



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF FILM & TELEVISION

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# LAUNCH YOUR CAREER IN DIGITAL FILM-MAKING

## *A Guide on How To CRASH The Movies*

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### ***HOW IT USED TO BE IN THE OLD DAYS***

Back in the 1920s and '30s when the studios were in their ascendance, there was an apprentice system that evolved along with all the rest of it. New people came in and were given a chance to learn a craft while working on the job, thus growing into the industry and its culture. Artisans and craftsmen higher up the ladder, with layers of experience and know-how, could watch you work and steer you in the direction where they saw your talents leading you. The most promising acolytes gradually moved upward, some as directors, others as writers, editors, camera technicians, set designers, prop makers, costumers, and so forth.

Those days are long gone.

When I first came to Hollywood in December of 1976, I didn't have much experience in filmmaking. There weren't many film schools in those days, and no how-to books, but I had a Bolex H16 camera with a parallax viewfinder. I'd made a handful of shorts on real film, in both 8mm and 16mm. I'd been a member of a filmmakers' co-op in

New York called The Millenium. Dues were \$10 a month and I could use the editing equipment all I wanted--sync blocks, take-up reels, moviolas. I even had one of my experimental pieces shown at the Whitney Museum on Fifth Avenue. I still remember my mention buried in the review in the *New York Times*: "In other films, a young man makes faces at himself in a mirror." My eight-minute black-&-white opus was called **PHYSIOGNOMY**.

I'd also done some free-lance grip work in commercial houses in Dallas and Boston, and I took a course in film editing in the newly-opened film department at my alma mater, SMU.

When I landed in Hollywood, I remember I felt certain there was bound to be another filmmakers' co-op here in L.A. How could there not be? There wasn't.

But somehow I met the young Ron Shelton when he was in charge of the film program at the California Science Museum, and he showed another of my 16mm shorts, this one in color. No review this time. (This was long before Shelton landed his debut feature, **BULL DURHAM**, starring Kevin Costner. Read his bio in Katz's **Film Encyclopedia** to find out how he busted into the biz.)

I knew maybe four people in L.A. back then, friends I'd done plays with and summer stock. But there were a number of repertory cinemas in town, movie theatres where they showed a double bill and changed it every day or two, where you could see a couple of classic movies from the '30s and '40s. I spent a year in the dark watching some great old features. While I worked at temp jobs during the day, at night I'd probably see eight or twelve movies a week in theatres all over town. That was my film school.

They're all gone now, swept away in the videocassette and cable TV tsunamis.

## ***AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE BIG STUDIOS***

Despite the bleak landscape for outsiders like me, guess what... There were low-budget movie companies like American International Pictures in competition with the studios, fighting over the booming teenage audience. They made exploitation pictures--"B" movies. A guy named Roger Corman had graduated from AIP and had his own studio, New World Pictures, in a former lumber yard in Venice, California. I had appeared briefly in a movie he directed called ***GAS-S-S-S***, shot on location in Dallas. I managed to pester him into giving me a job as a writer and ended up scripting about a dozen movies for him, as well as acting in some and associate-producing others, most in the half-million-dollar budget range. That was my graduate film school. The pay was meager, but you could always depend on getting it from Roger. And he wasn't the only player in town. There were scads of other small-time producers and mini-studios where you could knock on the door and someone might open up and let you in.

But wait a minute. This is supposed to be for you, in the here and now. How are you going to break in? The studio system is defunct, and the ranks of independent producers have been drastically thinned. So where can you turn if you want inside? I hate to tell you, but I'm glad I'm not the one trying to get started in this day-n-age. It's tough out there.

But you know how Dickens put it: "It was the best of times and the worst of times." Translation: things are getting real exciting out there, enough to get your blood surging, but at the same time, doors are locked up tighter than ever before.

There used to be tons of pulp magazines publishing short stories, that would print the work of new writers as long as the stories

were good. That's how filmmaker John Sayles got started--getting his stories published--before he too went to work for Roger Corman.

Now--even the magazines won't look at unsolicited fiction. But there's always the internet, right?

It might be worthwhile for us to see how a few other well-known types got their starts in the dream factory.

### ***TRUE STORIES ABOUT HOW VARIOUS PEOPLE FOUGHT THEIR WAY IN***

Like Henry Fonda (Jane's dad). Back in the '30s he was referred to as the "best-known unknown actor in New York." Why? Because he didn't waste any time sitting around waiting. He went out and looked for it. Every day he made tracks around to every agent and producer's office in New York City, knocking on doors, asking about auditions, inquiring about any jobs that might be available to a young man like himself. It got to where all the secretaries and mail room guys on Broadway knew young Hank Fonda, and maybe they'd start mentioning him to their bosses. Eventually it worked. He got cast in a show, ended up starring in more shows, and later he arrived on the west coast with a studio contract in his pocket, starring in movies and becoming an unforgettable emblem of American individualism.

I'm sure everybody knows the stories about Spielberg. When he was 20, he put on a suit and strolled onto the Universal lot with a briefcase, walked right past the security guards like he knew what he was doing, like he belonged there. He did it every day, walking on to the lot. He toured the buildings until he found an unoccupied office, and he set himself up there. It became his office because he said it was his office. No one challenged him.

He probably wouldn't get away with that today, in the post-9/11 world where security's tighter everywhere. But it tells you something about his boldness and about the system you're trying to crash. (I use *crash* not like crashing a computer, but crashing a party, getting in where you're not invited.)

If you look like you belong, then you're okay. Project confidence.

Spielberg's D.P. Janusz Kaminski and writer/director James Cameron are a couple of other Corman graduates. Cameron labored in Roger's lumber yard as a production and special effects designer, building miniature sets. He got fired from his first directing gig, **PIRANHA 2**, but he kept at it, doggedly writing scripts and doing rewrites, before he came blasting back three years later with **THE TERMINATOR**.

There's one thing stories like this have in common: Don't let anything hold you back. Don't take no for an answer. You have to be decent. You can't hold a gun on anyone to make them hire you. But never stop believing in yourself.

Here's my own story, from when I did that movie **GAS-S-S-S** in 1975. First I read for Roger's associates in Dallas, and they called me back a couple of weeks later. I read for Roger and was excused, and then as I was walking away, Roger himself came chasing after me down the hallway and handed me a script and told me to be ready on such-n-such a day. I wish every casting session would go like that. Then in 1976, I decided it was time to move to Hollywood.

I've always enjoyed acting, but I thought of myself first and foremost as a director. It's hard, when you haven't directed anything anybody's ever heard of, to get people to see you as the hand at the helm. So I started writing screenplays as a way in the door. I repeatedly called Roger's office, but I couldn't get past the secretary. Then one of my stage plays got produced and I

directed it, and someone who saw the play and liked it referred me to Roger's development executive, a wonderful woman named Frances Doel, who gave me a rewrite job on an **ALIEN** rip-off they were about to shoot.

Sometimes you'll meet people like Frances. She always seemed like she *wanted* to help people along. There are a lot of door-slamers in the industry who revel in power put-downs and seem to relish forecasting your failure because they don't believe in you. But try to keep in mind there are people like Frances out there, warm-hearted and gracious, affable, willing to lend a hand. Don't let those others bum you out. Just keep looking for your own mentors. They're out there somewhere, waiting for you right now.

But even after I did the rewrite for Frances, I still wasn't getting where I wanted. In the meantime, Roger sold New World and moved into new offices. I remember calling him several times and not getting a return call, so I went down to his new digs and told the receptionist I wanted to see Roger and I'd wait until he had a free moment. And I sat in the lobby for some time, I don't remember how long. Finally Roger came out specifically to see me. He didn't invite me into his office, he just said he was aware of my work and he'd give me the word later on when he had an opening for a writer. And he kept his promise. I got a call to write a sci-fi screenplay for him not too long after that.

Never surrender. Never say die. But you've got to have the chops when they call you in. You've got to be prepared.

Another example: My wife Atsuko had a lot of experience in the movie and TV business in Japan, but was always running into the glass ceiling there, the one that keeps women from rising through the ranks. She could go so far and no further in Tokyo, and she was

ambitious. She had stories she wanted to tell and she felt she couldn't get them told in Japan. I encouraged her to give it a shot in L.A. She took a number of less-than-desirable jobs while searching for a break, waitressing and so forth, while I tried to fish around for any prospects among my contacts. We were disappointed a couple of times, but finally a friend managed to get her a no-pay position at a small cable TV movie company as an assistant PA. (Not even a PA--an *assistant* PA!) She accepted it gladly. Atsuko's a fiend for work. She threw herself into it, and after two weeks they recognized her value and offered to hire her as a full-fledged PA for 3 days a week. She asked if they'd mind if she also came in and worked the other 2 days *for free*. Mouths open in astonishment, they nodded *okay*. A few days later, they came back and told her she was hired for *five* fully-paid days a week.

Atsuko likes working in the office, behind the scenes. She's got a strong work ethic and knows how to get things done. When she makes a promise, she keeps it. She believes in taking responsibility and doesn't gripe. Those are priceless characteristics in an industry that's always struggling with undependable people. It's what got her hired. And the first job always leads to another, as long as you get it done. (Subsequently, Atsuko ended up producing several low budget movies and getting a couple of articles written about her in slick, high-profile Tokyo magazines.)

You notice the common denominator in all these stories? It's there, if you haven't spotted it. It's *persistence*. Sometimes I think it counts for more than ability or intelligence. It's that gung-ho attitude: Never give in. Never concede.

You want to know something? You don't really need an agent. What you need is *persistence*. Let persistence be your agent.

It worked for me. I never had an agent until after I'd written more than a dozen movies that got made.

Agents and lawyers are all part of a big smoke screen. Designed by insiders to discourage everybody who's outside. You need to recognize that it's a system deliberately set up to defeat you, in order to weed out the weak and gutless, the ones who don't have persistence. And it works. The ones with no doggedness end up getting tired of the run-around and they go home. So you're not weak and gutless, right? Don't give up.

*I saw this written on the wall of a fast-food joint once. I give it to all my students at IAFT.*

### **PERSISTENCE**

Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent.

Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.

Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts.

Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

You don't have an agent? Go in through the side door. When you show them you've got the chops, they're not going to throw you out. People like spunk and ambition. They like it when you show them you're here to get something done, something good. But you've got to balance it with decency and not do anything crazy, nothing threatening, nothing dangerous. Be creative, be colorful, but be wise. Just locate the right door and find a way through it. Make something up if you have to. But don't forget to justify it with the right stuff once you get inside. You don't want to make someone look bad just because they had the poor taste to be the one who let you in. Make your benefactors proud of you.

### ***HINTS & TIPS FOR OUTSIDERS***

1. Make lists.
2. Zero in on producers and companies that do the kind



of movies you like. Look for mid-level and low-level types. (Why? Because everybody's chasing the big-wigs. You can meet and pursue them later, after you've started to make your mark.)

3. Do the phone. Make phone calls.
4. Fire off Emails.
5. Use snail mail to your advantage when a more physical presentation might help.

Anything that sets you apart. Anything big or small that helps them remember you. (But not too big--you might end up overdoing it--I know I did a couple of times. Use your judgment.)

6. Work your nets. Networking helps.
7. Get out there early and knock on doors, literally, even if it means waiting all day in the producer's outer office for a meeting that might last 2 minutes.
8. Volunteer to read scripts and do coverage (script reports). If it works out, that could turn into a paying job.
9. Volunteer for anything if it gets you in the door.

If you want it--if you really want it--you can't cave. You've got to hang in there until you beat the system that's been devised to beat you. Persistence. Best foot forward.

But when you get an opening--let's say it again--you've got to deliver the goods or you'll blow it. You don't want to make the mistake typified in this line from **BONNIE & CLYDE**: "Your advertising's great. Too bad you don't have anything to sell."

- ⇒ 10. Get ready. Stay ready.

## **CREATE YOUR OWN THING**

The waves of technological evolutions in recent years have put your fate in your hands. Make your own movie! Put together your own project. You can do it.

Here's a game plan:

- ➡ Do a short video.
- All right, what's your story? No ideas?
  - Okay, then, what locations do you have at your disposal? Make a list of intriguing places as distinct and different as possible, but close together, so you can move easily from one to the other. Best if it's places where you don't need permission to shoot.
  - What good actors do you know?
  - Figure out how much money you can spend. It could be as little as a couple hundred dollars.
  - Now think again--what story can you tell using these locations and these actors at this budget? In other words, fit the story to your available locations, actors, and budget.
  - Get someone to help you write the script, and see if you can find a friend with a videocamera to shoot it.
  - Start gathering a crew. It doesn't have to be more than a few energetic friends.
  - Think about how to get the best sound possible, and how you're going to do your post.

A friend and colleague, actor/writer/director Ryun Yu, has done exactly that. He's gone through the wringer, making several short videos using this formula. He's traveled the festival circuit, and now he's raised the funds to shoot a feature on a bigger budget--still a micro-budget, but enough to get you somewhere with something good in your hands. It's how the Coen Brothers started.

Ryun's written a terrific script, and he's pulled together production elements he knows he can handle on a tight budget. He had actors and locations in mind when putting together his story. It's an ambitious project. There are a million ways it could go wrong. But if he pulls it off--

Doors will open and the sky's the limit. Take action.

## **THE DETAILS**

Of course, there's a lot more to it than this. I've been talking about the big stuff. The ideas and aspirations that are rattling around inside your head, trying to find a way out. But believe me, there's an abundance of little things you've got to know and grasp,

which in the long run, in a way, might be even more important. Because in order to implement the big picture, you've got to go through the details.

And that's what an affordable quality training facility is there for. That's why we're here. Align yourself with a place like IAFT and you can get ready access to the latest gear and learn how to operate it hands-on from qualified industry professionals. What's the point of wandering into a bookstore and coming out with \$200 worth of technical manuals, books you don't really require that'll end up sitting uncracked on the coffee table forever. No need to spend money pointlessly when you've got a reasonable alternative like IAFT, where you can set off on a magnificent journey--and discover how to take your movie ideas and turn them into reality.

In the final analysis, you've got to handle the big stuff. Your story, your film, on your own. But we can help with the details.

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and getting to the next phase,  
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It's all waiting for you, right here, right now.  
We look forward to hearing from you.*



"True art is in the *doing* of it."

--Jean Renoir, movie writer/director

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