. a lucid and comprehensive manual of filmmaking from the Producer's point of view. Buck Houghton clarifies many confusing issues . . . and there is much wisdom . . . . I found myself nodding in agreement as I wandered through many familiar situations. It would be helpful to anyone interested in film production."

—Francis Ford Coppola

What a PRODUCER *Does*

The ART *of* MOVIEMAKING *(Not the Business)*

BUCK HOUGHTON

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What a **PRODUCER** *Does*

To the memory of Rod Serling—a unique talent.

JUMPING IN

I know that I have opened a can of worms with the word 'Producer' because entertainment entities, both networks and studios, have used the word with such inaccurate profligacy of late that it has lost its power of identification: Associate Producers, Line Producers, Co-Producers, Assistant Producers, Executive Producers! (One can only guess what they all do . . . probably too much or too little.) Some directors have told me that they seldom, if ever, hear from these titular producers. Other directors have told me that their titular producers are constantly and annoyingly in their hair . . . and that the style of producing of which I write is a creative pleasure whenever it occurs.

The controlling executives would be well advised, if they want to be prudent with money and to achieve the best possible cinematic result, to see to it that there is some *one* in that bunch of titles who can do what this book describes . . . alone! There is only *one* function, and to subdivide it is to weaken it. For that vitally necessary person is basically a storyteller who is uniquely armed with a creative understanding of how motion pictures are made in the over-view . . . not a promoter, nor a banker, nor a mechanic, nor a credit hungry writer, and he should be left to do his job without interference from . . . to point out a few more . . . the leading lady's agent, a super production manager, some guy who had a hold on the story property, nor the money man.

It is not vital for the producer to be skillful at 'doing lunch' with powerful agents, nor have an 'in' at Credit

Suisse; nor, necessarily, know how a camera works nor how sound gets onto film—just know how to deal knowledgeably, one on one, with professional people in the art of visual/on-screen storytelling, for the motion picture theater—or for the TV set. The principles are the same for each.

So this book is not about money-raising activities, studio politics, nor the agency circuit (necessary activities, but having little bearing on the job of creatively helping creative forces down the track to the best possible picture); nor will I be writing about technical matters, for there are good manuals and top-level classes covering the minute workings of every motion picture art and craft.

Follows, then, the structure of this book . . . its posture.

As the title promises, I will be writing about the duties of a creative producer, not a businessman. He has an idea and pursues it; or he learns of someone else's idea and seeks the means to realize upon it . . . indeed, to be sure that it is improved upon. A good producer, as an inspirer of creativity, must, himself, be creative.

He is a creative administrator . . . a judge of creativity. He guides and helps hundreds of people toward an objective that becomes increasingly clear-cut as the work proceeds from an idea, through its script and budget preparation, then to shooting (very tense and money hazardous), then to post-production (cost manageable and leisurely if you don't have a pressing air date or release deadline). It's like herding bees with a switch.

He administers everything, but it is not necessary that he be able to write, direct, act, nor compose music in order to help writers, directors, actors, or composers do their best. He knows what good people can do in the important production areas, and presses them to do their best, know-

ing full well when they are doing less than their best. You don't have to be a chicken to judge the quality of an egg, just a lover of eggs.

He co-ordinates the work of many who may never meet one another until the day when their work comes together, making sure that all hands, however far apart in time or place, serve a common purpose.

He is a majority force in the hiring of every artist who works the picture, being guided by the dictionary definition of that party as "one who professes and practices an art in which conception and execution are governed by imagination and taste." This demands selective creativity from the producer.

He is the center to whom everyone turns with their complaints, their questions, their grievances. Diplomacy!

He is the quietest man in the operation because, if he has performed his role well, there's nothing to shout about. Story, management, performance, money . . . all under well-thought-out control. Heaven!

His agenda, or syllabus, is the budget. Therein, awaiting dollar entries, are dozens of items that also define a separate creative function that must be manned, administered, and brought off to the greatest possible perfection. Story, direction, cast, etc., etc., etc.,

Let us allow those items to be my chapter headings.

~~PRODUCTION BUDGET~~

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1
THE STORY

The basis from which all else about a movie springs. As a producer you get stories on your desk by broadcasting your needs to the community—agents, friends who write, strangers who have shown skills in your area of interest, and idle writers who accept your invitation to a screening of the pilot (if you are in television). If you are in funds, you also have a Story Editor who pumps up his friends, reads the appropriate magazines, keeps his library card active, and sends his findings to you. If you have a big studio attachment, there's an expensive staff of readers who sift through everything that's printed against long odds of finding anything worth dramatic adaptation, and they broadcast their findings, good and bad, throughout the studio.

The story will come to you in many forms: novels, short stories, stageplays, screenplays, treatments, thumbnail sketches, verbal pitches across your desk, an idea of your own.

Now you have to judge what's been put before you. You must know exactly what you are looking for. In whichever producer role you find yourself—television or theatrical features—you must narrow your mind to focus on exactly what the ground rules are under which you are operating; develop a precise set of standards that will measure a story's

fit to your needs. There can be fateful repercussions all down the production line if any of those standards are ignored. And you save valuable time if you have guide lines to make yourself quickly discard unsuitable material.

I am speaking of story elements that are solely on the producer's back . . . not the "givens" for any good story . . . such as an appealing theme, good conflicts, attractive lead and subsidiary characters, compelling settings, provocative plot, strong and solid emotional elements; these are basic. The producer, naturally, thinks of these as he reads, but then he must watch for many other things that may slip through everyone else's fingers.

Seven guidelines to the *movie* story:

1. First, and most importantly, keep firmly in mind the peculiar needs of drama which no other form of story-telling must obey: open conflict. Jack Woodford, dead and gone (saying much the same thing as Aeschylus, also dead and gone), put it well in his book, *Plotting*: the curtains do not really open on a drama until the leading character finds someone or something standing in the way of his wishes or drives (it may be a girl who is hard to meet or a bank that is hard to get into); the drama progresses only while that character (our hero) makes successive attempts to overcome that obstacle (the heavy); it only truly grips an audience when something or someone (the personification of something) seems about to thwart the lead character's efforts; and it all comes to a climax time, the Second Act curtain (to use an applicable stage term), when the opponents are in deadly deadlock.

2. Cost. Yes, even Steven Spielberg watches the bucks. This takes some understanding of budget matters which I will take up in Chapter Six.

3. In reading novels and short stories, be wary of the story that charms but will be hard, or impossible, to dramatize because it carries you along on internal struggles and conflicts that resist being brought out into that openness demanded for a dramatic scene. Some novelists are fine story tellers, but their work is hard to adapt to a dramatic form; their novels are about people's insides, the withholding of which from public view is part of their technique. Point: don't invest in rights and a writer's services if dramatization . . . the codeword . . . is a major hurdle to conveying the story's values.

4. Again, about putting money into a novel and into screenwriting costs: it risks waste if the dramatic need for "economy of attention" is neither observed nor needed in the novel. A good novel can be spread out every which way, undigested; but a movie must be compact, even if it is lightweight . . . every scene pertinent to what went before and driving interest onward. Speaking of compaction, read *Doctor Zhivago*, then see the picture. What a masterful, mind-boggling job Robert Bolt had to perform in defying this dictum of mine . . . turn the rambling complexities of the Russian Revolution with a nice little love story running through it into a compelling love story against the background of the Russian Revolution. Avoid this sort of challenge unless you like doing the near-impossible.

5. Try hard to make your story (let's say you're now enthused about one) pass the test of

being universal in its appeal. There are some very specialized theatrical films of narrow or cultural purpose that I would have been proud to have produced, but I would have made sure that the money people knew that they would have a very tough time getting their costs back . . . and probably wouldn't. Successful film, artistically and/or financially, must appeal to a broad segment of the world's public. Yes, cost retrieval now is world-dependent. And that means that universality's only common denominator is human nature itself . . . not just college kids, not just baseball fans, not just old, young, male, female, etc. What sort of story appeals to the human side of most everyone . . . everywhere? I believe that it is one that lies within the bounds of our common experience, that affirms the human condition (be it via laughter or by way of tragedy) and proves, as Faulkner put it, that "Man will prevail."

6. Watch for silk among the shoddy. Often there is a wonderful story, right down your alley, that is wretchedly written. Plow in, but don't hire the author to do the screenplay.

7. In movies, be they for the theater or TV, remember that you are ultimately facing an audience with few preconceptions about your picture other than what the title has suggested, the generally distrusted hints in the ads, and sometimes the star. Sitting on their respective tokuses, they are saying, "What you got? Let's go." They'll be patient for a while. Get started early! Some stories, inherently, take forever to get going.

How does this story search process start up? Where do you begin? Nowadays, very few producers are on salary to a studio or a production organization. Most are independents who develop material out of their own thought processes, their own reading, their agent's hustle . . . with their own money, or money borrowed, or writers wangled into writing a screenplay for no money until the slow process of production starts (in the latter case, by Writers Guild rules, the screenplay belongs to the writer, with only a moral obligation tying him to the producer's plans).

Some producers have "first look" arrangements with a "producing company" entity under which they are obligated to show first to that management team whatever they discover or develop, before taking it elsewhere. For this, they have an inside track for a story development loan and are provided with a secretary, sometimes studio services (like the Story Department), an office, and the status that all that brings.

This area is mainly promotional work . . . in-fighting with agents and production heads . . . during which you are almost bound to lose if you are small, relatively new, or under-financed. The publishers send their hot galleys, and the agents send their new scripts, to the prospect who will pay the most: the major studios . . . then the major independents, then it will filter down to the smaller bankrolls.

It's a power game between the agent who must cement the loyalty of pricey clients with "top dollar" when the time comes, and the top buyers who won't hold their jobs for long if the best properties sail by them.

"Naomi's got a good one in the computer . . ." slyly said.

"When can I see it?" anxiously said.

"Well, y'know, I gotta play fair with Naomi." Butter would melt.

Wounded feelings. "You promised . . ."

"Now you know I like to do business with you. Let me see what I can do . . . couple weeks, outside."

Several elegant social occasions and a few lunches later (if you're up for playing the game this way), this agent hands Ms. Naomi's script to the top ten buyers simultaneously. (With any luck, you are one of them.)

"Sorry, but Naomi insisted." She probably didn't.

This story search is a tough one, for over and above the normal good-sense standards of looking for sound dramatic material, there are the diplomacies mentioned above and other standards peculiar to the picture industry. Such as:

1. Statistical standards. What sort of subject matter is hot now (determined by box-office reports) and, if you find one like it, can you get it into the theaters before the trend runs out? Market trends are studied and studied for firm clues, with much the same result as studying American newspapers with a view to guessing trends in today's Russia.

2. Star hunger. Are you seeking to fill a gap in a bankable star's schedule? What is that player best in? Does he/she know what he/she's best in?

3. A type of historically dependable popular picture. High adventure involving special effects like no one has ever seen before? A romantic comedy with a "boy meets girl" opening unlike any ever seen before? Street-level adventure with a new cause for violence? Racism, drugs, the stock market, Congress . . . something in the social significance department?

4. Suiting your financier or studio boss. They all have their favorite sort of picture, and it is well to know what that leaning is . . . for it will

often overcome statistics, freshness, star appeal.

There's another possibility within the producer function that some pursue successfully and others have no taste nor talent for. And that is originating an idea, finding a writer who responds, and getting it scripted . . . with one's own money (a very questionable practice; don't invest anything but your time in this hazardous business) . . . borrowed money . . . or by inducing the writer to write it for no cash up front and a premium price in prospect if it all works out (really against Writers Guild rules, but, in a practical world, often done.)

In the absence of anything exciting on your desk or a paying contract, staring out the window in search of an idea to start up this process is often well worth it . . . even if you only come up with a gimmick (let's do Captain Nemo as of the year 2010 with a space ship), or think up a springboard (the rascally black sheep in a rich family inherits all the money), or rediscover an old novel (Zola's *L'Argent*), or dig up an old and successful movie (*Greed*, based on the Norris novel *McTeague*, and made in '23 by Von Stroheim). Alice Kahn's funny column offers some classics you can steal from. [See page 8.]

A high-risk fact that feature entrepreneurship must face is that no studio, no organization, *has* to make x-number of pictures per year. Sure, they have to make some, but one like *Home Alone* or *Dances with Wolves* will keep their exhibitors happy for the better part of the year. Then they fill in with a few other in-house productions and negative pickups (pictures other companies without exhibition ties made on the speculation that they would somehow find an exhibitor). Consequently, there is not a consistent demand like there is in television or cable. Ergo: if you find yourself without a job, speculate on finding a story that television or

In one of Alice Kahn's columns, she noted that Eddie Murphy was developing a script based on Dante's *Inferno*. Ms. Kahn proceeded to demonstrate that other scripts could be developed from the same resources. Like:

FAUST	Guy closes merger with the devil. Seems to be surviving at the top. Runs into trouble.
THE SCARLET LETTER	Frustrated housewife has affair with town priest. Starts sartorial trend.
HAMLET	New-age wimp tries to avenge death of dad. Drives girlfriend nuts. Cuts self on poisoned blade. Can't do anything right.
JANE EYRE	Au pair takes job in weird household. Finds the wife in a closet. Has affair with the hubby.
CATCHER IN THE RYE	Disturbed teenager launches anti-graffiti campaign.
PARADISE LOST	Hell-raiser rebels against Big Guy. As a result, couple gets evicted from home.
DON QUIXOTE	Guy attacks alternative energy development.
GREAT GATSBY	Guy overinvests in real estate to impress Jodi Foster lookalike.
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE	Bitchy woman goes after clever guy, ends up with rich guy. Decides that's clever.
ROBINSON CRUSOE	Stuck on a desert island in the days before NEA funding, guy has homoerotic experience.
CRIME AND PUNISHMENT	Student kills neighbor. Gets caught by detective with hemorrhoids. Has religious experience.
ODYSSEY	Bummed out by war, hero sails around the world. Wife sets new Guinness record for fidelity.
OEDIPUS REX	Man Falls for older woman. Freaks when she turns out to be his mother.
LOLITA	Distinguished professor debauches child. Tours America. Kills critic.