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How Not to Make a Short Film

by Erik Sean McGiven on Feb 25, 2009

As I read "How Not to Make a Short Film" I felt more and more cheated, not by the book but by my film school. Why hadn't my instructors taught me this stuff? This is a book every film student, every filmmaker must read before writing, producing, or directing a short film. It's a must-have resource that guides one through filmmaking's precarious decisions and shows how to avoid the many errors in judgment that mark mediocre films. Written by Roberta Marie Monroe, an award winning filmmaker and former Sundance Film Festival short film programmer, Roberta brings to the table a wealth of knowledge about every phase, from conception to production to distribution.

For filmmakers film festivals are the major outlets and they have become the judge, jury, and sometimes the executioner when it comes to evaluating the worth of a short film. By knowing what not to do you can greatly increase one's chances of having your work being seen and appreciated. In this respect, the book walks you through the minefield of mistakes that aspiring filmmakers and seasoned pros make, so that you don't have to make them yourself. In addition, the book features interviews with many of today's most talented writers, producers, and directors, as well as provocative stories from Roberta's own short film experiences.

The book is laid out in a most pragmatic fashion and follows the steps one would normally take in producing a short film. The first chapter on script story talks about keeping it fresh and lists a multitude of story lines to avoid, story lines that have become mundane through overuse. When programmers say, "Been there, seen it," you lose them as well as your audience. This chapter I found most fascinating as it allows us inside the programmer's mind and the primary selection criteria, namely what's the story and why should I watch it? This chapter also covers the evaluation of your script such as hiring a consultant and the pros and cons of getting feedback from friends.

Another chapter discusses film length and how it should match the story. DP Geary McLeod comments, "Every single frame has to work, it has to move the story forward. 'Economical' is what short filmmakers need to remind themselves." The book goes on to point out that it's also easier to find a slot for an 8—12 minute film versus a 28-minute opus. Meredith Kadlec adds, "Don't fall into the trap of trying to prove how MUCH you can do, rather [show] how WELL you can do it."

"How Not to..." covers a wide array of filmmaking considerations, from picking a producer, knowing their duties, to budgeting, plus ways to save money and raise funds. The chapter on Crewing Up is most relevant to first-time filmmakers. It talks about the synergy of a film crew and how to guide their efforts and deal with the ever changing dynamics. This chapter describes the key positions, people that you need to consult before you shoot along with topics that need to be addressed. The chapter reiterates the need for harmonious collaboration and the fact that you cannot do it all by yourself.

All these considerations may seem daunting at first but if they are not addressed, your film suffers as a result. After reading this book, I was overwhelmed by the multitude of responsibilities. But then I remembered Roberta's mantra that you need to have good people around you and this book provides direction on how to select your support team.

Casting is another area where the author suggests seeking assistance. She goes through the process of finding and hiring a casting director along with the reasons for doing so. One would assume that casting directors would avoid short films but many look on it as a way to provide work and exposure for their clients, especially those that have breakout potential. Advice on auditions, rehearsals and creating a safe space for your actors is also offered in this chapter. Actor Chase Gilbertson talks about how neophyte directors sometimes drift off track. "Obviously if I'm doing your film the story was good enough in the first place but now instead of simply telling a good story you're trying to make a Hollywood blockbuster. Yeah you've got a lot of cool toys but ultimately what is the end result? What happened to the story?"

The chapter on production discusses numerous precautions relating to the on-set experience along with creative solutions to some of these problems. One of the best was using New York Calls to outfox an innocuous business owner. Other problem areas covered include on-set etiquette and attitude, insurance and permits along with meals and craft services. What was especially important is Roberta's advice to have a good time, be prepared, and enjoy the magical moment of being a filmmaker.

Post is the love/hate relationship of filmmaking. All mixed together is the footage you love followed by the worst shots, lighting, performance, and blocking of your life. Roberta repeats several times, "This is normal." She also suggests reading Walter Murch's book "In the Blink of an Eye" to gain some extraordinary insights into the editing process. Knowledge of how editing works is paramount to your success on set, she says, for then you'll know which shots are most important to telling your story. The chapter also hits on how technology has made filmmaking less disciplined, i.e., shooting more footage, cutting faster, and ending up with more versions while wasting labor.

Roberta sights an MPAA report saying that only 2% of all features-length films actually secure a theatrical or DVD release. From that one might surmise that in the short film world distribution could be even more difficult. Orly Ravid of New American Vision points out that distribution process starts before you make your film. You need a sense of who is the audience, conceive the film's appeal in advance and have compelling marketing illustrations or photography that sells the film. Orly also advises to budget funds for marketing and outreach. This chapter discusses numerous channels for distribution, but states that your short may also have value as a TV pilot or when expanded into a feature. Orly's priceless questionnaire "Is Your Film Distribution Ready?" covers the most problematic and overlooked areas. Academy qualification information is also covered in this chapter. Roberta makes finding short distributors easy by posting an up-to-date list of U.S. and international companies on her website.

The chapter on the Sundance Film Festival provides an illuminating background as well as effective submission strategies. The submission do's and don't list by Sundance programming manager Adam Montgomery will help move you film further up the selection ladder. The section on publicity and marketing tells what you need, basically a robust web site, a stellar collection of still photos and a simple business card directing people to your site. In addition, posting a trailer will greatly enhance your ranking on Google and give viewers a better glimpse of your work.

The rest of the book is allotted to sample budgets, top short filmmaker clichés, and an extensive resource guide. This guide includes listings of short friendly film festivals, short film distributors, blogs, community outreach organizations, databases, plus broadcast and online television companies.

"How Not to Make a Short Film – Secrets from a Sundance Programmer" vividly depicts the enormous task that filmmaking entails. Yet it shows how by avoiding the many pitfalls one can save time and money and create a short film that remains memorable in the minds of programmers and audiences. Well written and timely, I strongly recommend this book as an addition to every filmmaker's resource library.