

CHAPTER 9

WAR STORIES & ADVICE FROM THE TRENCHES



“A film is a boat which is always on the point of sinking—it always tends to break up as you go along and drag you under with it.”

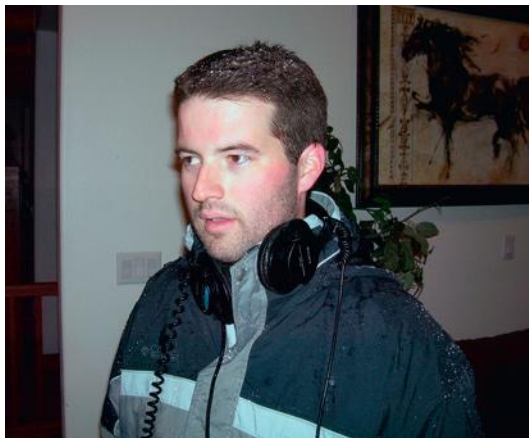
—FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT

Independent filmmaking can be stressful. Typically, you are the one doing everything and trying to make everyone happy. When I make a film, I plan everything very meticulously, but I know from experience that what I’m planning will usually not work. However, this doesn’t mean I shouldn’t plan. I still must do the work and come to the set with a direction. Independent filmmaking is not a mechanical process you can map out on paper; there are too many variables. If one thing doesn’t go as planned, other plans tumble like a house of cards. The key is to know how to deal with problems calmly and be quick on your feet.

Perhaps you can learn from my mistakes or laugh at my follies. Here are some anecdotes from my productions:

WEATHER PROBLEMS

I think Mother Nature hates filmmakers, or maybe just me, or perhaps doesn’t like to work for free. If your production has a lot of exteriors, you need to seriously consider a backup plan if you suspect rain, snow, fog, or



After being caught in a nasty hail storm.



On this day, the blizzard came with no mercy.

overcast skies. Your location and geography determine a lot, but you need to keep up to date on the weather conditions in your area daily.

On GHOST MONTH, we shot entirely in the mountains of Nevada in the cold months of December. During the first half of the shoot we had beautiful weather and shot most of the exteriors, but about half-way through the shoot, I got word a snowstorm was imminent. I decided I had to shoot the rest of the exteriors while I still could, but we were losing light fast, and I could see a dark cloud of doom on the horizon. I didn't have a backup plan and decided to take a chance and shoot anyway. I had to rework the scenes, limit my coverage, and do no more than two takes. On the second take of the last shot, a blizzard blanketed the entire mountain within a matter of minutes. The gear was buried in white powder—most of which we found days later under the ice—and everyone scrambled to get inside where we continued to shoot the rest of the day. I felt a sense of relief that I beat Mother Nature...this time.

MORAL

Don't ignore Mother Nature.



GAS MONEY LEECHES

If you are shooting in town and the cast and crew is local, they pay for their own gas. If you are shooting out of town and they drive, usually as an incentive the production will reimburse gas expenses. It's a good idea to cap the amount and only allocate a reasonable *flat rate* for the duration

of the shoot, or just make it clear that the production doesn't pay for gas. The problem is each person drives a different vehicle. They drive vans, SUVs, and monster trucks and other gas guzzlers, and some people even fill up with the most expensive premium gas they can find—and get a car wash too—then hand the producer the bill!

THE COPS

It's funny how fast cast and crew disappear into dark corners when they see the boys in blue arrive. Los Angeles is one of the worst places to bring out a camera and crew without a permit. It seems no matter how small your crew is or how inconspicuous you are, the cops are always hiding in the corner somewhere looking for filmmakers. I have been shut down many times and almost arrested on one occasion.



A woman (Lunden De Leon) dressed like this, walking down a public street in Los Angeles is bound to draw attention!

On one of my films, we shot a scene on a major street in North Hollywood, complete with a scantily clad vampire stripper prowling the streets looking for fresh meat. I knew it was only a matter of time before the cops would arrive, and they eventually did. They were intimidating and interrogated us with questions. I was 23 at the time, so I told them a story about how I was a broke filmmaker trying to get into USC Film School by spending my life savings on this little horror film. One cop in particular became very interested in the film and wanted to meet the large-breasted actress. Later, he told me his wife was also an actress and he was interested in filmmaking, so I got his phone number and told him I would put his wife in the next one. They even volunteered to do a cameo on the next film.

MORAL

Flat rates always work best.



MORAL

Some cops want to be directors or action stars.



MORAL

Make sure all the money is in your bank or don't go into production.



MONEY PROBLEMS

If you are paying for the film yourself, great. If you have executive producers and you're being cash flowed the production money in pieces, that is cause for alarm. I have worked as a producer for hire and have been cash flowed on almost every production, and let me tell you, it's a nightmare. Nothing is more troublesome than making deals, booking locations and gear, all based on money you haven't received yet. I have been disappointed many times, so my rule now is to never go into production without the entire budget in my bank account. Never take it in payments. As the producer, your reputation is on the line. I take that very seriously and always look out for the people who work for me.

WORKING WITH ANIMALS

I dearly love animals, but when making a low-budget film you must be as practical as possible. As a producer, if I read a script that has any kind of animal, I have the writer remove it. Unless you really need the animal to move the story forward, you should stay away from animals of all kinds on low-budget films.

On one film we had a cockatoo bird in the script, so we hired a professional bird actor. The bird was animated around people and its handler, but it didn't always do what it was told when the camera was rolling. This so-called professional bird tended to go to sleep sporadically, usually mid-scene or after I called action. It was frustrating, expensive, and completely unnecessary. I remember during its close-up, the bird kept falling asleep and wouldn't react properly for the shot, and I spent way too much time trying to get any reaction so it didn't look like a stuffed animal. My assistant director, with his loud English accent, would shout out things like, "Can't we just poke it with a f&*%^\$ stick to make it move?" or "Maybe a firecracker in his arse will jump-start it?" or "Let's pluck a feather and see what happens!" His humor upset the handler, and it was downhill from there. I even had to pay the narcoleptic bird overtime!

MORAL

Animals should stay at home and be loved. They aren't always necessary in low-budget horror films.



WORKING WITH FIRE

Working with fire, or *pyrotechnics*, usually requires a skilled technician, permit, and the fire department on set. It's expensive anytime you have this in your script. If you can, try to do without it. When I was starting out

making movies, I had fire scenes in my script and we almost had several serious accidents, including burning down a location.

MOVING VEHICLES

If you can avoid driving scenes in your script, that is always best for low-budget films. I have almost been killed several times while shooting in a moving car on the open road. I have dangled out of many trucks holding a camera, sat on roofs and hoods at high speeds, all in an effort to get moving car shots.



In *GHOST MONTH*, the opening scene involves driving on public roads in a small minivan. Inside that van, we fit the director of photography, Mike King, sitting on an apple box with a Moviemcam 35mm camera on his shoulder, along with one camera assistant, me directing from a corner, a monitor, the actress, and a driver who was also acting. We drove down a one-lane highway nicknamed “The Widowmaker” because so many people met their fate on that road. Fortunately, I lived to write this book.

ANGRY NEIGHBORS

When shooting on location in the city or suburbs, you may have to deal with irate neighbors. Even if you have a permit, you may still be making too much noise or causing some other kind of disturbance. Sometimes a neighbor will politely come over and tell you what is bothering him or her and ask you to stop, or more commonly, the neighbors just call the cops. For example, we once parked a generator next to a house in Hollywood where we were shooting and ran the heavy cable up a telephone pole and hung it over a street alley and into a window so it would look like telephone

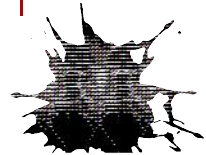
MORAL

Stay away from scenes with fire in your script.



MORAL

Stay away from scenes inside of moving cars.



MORAL

Scout your locations and prescreen the neighborhoods.



wire. Yes, that was very stupid, but a great disguise. After a day of shooting undisturbed, an old man came over and told us the fumes from the generator were bothering him and his wife. Fortunately we moved it with no problems or cops (we had no permit!).

In Los Angeles in particular, a popular scam for locals is to make noise until someone from the production asks them to be quiet. They usually demand money and then stop after they have been paid cash. I've been on productions where neighbors yell on the fence and demand money to be quiet, or mow their lawn for hours, or have a pool party with a radio blasting, or work on a backyard building project, or anything to make noise so you can't shoot sound. We once politely asked some neighbors to halt work for a short period of time while we shoot, and they responded by shooting BB guns from their roof at the crew!

NARCISSISTIC MONSTERS

I once hired an actor to simply be a slow-moving monster in a cloak. On the day of shooting, he arrived with his *fan club* (translation: family members) ready for his film premiere. After we put him through wardrobe and makeup, I explained to him that I wanted the hood pulled completely over his head. He then complained to me that we couldn't see his face. I explained that the scene was not about him and he was simply a background

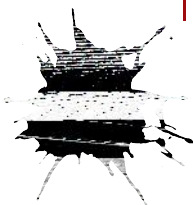


A production assistant who got promoted to monster duties to replace a troublesome actor.

monster. On the first take, I saw he had removed his hood and proceeded to make strange monsterlike gesticulations. I told my assistant director to tell him to pull the hood back over his head, and he did. On the second take, I couldn't believe my eyes. He charged into the scene, front and center, with his hood down and his face contorted in a permanent growl, drooling, and moaning loudly like a George Romero zombie. On the third take, he was gone because I fired him. I then promoted my production assistant to monster duties.

MORAL

Egos have no place on the set.



ALCOHOLIC VAMPIRE

It was the last few hours of a long day. We were shooting at a new location in the morning and we needed to finish the last scene at the current location, no matter what. The scene was scripted as a complicated ritual with magic potions, blood, and mayhem. The actor, who spent hours in the makeup chair getting prosthetics, contact lenses, and vampire teeth applied, decided to get drunk before the scene. I don't know why, and I had no idea at the time. A few minutes before shooting, I went over the blocking with the actor and noticed she was somewhat comatose. Here I was with hours left at this location and I had a half-naked, drunk vampire staring at me. Her speech was slurred, her balance was off-kilter, and I knew she hadn't been drinking blood, but gin and juice. We were in big trouble!

I told everyone to take 10 and then I threw away the script and my plans. I sat there and asked myself: What do drunks like to do? After a few moments, and remembering my Uncle Bob, it hit me. They like to *fight!* I quickly called everyone back and improvised the entire ending of the movie as a fight scene. We shot it all and wrapped on time. I'll never forget that story, so cheers to drunk vampires everywhere...this Bud's for you!

MORAL

*If there's a will,
there's a way. No
matter how bizarre.*



STALKERS

I once had a crazy actor show up at my apartment unannounced at night. I don't know how he knew my address, but I guess that is a stalker's secret. He had an entourage of goofy friends with him and demanded to get prosthetic teeth that he claimed were promised to him by the makeup artist. I had no idea what nonsense he was talking about, but he wouldn't leave. I had to shoo them all away several times. Finally they left, but hours later, they were all hanging out on my stairs outside my apartment building. Email stalking followed.

MORAL

*Never promise
anyone anything that
isn't in writing.*



SNAPPED LEG

During a death scene in my film HELL ASYLUM, actor Tim Muskatell was having his innards ripped out through his mouth. Pleasant, I know. He was standing on a sheet of plastic and shaking profusely, but eventually he



Actress Ali Taylor and an unmasked Chuck Williams on the set of DARKWALKER after an accident during a death scene.

Actor Tim Muskatell staring at his heart moments before he snapped his leg.

MORAL

Make sure you always have insurance!



slipped and dislocated his leg. The paramedics arrived and he was rushed to the hospital, but being a trouper, he shot out the rest of the film with a limp. Sometimes filmmaking can be painful, but film is forever!

NEO-NAZI EXTRAS

MORAL

Be careful whom you hire! It can haunt you.



I once made a film in a remote farming town. We wanted to save money, so we contacted a local casting agency to provide us with locals for a few supporting roles and extra work. The producers on low-budget films don't screen people's backgrounds and usually just take anyone who is interested in helping out for free. However, on this particular film we had some locals who were involved in white supremacist activities (we had no idea at the time). What people do with their lives is their own business, but these people were very controversial in their beliefs. A few years after the film was released, we started seeing reviews, blogs, and web sites talking about these people and attaching their names to our film as if we hired them to support their activities. Our little low-budget film has been unfairly criticized and abused because of them. I certainly don't endorse any of this insanity, but it reflected back on the film and filmmakers in a bad light, thanks to a few local racists.

RATS!



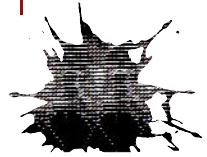
The rats are everywhere!

through the thick plastic bin and ate the food. Everything was contaminated and we had to rebuy all the food.

I once shot at a run-down building in downtown Los Angeles for 8 days. At the end of each day, we were allowed to leave our gear and craft service food in a locked room to save time. All of our food was kept in a sealed plastic container. One day, we came to set and found that an army of voracious rats

MORAL

Never leave anything edible on set.



GIRLFRIENDS

I once had an actress that was the girlfriend of an important money person. We had to stay after a 16-hour day to shoot a special, unrelated scene for her personal demo reel. Everyone on the crew had to stay and do it under quiet duress, and we wasted valuable production time and morale suffered.

MORAL

Never do favors that aren't part of your actual movie.

