

"DMI are always very creative in coming up with ideas..." Katie Phillips, ChildLine

dmi productions

VIDEO / DIGITAL / LIVE

14 TIPS FOR YOUR FIRST FILM

"Next Saturday night, we're sending you back – to the future!"

Of all the millions of people who see that film, how many notice that, during the title sequence, one of the Doc's numerous synchronized clocks shows a representation of silent movie star Harold Lloyd hanging from its hands?

As well as foreshadowing the film's own iconic climax, this tiny in-joke bridges 62 years of comedy movie-making. It refers to the 1923 film 'Safety Last!', which sees Christopher Lloyd's namesake dangling precariously from a clock tower above the streets of Los Angeles... Poor Harold!

Still. Finding out this kind of thing about film is easy – that's why we have Google! What's harder is finding accessible and realistic advice about making your first film... So this month, the Voice of DMI invited four of its chums to answer this question:

"What are the three most important lessons you learned whilst working on your first film?"

First to answer was James Shanks of Dog Face Films, who overcame creative, financial and production setbacks to sell his first feature film, 'Devil's Harvest', in 2003. He tells us a total of five things:

"Since you're probably not paying anyone to help you, I would have to say that number one would be to use ingenious humility. You should always, ALWAYS treat your fellow cast and crew with the utmost respect, courtesy and professionalism. Let's face it, they're either there because they love you, they think it could be a good career move or a bit of both..."

"Humility can go a long way, especially when it comes to 'blagging'. I've managed to get some amazing freebies simply by being honest and polite to the right people: 35mm cameras, helicopters, Land Rovers, and some incredible locations, all free. It doesn't hurt to ask if you ask nicely."

"I've also found that, if you do ask really nicely for something in excess of what you might reasonably hope for, you sometimes get it... And on those occasions when you don't, you often get something very agreeable instead. That's when the humility becomes ingenious! A bottle of booze when you return stuff always helps, too, especially for next time!"

"Second – and it sounds so obvious – prepare as much as you humanly can before shooting. Storyboards are a fantastic tool. I storyboard everything. Not only is it a good and quick way to show everyone exactly what needs to be achieved, it's also a lifesaver when you're against the clock. At times, everyone will be bombarding you with questions about "Which costume do you prefer?", "Am I needed for this?", "Where do we park?" etc..."

"It's so easy to get yourself 'lost' and forget shots; simple shots that could make or break a scene and you'll be banging your head against the wall when you finish and realize they're missing. Plus, it's also motivating to tick the storyboards off when they're in the can – or



the memory card if you prefer. You don't need to be a great artist. Stick men with arrows work fine for me."

"Next, something I learned from 'Devil's Harvest' was, when possible, to shoot some of the best, most exciting stuff first. Then, if you run out of cash before everything is shot you can still cut together a stonking teaser trailer for your website to help raise the rest of your budget, or – better still – pre-sell the film."

"I wish I'd realized that earlier... The first teaser for 'Devil's Harvest' was just a lot of people looking dramatically off camera 'cos that's all we'd shot. We called it the "Head-turning trailer". Later on we managed to shoot the more exciting stuff and made the trailer that eventually sold the film. So get your money shots in as early as possible."

"Similarly, unless the story dictates it, don't try to shoot your film in sequence. It's far easier and often more cost effective to shoot scenes in a sensible set of blocks. If you can afford it, get your hands on a copy of 'Movie Magic Scheduling'; it's a guerilla film-maker's holy-grail! You can factor in location availability, actor availability, time of day, etc. Similar software is available, such as 'Sunfrog', which may not be as good, but is not as hard on your pocket."

"And finally, number five... Always try to exceed people's expectations. You're a genius, after all!"

Happily, even as we thanked Jim for making the time to share these thoughts, Amy Hounsell, who co-wrote and then directed the short film 'Patrick Mann's Daughter', suggested lessons that are fresh in the mind! Here's what Amy discovered...

"One thing I learned is the extent to which working with actors is really a two way thing. You need to make sure they understand what you want out of the scene and direct them with confidence. If you're unsure, they'll sense your uncertainty... At the same time, realize that they may well understand their character better than you do. If they have a suggestion about a line, listen and consider it. If they feel the scene direction is wrong and they want to stand up whilst saying a line, rehearse it and see how it feels..."

"That's not to say that creative control should be taken out of your hands, but you need to be open-minded enough to listen. Whilst shooting 'Patrick Mann's Daughter', I was reluctant to veer from the script, but I learned to rehearse with the actors on set, by being a fly on the wall before the lighting was set and the camera was in their face. I got a lot out of just watching them closely and studying their performances, which helped us work out – together – what felt most natural."

"I'll give you an example: for one scene the lead actor asked me if he could "try something" during the next take, I said yes and he followed the script up until the point at which he shouted at someone to get out of his house... After the actress left, he burst into tears helplessly; his character immediately deepened and the scene became electric... The crew was speechless and it's undoubtedly one of the best parts of the film."





"Just as working with the actors is critical, the casting process is crucial... Never cast on an average performance in the hope that they'll improve on the day. They almost certainly won't. Seeing potential is great, and having a second round of auditions is smart, but if you get to the shoot and you're looking at the performance on the monitor and not believing it, then you – as the director – are equally responsible for that performance. It's tough, but I think you just know when you find the right actor."

"Next, I'd say: really be aware of the sound! You can have the most beautiful, inventive pictures in the world, but if the sound's bad, it lets the whole thing down. I learned to record plenty of wild track. If a car drives past, or a dog barks, do another take for safety. In fact, do another take, with the actors right next to the microphone, just for sound purposes. You won't regret it. ADR (automatic dialogue replacement) is magic, but it's expensive and hard to recreate the exact atmosphere. If I knew this beforehand it would have saved me – and Neil Hoskin, who stepped in to take care of the dubbing mix – a long and frustrating time in post production!"

"Finally, I'll say make a budget – and really stick to it. I took care of the budget and was shocked at how all of the smaller things added up, but it wouldn't have come to so much with a little more forward planning... If it's a small, personal project and you're putting your own money into it, consider making your – trustworthy – Production Manager responsible for spending. A good Production Manager will look at the bigger picture, think logically about the money and allocate it to the right places. And they might even leave a contingency fund for reshoots."

By happy coincidence, Deej from DMI – who has had the good fortune to work with both Jim and Amy on their films – agreed with that and, when he answered the question based on his experiences, initially cited the technique of a legendary director...

"I think filming, in many respects, is like writing the script, or a book. You wouldn't expect to get those right first time; that's why you make several drafts. Woody Allen – love him or loathe him – has made a film a year, every year, since 1969, more or less. If I understand correctly, he budgets with reshoots in mind. He accepts that he will inevitably want to reshoot, in the same way an author might want to add an epilogue, or suddenly envision a whole chapter in another location because it doesn't work where it is..."

"It costs nothing to do that when you're writing, but it's prohibitively expensive in film – unless you budget for it! The trouble is it's counterintuitive; no one's really sitting there planning a budget with the attitude: I'll keep 30% back in case I want to do it differently later. It could save a tremendous amount of heartache if you do, though."

"Bite the bullet, I guess, is my next thought, and start making it... Then carry on making it until it's finished. Keep at it. You can read all about the 'who' and the 'how'; you can endlessly assimilate information and garner ideas... But at some point you need to start, you need to get through it and you need to finish it because if it's not finished, then you've still not made your first film! You learn more by going through the process one time than



you could possibly hope to understand through reading how someone else did it, and the reality of the experience is likely to be extraordinary.”

“I’d also say this: there are a lot of naysayers, doom-mongers and ne’er do wells in the world! And you know what? Every one of them has an opinion on how this, that and the other could, should and would be done if it was their film. And they’re absolutely entitled to an opinion of course...”

“But I think you need to be discerning: listen to the advice of the people you trust and respect, and remember that listening to advice doesn’t always mean taking it! When it’s time to call “cut”, they’re not making the film or taking the risks – you are. So judge things based on your own values and make the film you want to make...I say this because even if what you end up with is absolute rubbish, you’ll still be able to say: I did it.”

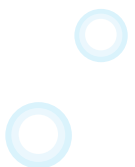
“Finally, I can’t overstate the importance of surrounding yourself with problem solving people who’ll help you keep going. It needs to be fun, it needs to be positive and it needs to be motivating, because there are dozens of reasons to stop trying, dozens of people who won’t stop moaning and hundreds of things that you don’t know you don’t know until you do it and, believe me, having someone say ‘I could’ve told you that would happen’ offers cold comfort indeed!”

And hot on the heels of this cold comfort comes a friendly word or 474 from Mark Anand, who made the short film ‘A Trivial Pursuit’ in 2002. Now, his advice begins with the suggestion that a guerilla film should be shot away from the big smoke, if it’s at all possible...

“This is tough because the budget’s not always there, but I found it really helped that we went away to make ‘A Trivial Pursuit’. There are a couple of reasons for that. First, I find that – no matter what you’re doing or why – a lot of people in cities and towns seem just a bit blasé when a film crew shows up! Obviously, I’m speaking generally. But, in my experience, if you try and get permission to film in a pub or restaurant, say, there’s this sense of “What do I get out of it?” And that’s compounded a hundred times when you want to film somewhere and have to go through an official!”

“It’s not only that people tend to say ‘no’ without seriously considering it. They often don’t show any interest at all if it sounds like even the slightest trouble! People are quick to tell you the rules and slow to tell you the answers. Some actually relish it; the subtext appears to be “I don’t make the rules, but I know them, and I’m going to stick to them come what may”. It’s a firm “don’t-trouble-us-unless-you’ve-got-money-or-George Clooney” kind of no! Again, I’m saying, in general, this is my experience.”

“By contrast, shooting somewhere in which filming is a bit of an event has a totally different feel. People can’t help enough, it seems... If you’ve cast a local child, say, or used a local landmark in the film, the local press tend to be genuinely interested. It’s a question of the relative novelty of it, I guess. The Post Office, landlords, shop owners and locals we met in the remotest parts of Wales, for example, were unbelievably helpful. One fella even gave us the keys to his pub and told us to lock up when we’d finished!”





“Secondly, going away kind of focuses the cast and crew, too. There’s not so much distraction and clock-watching; the emphasis is on filming. We shot ‘A Trivial Pursuit’ in and around this tiny village, Pwhelli – I say village; it’s not, it’s fields with a road through it – and it was, literally, miles to the nearest shops and pub! So people were ready to work early and – this might sound dreadful – happy to keep going when it would ordinarily be knocking-off time!”

“Which leads us to the third thing I learned... To leave enough time! If you’ve prepared thoroughly, as Jim Shanks suggests, then it helps, but it’s hard to put over the degree to which you need to allow for camera set ups, lighting changes, make-up and so on. Don’t cheat yourself out of the time that you deserve to make the best film you can. Either make the script shorter or the schedule longer – after all the effort you put in, you don’t want to make sacrifices because you were over ambitious.”

So there we go. We hope it’s clear that the contributors are people more like you than like Steven Spielberg! They just had the idea that they could make, or help make, a film and then jumped to it. For further reading, the Voice of DMI points you toward ‘The Guerilla Film Maker’s Handbook’, which is a terrific tome. Perhaps, with a copy of that sitting in one hand and this advice ringing in your ears, you’ll feel comfortable enough to take the plunge and go for it!

Let us know how you get on when you do – who knows where it’ll end up? In the words of Back to the Future’s own Emmet “Doc” Brown: “Your future’s whatever you make it... So make it a good one!

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