

How to launch a career as a DOP

Ian Kerr is an Emmy-award winning Vancouver cinematographer and occasional cinematography instructor. He recently faced a class of cinematography students wanting to know how to launch their careers. So he reached out to three of his former students: Oliver Millar (UBC grad 2011), who shoots music videos, commercials and features (*Rise of Laka*); Chris Mennell (SFU grad 2007) who's credits include *Real Housewives of Vancouver* and *Emergency Room: Life and Death at VGH*; and Nelson Talbot (SFU Grad 2011), who shot the feature *Lawrence and Holloman*. Hoping to glean some wisdom from this trio's fresh experience in the harsh, cold world of film production, he emailed a list of questions to them. Kerr has edited down their insights in the following Q & A.

Q&A by
Ian Kerr

What would you have done differently starting out?

OM: Immediately moved to LA.

CM: I would have really committed to it earlier. I had a lot of doubts about whether it was a career for me, and then I realized I just had to go for it. I would have approached my work with a little more humility, and understood that my work wasn't necessarily worth the amount I thought it was early on. I got a little bitter and angry right out of school, I thought everyone was out to screw me, then I realized that it's my job to communicate my limits and the things I wanted and needed. They (PMs, Producers) are just doing their jobs and they're just after value like you are.

NT: I wish that I had taken more gigs. Most directors pick a DOP and stay with him for many of their shoots so if you miss that chance you may never work with them again.

How did you pay the bills in the first year after graduating?

NT: I didn't really. I was poor and lived at home. Might as well accept the fact that if you want to DOP right

after school the gigs are 99% unpaid.

OM: I edited a lot and did still-photography during school. By graduation my DPing was modestly paying bills.

CM: I was in a fortunate position that I had a family with a large orchard in the BC interior. I was able to fill any gaps in production work (and there were a lot of gaps) with very flexible employers (parents). It helped to be really flexible about the jobs I took. I've seen some people be very rigid about what they wanted to do out of school, and I'm not sure if that's the best route when you are starting out.

What rate would you expect a graduating student with some experience to charge for low-end camerawork (eg. corporate DSLR videos)

NT: I always went on a per project basis. My rate was always dependant on the budget of the show. Anywhere from gas money to a couple hundred bucks a day I would say is normal.

OM: \$400/ day? With a DSLR? Any less than that and it's better business to work as an AC to gain experience.

CM: I think if depending on your experience level, you could charge \$300 - 400/day as an operator, and \$400-\$500/day as a DP, hopefully with gear rental on top.

How did you approach jobs that didn't offer pay?

NT: I own a Red so I would always make sure I negotiated a camera rate if there was no DP day rate. Also be sure that the free gigs have quality scripts that will get into festivals and be shown publicly. The last thing you want is to not get paid and then end up with a pile of shit film. That is no good to you.

OM: Very selectively after I made a few mistakes. I learned that DPs are very valuable and shouldn't give away work to a production that isn't 100% serious. Be careful of "spec" jobs, they can be damaging to your reputation I think, despite being good practice. At least that's how I feel....

CM: This is a hard question. I started out working a lot for free. It's easy to find work that way, but it can ruin your soul. I know some people who won't work for free, and they had very few gigs. I did come to a point where I didn't do it any more, on a professional level anyway. My rule now is if it's very short term and for friends, I will work for free. Volunteer shows are very, very hard to maintain, from a mental perspective. So don't let yourself get bitter and jaded.

How have you approached purchasing gear both from a financial and career-building point of view?

NT: As an owner of a RED Epic package worth 125k, I can say this without a doubt. As a young DOP if you buy a camera you will not make any money off it. Everyone nowadays has a camera, you will never get your rate. If you buy a camera consider it an investment in building your career, your work will look better because you always shoot with a high-end camera.

OM: I only bought gear that I want to personally use. The rental business isn't for me. I took out a line of credit to get an Epic-M and it didn't help me get jobs as much as it helped me make a better income (if only to pay off said credit).

CM: Buying gear is a strange thing. I think when you are working in the reality/doc world, it's about timing. If a show is willing to rent your gear, and if you are in a position high enough up the food chain to make those requests. If you aren't in that position it's a lot harder to justify buying anything substantial. The advice I always received was that tripods, lenses, filters and lights can be good purchases, as this technology doesn't really change that quickly.

From the Pros continued on page 29

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Legal Briefs continued from page 7

will provide a producer little comfort if the distributor has a limited ability to make sales or is unwilling to properly account to the producer for sales made, requiring the producer to conduct an audit and potentially litigate, which is an undesirable situation to fall into, especially on a low budget film. Consulting with legal counsel to ensure that the most beneficial terms possible can be achieved is always

recommended so the film in question can reach a wide audience and the filmmakers can be rewarded for their efforts.

Doran Chandler is a lawyer with the entertainment law boutique Chandler Fogden, providing legal services in relation to all aspects of the entertainment industry, including in relation to film and television financing and production, intellectual property issues, production services and music. ■

Indie Scene continued from page 9

funding you were hoping to receive doesn't materialize. Producers are left scrambling to meet the budget shortfall which often results in having to lower the production budget."

Devine and Eisses also encountered production issues.

"We went into production during pilot season and so there was absolutely no crew to be found," they explain. "We managed by asking some crew members to do several jobs; some key crew gave up lucrative day calls to work on the project; and we

partnered with local film schools to get students out to help."

And that is the true spirit of indie filmmaking – making your movie against all odds and having enough passion for your film that others catch that spirit and want to be part of it.

Let's hope that the year continues strong and can match the success of last year. So far so good.

Paul Armstrong is a film producer who also produces The Celluloid Social Club and the Crazy8s Film Event. ■

From the Pros continued from page 11

What's the first thing a cinematography-minded film grad should do after graduation?

NT: Shoot. And never get an ego, work on other DOP's sets as gaffer, lamp op, camera, grip etc.

OM: Move to LA :) After graduation you need to decide where you want to get established. Find the circle of directors and producers you want to work with and go there. You need to put in a lot of time building relationships with rental houses and crews, so make sure those first few years of legwork are a worthwhile investment.

CM: I would just get out there and try to work at whatever you can in the

camera department. Always keep in mind that any experience on a production can help you. My brief time as a boom operator gave me an appreciation for the sound department. I understand their concerns. The more people you know will result in more work opportunities. Beyond that you can form some genuine friendships. That was an important realization for me, "networking" (a term I hate) is as simple as going for beers with your camera buddies, or meeting up with mentors and catching up. Operating has also been an essential step for me, I'm not sure in the doc/reality world if you could even get to DP without a good chunk of time spent operating. All these steps are very important, don't rush it. ■

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