

PART 6: PREPRODUCTION

General:

- Define the core premise of your story. Write it down. Don't forget it. This is your true North that will guide you through all the aesthetic and stylistic decisions you make during pre-production.
- Remember, use camera for active storytelling, not just as passive surveillance.
- Remember, everything on screen and on the soundtrack contributes meaning to the story – every detail is an opportunity to enrich your narrative.

Chapter 17 - Exploring the Script

- Use every tool of story analysis to break down your story and its scenes.
- Decide whether you have a dialogue-driven or visually-driven film, and plan camera coverage accordingly.
- Give each scene a functional logline or tag description.
- Note whose point of view audience should sympathize with moment to moment.
- Graph out changing tensions and beats.
- Attune yourself to the subtexts in each scene by writing them up.
- Make yourself aware of what makes a scene into a discrete unit. (Is it defined by time, location, mood, other?)

Chapter 18 - Casting

A huge part of any film's success depends on wise and inspired casting.

When seeking actors:

- Advertise roles clearly.
- Look far and wide for your actors.
- For each role, arrange headshots/bios into three piles: YES, NO, MAYBE. Call only the people in your YES pile.
- You can pre-interview by phone or Skype before giving an audition slot. This is not an audition, but is principally about schedules and availability.

- Describe scheduling, time expectations and compensation realistically.
- Give dates, times, places, and contact details in a thoroughly businesslike way.
- Tell actors what they need to prepare for the audition (e.g. two contrasting monologues learned by heart, or one monologue and a cold reading from the script)
- Try different players in different roles to see what illumination each brings.
- Avoid trying simply to fulfill your expectations, since that can blind you to opportunities.
- Understand that much extra work will be required if you mix trained actors with non-actors. Remarkable performances all round are possible with wise directing.

First audition:

- Schedule auditions with plenty of time for each – try not to create a backlog of actors waiting for their slot.
- Receptionist chats with actors and has them fill out an information form.
- Give actors screenplay sides to look over for cold reading (if necessary).
- See actor's monologues and classify his or her self-image.
- Look for acting with whole body, not just face.
- Listen for power and associations of actor's voice.
- Don't ask yourself if the actor fits the part, but rather, "What sort of character would I get from this actor?"
- Thank actors, and give date by which you'll give the next decision.

Before callback:

- Inform each actor whether or not they are wanted for callback.
 - When you must reject, tell each actor something positive about his or her performance.
 - Avoid casting people for their real-life negative traits.
 - Carefully examine taped rehearsals for actors' characteristics relayed from the screen.
- Your impressions and intuitions here are supremely important.

Callback:

- Combine promising actors in different permutations to test for chemistry.
- Have actors play parts in different ways to assess their capacity for change.
- Test spontaneous creativity with improvisations based on the piece's issues.
- Be attuned to what the actor adds to the character that might not be in the script or even part of your original conception.
- Redirect second version of improv to see how actors handle changes.
- Always videotape callbacks for later reference and to see how actors respond to the presence of the camera.

When deciding cast, consider each actor's:

- Impact.
- Rhythm and movements.
- Patterns of development.
- Quickness of mind.
- Compatibility and chemistry with other cast members.
- Ability for mimicry (accents, character specialties, etc.).
- Capacity for holding on to both new and old instructions.
- Intelligence.
- Temperament.
- Type of mind.
- Commitment to acting and to this particular project.
- Concentration and attention span.
- Consider discussing your reservations with an actor before casting.
- Thank all for taking part and set a date for notification.

Chapter 19 - Acting Fundamentals

The director is both actor's guide and his or her audience. "Nothing human is alien to me"¹

- Watch that each actor knows how to maintain an interior monologue but do not impose

¹ Terence c. 190-159 B.C.

one on anyone who does not need it.

- Learn where each of your cast members carries tension in his or her body.
- Do what is needed to achieve relaxation—in yourself as well as in your cast.
- Watch out for actors losing focus—there is always a reason.
- Make sure everyone has lots of relevant “business” and objectives to accomplish.
- A well-conceived character’s objective has an action, a purpose or objective, and an outcome which leads to the next action.
- Make sure actors personalize by discussing their character’s states in the first person.

Chapter 20 - Directing Actors

When you deal with actors:

- Unless you can afford top talent, learn to become an acting coach.
- Do work with non-actors; their problems will teach you about those less visible in trained actors.
- Create an ensemble with an intense period of development prior to shooting. Actors must *be*, not perform. The camera magnifies truth and falsehood equally.
- Look for actors’ obstacles, and figure out how to remove them.
- If someone is acting in isolation, it’s usually from misguided preparation and fear of failure.
- Do all you can to promote and maintain communion in your cast.
- Feed in new factors to prevent your cast from falling into repetition.
- Work to make all dialogue into verbal action.
- Make sure actors know all the subtexts to their characters’ words and actions.
- Egos are sometimes threatened when actors must play what is contemptible in their character.
- Find the good in the bad character, and the faults in the good.

Chapter 21 - Rehearsals

Rehearsal:

- Actors make character biographies, but do not yet learn lines.
- Director and actors break scene into dramatic beats with clear developmental steps and possible subtext within each.
- Director encourages the search for action and movement at every stage.
- Director meets principal actors singly to discuss their character.
- Expect actors to problem-solve.
- Make notes during each run-through.
- Actors must play the scene, not just the lines.
- Be attuned to valuable suggestions and changes to scenes that result from rehearsals. Remember, rehearsals are an opportunity to re-write and improve the script.

Script Interpretation:

- Make sure screenplay establishes facts and necessary values.
- Determine the givens.
- Where possible, convert conversation into action that relays the narrative non-verbally.
- For each scene, define point of view, subtexts, and characters' hidden pressures.
- Graph dramatic pressure changes for each scene, then string them together to graph out the film as a whole.
- Develop a hierarchy of themes so you know your priorities.
- Remain alert to options and opportunities for character "business" and blocking that can deepen a scene.

Focusing thematic purpose with the players:

- Co-create a full backstory with the cast.
- Seek cast ideas about subtexts for key scenes.
- How do they align with the characters' purposes?

Rehearsal with the book:

- Tackle key scenes first.

- Work on motivations.
- Develop possible actions, “business” and blocking.
- Find and characterize the beats.
- Develop special actions for the beat points.
- Within each dramatic unit, figure out the stages of escalation that lead to the beat.
- Deal only with top level of a scene’s problems at each pass.
- If possible, rehearse in location, or thoroughly brief actors on its particularities.
- Use improv to set level of focus to be matched when you work with the text.
- Now actors can learn their lines!

Rehearsal without the book:

- Each line of dialogue should be a verbal action seeking an effect.
- Film actors have no audience but their director.
- Staying in character comes from staying appropriately busy in mind and body.
- Focus leads to relaxation.
- Characters in action should be indistinguishable from real people coping with real situations.
- When an actor loses focus, find the cause and remove it.
- Watch your actor’s faces and bodies for telltale signs of inappropriate tension.
- Physical actions particular to the player can release authentic emotions.
- Give local, specific, positive goals for actors to reach.
- Characters’ actions should generally seek an effect in other characters.

Reviewing a taped scene:

- Videotape all rehearsals. Take the camera off the tripod and experiment with various framings, movements, and coverage.
- What does the video communicate when viewed silent?
- Is the cast using space and their physical surroundings effectively?
- Are their movements and performance playing well on camera?
- Can you see the characters’ visions, memories, and imaginations at work?

- Does each character constantly pursue their own agendas?

Chapter 22 - Acting Exercises

See chapter for exercise lists and objectives.

All acting exercises using improv and text are available for downloading from this website. See “Miscellaneous” tab.

You will find many more improv exercises listed on the website document than in the book chapter.

Many directors have used improv to further develop specific scenes, however long term, guided improvisation workshops can also be harnessed to create story events, characters, and an entire written screenplay from a basic premise. This organic method of story development multiplies the creative investment actors have in the project and creates a strong bond among the entire ensemble.

Determine if your project might benefit from such a process. Do you have an ensemble willing and able to undergo the rigors of building characters, conflicts and situations from scratch. Do you have a cast that can devote extended time to this process?

Chapter 23 - Planning the Visual Design

Production Design:

- What era and what world do the characters live in?
- What is that world’s palette?
- What is each character’s particular clothes and colors?
- How do the characters contrast with each other, and how is this reflected in costuming?
- What objects, furniture, and surroundings are peculiar to the characters?
- What is the succession of moods in the film, and how is this reflected in lighting and color schemes?
- What is the color progression through the film?

Chapter 24 - Developing the Shooting Script

Production Meetings:

- Hold regular production meetings with each department to discuss the breakdown and interpretation of the script as it pertains to their craft area.
- Discuss issues of the dramatic meaning, tone and POV, and find appropriate and expressive solutions for every scene.
- Stress the importance of safety throughout pre-production. Plan for safety on the set.
- Establish project technical workflow with camera, sound, and editorial departments.

Planning on paper:

- Discuss issues of the dramatic meaning, tone and POV, and find appropriate and expressive camerawork and coverage solutions for every scene.
- Agree the size, framing and movement of each shot with the DP.
- With the DP, draw a floor plan for each sequence showing character movement, scene axes, camera angles, and lighting placements for all set-ups.
- Always consider how the sequence will hold together in the edit – for example, use movement to link angles at action-match cutting points.
- Include plenty of overlap between angles to give yourself latitude in cutting points.
- Decide where the scene will profit from changes between subjective (near axis) and objective (far from axis) camera angles.
- Cover important aspects of a scene from more than one angle.
- Make the location into a live character, not a dead backdrop for action.
- Remember to compose for depth in the frame unless a flat frame is intended.
- Consider blocking as more than simple utilitarian action. Consider how character movement and positioning can reveal their inner worlds and subtext.
- Create a final shooting script (with A.D.) by transposing your coverage decisions (all camera angles and moves for every scene) to the screenplay itself.
- Give every camera a label (scene # and shot letter. e.g. 14-a., 14-b., 14-c., and so on).
- Create storyboards for complex scenes. Stick figures are fine.
- Make up crib cards for each scene with “must not forget” points listed.

Chapter 25 - Line Producing and Logistics

Budgeting:

See the provided budget for line-by-line budgeting details:

- Budget your film, but always remember that budgets are perpetually evolving to accommodate shifts in resources and expenditures. Keep the budget up to date.
- Do not be overly optimistic with your budget – be realistic and always include a contingency percentage.
- Is the technical workflow fully authenticated and budgeted for chosen equipment and postproduction?
- Equipment, supply, facility and location rental lists prepared, justified, and budgeted?
- Are there contingency situations that might depend on having reserve equipment?
- PM should prepare daily cost projection.
- Cost flow reporting is organized?
- All necessary insurances are all arranged and budgeted?
- Cast and crew contracts are ready to issue?

Scheduling:

- Organize shooting schedule by locations first, then day and night scenes. Remember, you will usually have special considerations that must be accommodated.
- Shooting order takes into account key scenes and those that are emotionally demanding?
- Be pessimistic when scheduling; you will never have too much time to shoot.
- Schedule the early part of the schedule for a slower pace.
- Plan contingency alternatives (and cover sets) in case of bad weather, etc.
- Conserve shooting time by bringing food to the unit, not the unit to food
- Supply your cast and crew with professional call sheets including emergency information and a central, reliable phone contact.
- Create a prioritized shot list (be prepared to cut dialogue, actions, or camera set-ups to stay on schedule).
- Scenes tend to get more elaborate and run longer, so set a timing in rehearsal, and keep a watchful eye.

- Prepare cast for changes should exigency so require (it often does).
- Schedule the wrap party!

Location Scouting

- Are all locations scouted?
- Do all locations add narrative or thematic meaning to the film? No neutral locations.
- Do a thorough survey of each location. Check for:
 - Safety and security issues.
 - Electrical supply, circuits, and fuse capacities.
 - Natural light availability (use a compass).
 - Sound issues for recording.
 - Equipment loading and staging availability.
 - Changing rooms and bathrooms.
 - Transportation access.
 - Emergency services.
- Secure all locations permissions and police permits for exteriors.

Getting ready to shoot:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Get clear call sheets to everyone that include directions, public transportation options and contact information.
- Arrangements have been made to shoot production publicity stills?
- For locations, locate nearest toilets, first aid and basic medicine kit, and know where emergency medical facilities are.
- Research nearest point for repairs, spares, and dealers.
- Make sure everyone is clear about their responsibilities.
- Establish crew protocols for dealing with actors or the public.
- Warn inexperienced actors that shooting is slow, and they should bring books, board games, yoga mats, whatever.

Workflow and shooting formats:

- Develop your video workflow before budgeting. This is done in collaboration with your cinematographer and post-production facility.
- Agree on your final “look” and the workflow path that will get you there
- Consider all of the format options based on desired look and available budget.
- Reserve the appropriate gear to achieve the look you are after.
- Schedule test shoots so that you and your cinematographer can develop appropriate LUTs in pre-production. This will allow you to load LUTs into the field monitor and evaluate footage that approximates your final look.
- Be clear about your technical workflow and communicate it to all departments; esp. camera and sound.