

TECHNICAL

FILM AND TV

FOR

NONTECHNICAL

PEOPLE

Drew Campbell

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NONTECHNICAL

PEOPLE

by Drew Campbell

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FLY THAT STINGER TO THE MIDGET ON THE PLATYPUS: WHY THIS BOOK

"Fly that stinger to the midget on the platypus!"

Someone actually said that to me. And expected me to understand.

It was my first day on a movie set, and I was feeling good. I had spent over twenty years in live theater as a technician, designer, director, and actor, and I knew my way around backstage. I knew a Leko from a fresnel from a hole in the ground, you betcha.¹ I knew how to use a parametric equalizer to wring feedback out of wedge monitors, and I wasn't afraid to do it. So when I got to L.A. and plunged into the world of television and film production, I figured that my knowledge would translate, and it would take me no time at all to become Mr. Lighting, Mr. Sound, or Mr. Whatever You Need.

So here I am, day one, 9:00 A.M., and this stressed-out person is shoving me towards the set with this frantic command: "Fly that stinger to the midget on the platypus!"

Do what?

Let me tell you, it had been a while since I had stood slack-jawed and clueless like an inbred hillbilly cousin, staring at a pile of cables and lights like I had never seen electricity in all my born days. This guy had rendered Mr. Technical speechless in one swell foop. Of course, my first thought was that this was one of those hazing things they do to the new guy, so I looked around for the telltale signs of snickering technicians, huddled in clusters by the coffee machine, waiting to see if I would take the bait. I suppose it's only fair, I thought. I've sent an intern out to get polka-dot paint once or twice myself.

¹ And so do you, if you read my first book, *Technical Theater for Nontechnical People*, (Allworth Press, 1999).

But, no—all I saw was an experienced and professional crew, rushing to get the first shot set up before the sun got too high in the sky and made everything look flat. These guys were serious. So, I did the only thing that you can do when you land in a foreign country. You learn the language, word by word. I swallowed my pride, looked this guy in the face and asked, “What’s a stinger? What’s a platypus? How do I fly them? And where do I find the midget?”

Do you need to know what this sentence means? Let’s say you’re an actor, just starting to work in film. Or an eager production assistant, determined to learn everything you can about television. Or an aspiring filmmaker with lots of ideas and no idea what to do with them. Or let’s say you’re like me, a theater veteran, trying to understand how film and TV can be so much like the stage and yet so different.

If you are any of these things, then, yes, you do need to know that to “fly in” something means to bring it onto the set, a “stinger” is an extension cord, a “midget” is a small, 200-watt lighting instrument, and a “platypus” is a clamp with broad, flat jaws used to mount a light on a scenic wall.

This book exists to help you distinguish between what you need to know and what you don’t need to know. Don’t get me wrong: Knowledge is power, and the more you know about the craft of filmmaking, the more you can bend it to your will. But if your brain is like mine, you run the risk of information overload, the dreaded “Etch-a-Sketch” effect, where your brain just gives up, turns upside down, and shakes, thereby clearing all information—both essential and not—from your mental screen.

Do you need to know that the Panaflex 35mm silent camera has a pellicle reflex system? Unless you want a career as a camera assistant, the answer is no. Do you need to know the difference between deep focus and shallow focus? Yes, you do, because it affects everything from the actor’s performance to how big a parking space the grip truck will need. (And yes, you do have to know what a “grip truck” is.)

But if the four-decibel difference between axial and displacement magazines really fascinates you, then get a subscription to *American Cinematographer* and move on to more detail-oriented books. (You might look up some of them in the bibliography in the back of this one.)

If, however, you want to act, direct, produce, get a PA job, be a production manager, hire a crew for your music video, or get a training film made, this book is for you. Right now, a Hollywood conversation may sound like so much gibberish, but take heart. Grab that stinger, that midget, that Nagra, that redhead, that quarter silk, and that finger solid. We'll have you shooting the martini in no time.

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Chapter 1:

WHO DOES WHAT: THE POPULATION OF A SET

When I made my first real film, as opposed to the video experiments that I used as a rationalization for introducing myself as a “filmmaker” at parties, I made an arrangement to do a shoot at a local restaurant. I assured the nervous owner that it was a small, no-budget production with a skeleton crew, a fact I knew to be true, having spent some time on large feature film sets. Just the essential people—no frills, no entourages, no paparazzi. I reminded people repeatedly that we were a small, hardy troupe of players, not a bloated Hollywood production. Think of the troupe of players in *Hamlet*, I said, not the legions of workers from *Singin’ in the Rain*.

So I show up on the morning of the shoot, virgin producer-director-writer that I am, my crew showing up in ones and twos, and within an hour, the nervous restaurant owner has gone straight into hysterics. There are thirty-one people standing in his tiny bistro.

“I thought you said this was low budget!” he screamed.

I assured him that the budget was strictly limited to the credit limit on my Visa.

“But why are there all of these *PEOPLE*?” he cried, bug-eyed and rampant.

Why, indeed.

I thought back to this moment recently while working a professional commercial shoot. The production brought in no less than ten different trucks requiring that an entire city block be cleared for parking. Besides the lighting truck, the grip truck, and the camera truck, there was a wardrobe truck, an art-department truck, and a truck specially designed to create food props. This was all in addition to the requisite catering truck and a production trailer that could have housed a family of nine.

Because I was working on the lighting for the shoot, I spent most of the time up in the grid work looking down on the action. The soundstage was ablaze with people. Everywhere you looked, there were moving bodies, and most of them were in a terrible hurry. Lighting equipment filled every corner of the room and there were two complete 35mm-camera setups. Money was being spent like rain.

From my vantage point, high above the center of the action, I looked down into the center of the set, and there, at the center of this hurricane of activity, brilliantly lit from all sides like an Impressionist still life, looking for all the world like a precious artifact, was the object of all this attention—a bowl of oatmeal.

Actually, a series of bowls of oatmeal, because every few minutes the oats would become mushy or tepid or cool or whatever oatmeal does under movie lights, and a props person would sweep it away and leave another, perfectly formed, delicately steaming bowl in its place. I believe the cast and crew got a warm, filling breakfast several times over. Regularity was not a problem on that set.

Why does it take so many people to run a set? Why does a caterer have to feed a small army just to shoot a cereal spot or a music video or a public service announcement, let alone a feature film?

I believe the answer is this: The number of things that can go wrong on any given shoot is so incomparably huge, so vast in detail, that you literally have to parcel out the responsibilities to a squadron of folks just so you can get through the shoot and into the editing studio without anyone saying, “Oh no, we forgot about the [insert detail here].”

Filmmaking is an art that rests on detail. And the filmmaker's defense against detail is to create safety in numbers. That is one reason why a film shoot has so many people—with so many eyes on the set, someone is bound to notice that the spot of sunlight on the wall has moved between shots, or the actor's tie has come loose, or the sound of the motorcycle outside ruined the take.

Another reason why we need so many people is that we have a very demanding master—the camera. When a shoot is in full swing, the whole idea is to keep the camera rolling as much as possible. Anything that delays the camera is a delay to the whole process. Again, the defense is to have a person on set, somebody *right there* who knows exactly what to do to solve the problem, remove the block, or answer

the question. An electrician *right there* who can refocus that light, a soundman *right there* who can adjust that microphone, a script supervisor *right there* who knows if the actor put his glasses on before or after his line, and yes, a props person *right there* who makes sure that the oatmeal is steaming on cue.

Multiply the number of possible problems by the number of people needed to solve them, and you get a whole bunch of folks standing around a set, waiting for their moment to jump in.

So who are these people?

Basically, the population of a set is divided into fourteen categories. Let's look at the categories and then meet the folks.

Producing Department: The Bill-payers

Directing Department: The Visionaries

Camera Department: Keepers of the Beast

Lighting Department: Feeders of the Beast

Grip Department: Movers and Shakers

Sound Department: The Dialogue Catchers

Art Department: Making the Walls

Prop Department: Phasers to Falcons

Wardrobe: Dressing the Cast

Makeup and Hair: Preening and Prepping

Catering and Craft: Feeding the Multitudes

Drivers: Moving the Show

Teachers, Doctors, and Other Helper-Types: Keeping us
Learned and Healthy

The Talent: The People in the Frame

See what I mean? A whole lotta people, and these are just the ones on the set. Wait till we get to postproduction. Another whole town of people is waiting when these people are done.

PRODUCING DEPARTMENT

Somebody once said that all you needed to be a producer was a phone booth and a stack of nickels. Of course, these days, it's a cell phone and a clear signal, but make no mistake, the ability to talk fast and smooth is still a job requirement for a producer. The producer stays with the

film, commercial, or TV show from the idea stage (when it is called a “concept” or a “package”), through preproduction (when it is called a “project”), production and postproduction (when it is called a “show”), and then through distribution and marketing (when it is called a “film,” “commercial,” or “TV show”).

The Producer

The producer is the one in charge—the *capo di tutti capi*—for one simple reason. She’s the money. Or at least she represents the money, because every good producer knows the folly of investing her own hard-earned cash in a film. She is in charge of staying on budget and on schedule. She also may operate as a liaison between the show and the production company or studio.

The film is the producer’s baby. She raises the money, buys the script, hires the crew, chooses the cast, approves the budget, signs the checks, accepts the Oscar, and, with any luck, makes the profit.

People who come to film or TV from the theater are often surprised at the difference in power structure between the producer and director. In theater, the director tends to be a much more powerful decision maker, both on larger items like designs and casting and on smaller, more daily decisions like props and acting styles. The theatrical producer concerns himself more with large decisions, like choosing a play and raising money. In film, the producer is much more visible during the production process and much more involved in daily decision-making.

In the theater, there is generally a moment, somewhere between casting the stars and starting rehearsal, when the producer backs off and lets the show run on its own. The pieces are in place; everyone knows what to do. Now, it’s time to see the crew sail its own boat. Generally, if the producer is in the rehearsal hall, something is going wrong.

There is no such moment in film. The producer is omnipresent, heading the ad hoc corporation that grows up around a film and, generally, micromanaging it. Most producers make a surprising number of artistic decisions—they generally do it at a distance by choosing cast members, hiring directors, and buying scripts, but they involve themselves much more deeply in the creative process than their theatrical counterparts. Actors and designers accustomed to getting notes only from the director may find themselves startled to get direction and approvals from the producer just as often. Little wonder that successful

directors and actors try to become producers of their own movies. It is the only way of gaining any control over the finished product.

Again, *the producer makes decisions*. Which star do we cast? Which script? Which version of the script? Do we shoot in Los Angeles or Toronto? Which format do we shoot in? Which revision of which annotated rewrite of the script based on the notes from which story editor?

If it involves money (and it always involves money), it is the producer's call. The director may decide that he needs an extra day on location, but no one is booking the hotel until the producer says yes.

There is a gaggle of different producers and an unwritten code about what the titles mean:

Producer. The trend these days is for producers to travel in packs. It's rare to see a single producer on a film anymore, because everyone wants power, and this is where it is. A producer credit can bestow visibility and money on its recipient, so it is sometimes offered as a negotiating point with people who may only be tangentially involved with a show. The title "producer" is generally bestowed on the people who are really driving the project, on a day-to-day basis, from concept to completion.

Executive Producer. Either someone who arranged financing for the film and wants a vanity title or someone who is barely involved but has a recognizable name that will help the show raise money. Sometimes it's a studio head who has championed the film.

Associate Producer. This title is sometimes given as a reward for someone like a production manager or 1st AD who worked above and beyond the call to get a film done. Sometimes it's given to a writer or director who negotiated for a producing credit, or as a way of assuring certain production team members that they actually have some power in the production.

Line Producer. Large-budget shows will have someone between the producer and the production manager whose job it is to manage the budget. Besides riding herd on overruns, they also make sure that enough money is provided for each area. Unlike the producer, the line producer does not make artistic decisions. This is the realm of the creative but exacting money manager.

The Production Staff

Under the producers is another group of people who monitor budgets, create schedules, and otherwise keep a show running.

Unit Production Manager. The UPM puts together the budget (with the line producer on big shows) and makes the whole shoot happen. He hires crew, rents trucks, handles locations, and does everything necessary to put the right people in the right place with the right tools at the right time. He is brought in during preproduction, and his planning can make the difference between a smooth shoot and a nightmare.

Production Coordinator. While the UPM is generally out in the field, the production coordinator works out of the production office to coordinate logistics, particularly lodging, transportation, and shipping of critical items like film and dailies.

Production Assistants. The time-honored way of breaking into film and TV. *PAs* run errands, type schedules, carry equipment, post signs, and anything else that needs to be done. Their mating call is, "I'm on it!" For years, they were famous for making coffee, but in this day and age, they keep track of the closest Starbucks and which actor gets the no-fat, no-foam, triple grande vanilla latte.

Location Managers and Scouts. "Let's just keep going!" says Thelma. "What do you mean?" says Louise, as the crowd of police cars forms up behind them, cutting off all hope of escape.

"Let's just keep going!" repeats Thelma, gesturing to the sheer cliff ahead of them, beyond which there is only air and a thousand-foot drop to oblivion. Louise jams the car into gear and over they go, leaving their lives behind them, frozen midair in female-empowered jubilation, silhouetted against endless miles of striped canyon.

Callie Khouri's script for *Thelma and Louise* may have ended with the triumphant, suicidal plunge of two determined feminists, but it wasn't going to end up on-screen until someone found a photogenic cliff. That person was a location manager or a location scout. (On small shows, the location manager scouts, as well, while big shows have two different people.) His job is to scour the world in search of the perfect place for a suicide, a murder, a love affair, a heist, or whatever else is called for in the script. Once a place is found, a delicate negotiation

begins with the owner, the neighbors, the local government, and anyone else who might have a stake in whether or not a film is allowed to shoot.

When a film comes to town, the effect is somewhere between traveling gypsies and a gold rush. A shoot can mean dozens of people may be tramping across lawns, bright lights may be on in the middle of the night, traffic and access to homes and businesses may be affected, and, in some cases, a '66 T-Bird may be tossed off a cliff.

The arrival of a film can make people cranky. During the shooting of *The Bridges of Madison County*, one neighboring farmer got so incensed that he ran his mower nonstop next door, ruining take after take until the film crew found a way to placate him.

In Los Angeles, film locations inside the city limits are posted at City Hall, and one man in need of therapy has made a career out of disturbing them. He is known among location managers as "Weedeater Man." When the film is setting up in the morning, Weedeater Man stands across the street and cranks up his gas-powered weed trimmer nice and loud. When it becomes apparent that he is going to stay all day, the location manager crosses the street and pays him off. He tosses the weedeater in the trunk and heads home, another day's work (and another pissed-off crew) behind him. (If you are the Weedeater Man and you are reading this, *get help*, you idiot.)

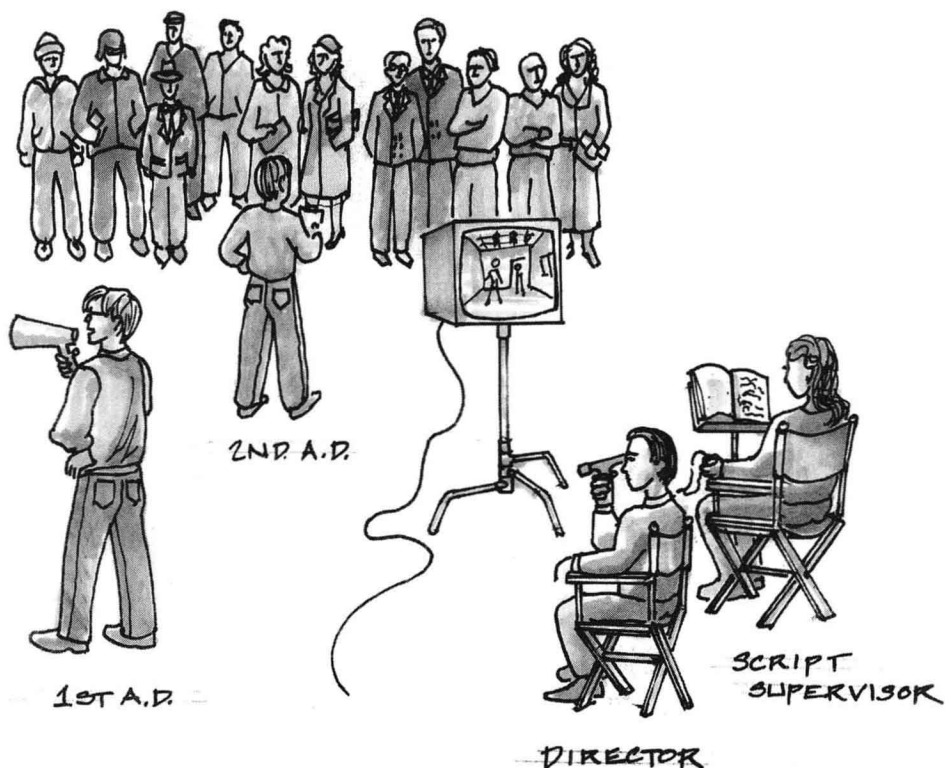
It is the location manager's job to solve problems like these. After the scout has dug up the place and the producer and director have agreed to it, the location manager is responsible for getting permission to use the place, negotiating with any open palms, and planning the logistics.

For the record, Thelma and Louise's cliff is on Potash Road, off Route 279, nineteen miles south of Moab, Utah.²

DIRECTING DEPARTMENT

The phrase, "But what I really want to do is direct," is so far beyond cliché that it almost doesn't bear mentioning. EVERYBODY wants to direct. I want to direct. Directors are Hollywood's favorite sons and

² For hundreds of these bits of location trivia, check out *Shot on This Site*, by William Gordon (Citadel Press, 1995).



The directing department.

daughters, even though they still serve at the pleasure of the producers. In Hollywood, the director is seen as the Great Artist.

The Director

While the producer wields control over the big decisions like casting, script, and budget, the director controls all of the shot-by-shot, moment-to-moment decisions. Of course, he has input in those pre-production issues, but he doesn't become a deity until we are on the set. He will choose where the camera goes, how it moves, and what it sees, and, because everything that happens on a set happens for the camera, that makes the director a powerful person.

The director has a mental image of what he wants, and it is his job to communicate that image to the cast and crew. Their job is to turn that image into celluloid or videotape. Success depends on the clarity of the director's image and his skill at communicating that image to others.

But what, exactly, does a director do?