test her, you must speak to the Director and have her publicly (in front of other crew members they are working with) fire the male crew member who is challenging their authority so that the rest of the male crew members know it is unacceptable. If she does not feel comfortable doing it, then you must do it for them, publicly, and remind everyone that she is the chief on the set, otherwise the crew will not listen anymore and your production might suffer or become a disaster. If the whole crew rebels, then fire all of them. The Director is the captain of the ship during production. The Producer is the God-father/Queen Isabela of the Production and if need be - GOD - and step in and stop production, change route, or change course. Being in production is the closest you get to going to war without getting killed. It's usually 12 hour days that will test your sanity. You cannot work more than 12 hours. You cannot force anyone to work more than 12 hours without compromising their safety or sanity. People need to rest at least 12 hours so they don't crash physically, emotionally or spiritually.

Production always runs late... Make sure your DP works fast and has all the lighting prepared in their shot list before they come in. Never let anyone wing it if possible, unless the electricity goes out and you have to light with whatever is available. The artistic choices all need to be made in pre-production as much as possible to save money. The risk is that when you are inspired in the moment and it delays things it can cost you a crucial scene later. You must balance time, money, quality and make quick decisions as to what to prioritize in that moment.

If you are shooting for a festival deadline you must have a tech person transferring your images to two external hard drives on the set to save time and have the Editor start putting the scenes together. Always make copies of all of your work as a back up!

Make sure you have a great Script Supervisor who is making sure all shots are being accounted, and that there are no errors or omissions or anything that is going to be troublesome in post production.

At the end of the shoot have a CAST & CREW PARTY at CASA FINA to celebrate! :)

POST PRODUCTION PHASE

The Editor assembles a rough cut and shows it to you and the Director and you give notes on the scenes and images. Sound can be fixed when the Sound Editor gets it.

Check that there are no errors or omissions or that you did not, in anyway, infringe on any copyright. Productions with money hire Lawyers to do this to make sure no one can sue you for defamation, libel, or whatever other reason. Make sure you did not accidentally shoot a brand or product logo anything that has a copyright. If you did, you must hire someone to clean it up, or remove it, or cover it up, or cut the scene out.

Although it is customary that the Editor is chosen by the Director, make sure the Editor works for you. Because if it comes down to a creative disagreement fight, there must be a Producer's Cut and a Director's Cut... It's art. You want the Editor to listen to you because you have to sell the movie. The Director may disagree with you because they want to keep their integrity as an artist, but it might make it less "commercial."

Your sound Editor and Composer are busy creating the music and sounds that are going to go into the film.

When you are satisfied with the images of your film and you are happy with it, then the sound editor and composer will get a chance to create the sound and music score for it. Once they are done, a Sound Editor/Engineer will input it into the film. Once the music and sound and image are perfect then you can LOCK THE PICTURE.

You can have a screening for the cast & crew. Make sure no press or bloggers or anyone who might think they are a journalist comes to this screening. I had an idiot friend of a crew member come to the screening and starting giving me a bad review on IMDB and called it the EAST LA Premiere - really condescending which affects your rating. Really ridiculous. Make sure everyone signs a release stating that they cannot blog about it or rate it or anything. If they are interested in doing that they can talk to the publicist once it's going to have a premiere so they get all the facts right.

Your publicist is scouting opportunities for your Actors and Director to come out in stories in the press or social media.

Your Graphic Designer is designing posters, materials for the publicity packet. Editor is making a Trailer and short commercials if you're trying to get a distributor.

You can invite Distributors; try to meet them at the film marker, etc. They are overwhelmed, so they go to Film Festivals to scout films so that they don't have to waste their time with all the junk getting made.

You submit to Festival and if you can hire a Film Rep great! They can shake the bushes for you. It's so competitive that it's hard to get into them unless you know someone... If you get into SUNDANCE you must exploit the hell out of this and take a publicist to the festival so that you can create BUZZ at the festival. This can make the difference between not getting distribution and getting an award and distribution and a lot of money. BUZZ will help raise the price of your film.

At the Film Festival premiere never tell anyone what the budget is!!!! NEVER! No matter how many times they ask. You never want to brag your film only cost \$100K and then the distributor only offers you \$200K when they were prepared to offer you \$2 Million. In Negotiations you must always let the Distributor make the first offer.

If you do not know how to negotiate a distribution deal it is a good idea to hire an Entertainment Lawyer who specializes in film distribution to do it for you. If you have a **FILM REP** they will do it for you.

ONCE YOUR MOVIE GETS PURCHASED PHASE

The Studio or Network will request **DELIVERABLES**. They will give you a list of all they need including **E & O Insurance**. Which is Errors & Omissions so that no one will sue them for anything you failed to do or clean up in your film. They will want different technical things that will help them sell it overseas and dub it into another language. You will need help from a **FILM REP** for this.

MARKETING - HOW TO "SELL" YOUR FILM & TO WHOM

Studio will work with you or not on Marketing & Publicity campaign. If you are distributing it yourself because no one is buying it, then you have to decide who you will target and how you will do outreach. How to get the most publicity for the least amount of money. Social Media is really what an Indie Filmmaker can do...

AMC has an Indie Film Distribution program, but you must guarantee that you have put \$20K in publicity in the market where you are screening your film. They will allow you to show your film at an empty movie theater and they will take 50% or you can rent the movie theater and keep all the profits.

At Your Film Premiere invite everyone who donated or helped in anyway or have a special screening for investors and donors if you can't invite a lot of people to the premiere. You want to thank them and inspire them to give you money again!!

Buy small movie posters and give everyone a copy so they can get actor signatures, small things like that go a long way.

Do your best to present the most professional film, but don't have any expectations, you will be disappointed. Be surprised instead and be grateful for any opportunity that comes your way. Everyone wants a theatrical release, but not every film gets one. Don't be attached to that.

CELEBRATE THAT YOU GOT IT MADE! No matter what the outcome. You made a film!! **TAKE TIME OFF TO REST... AND START AGAIN... REVIEW ALL OF YOUR MISTAKES & LEARN FROM THEM... SOMETIMES MAKING YOUR FEATURE FILM IS THE WAY YOU PAY YOUR DUES IF YOU DID NOT GO TO FILM SCHOOL...**