

# RUNNING A MARATHON AT A SPURTER'S PACE

A CINEMATOGRAPHER'S TIPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING THE WORLD OF LOW-BUDGET FEATURES



Photos by Jimmy Cellian

BY **MATTHEW IRVING**

I have always been envious of the cinematographers who were lucky enough to have legendary DPs show them the ropes. I myself never had the opportunity to be on set with a Conrad Hall or a John Toll, where I could quietly observe them in action and turn to them for advice. Instead, I started from scratch. But I've learned important lessons that continue to shape my career more than 20 feature films later. In the spirit of such mentorship, I offer these 10 tips for being a desirable (and re-hirable) cinematographer to young DPs as they dive into the moviemaking pool.

## 1 DEVELOP A WINNING ON-SET PERSONALITY.

Think of it as ABCD: Affability, Boldness, Collaboration and Decisiveness. With these qualities come the respect of your crew, the ability to work well with your director and producers and the distinct possibility that your work will stand out in an overcrowded sea of product.

**AFFABILITY** • Surprisingly, the simple

act of just being nice will set you apart from the pack. DPs have a tough job, especially when we're just starting out. It can be frustrating—and even a little scary—to be under so much pressure while spending long hours in close proximity with the many odd personalities and inflated egos that pop up on a film set. But chill out. Everyone is working toward a common cause, and even if someone is being openly antagonistic, you'd be surprised at how disarming a calm, affable attitude can be.

**BOLDNESS** • "Safe" thinking breeds mediocrity, so be bold. My first feature (the arthouse flick *One*) probably *did* have too many shots that peered through doorways and divided up the frame in odd ways. But it was a choice that the director and I made. We went all the way... and it put me on the map. Have the courage of your convictions.

**COLLABORATION** • This is the foundation of our chosen art form, so be open to it. As a DP your chief collaboration will be with the director, but be open to input from your own team, including electricians, grips and camera assistants. Taking a good suggestion from a

grip day-player doesn't make you a weak DP, it empowers your crew and makes the film stronger. Make sure every member of your team knows that he or she is an active participant and that all suggestions are welcome.

## "SAFE THINKING BREEDS MEDIOCRITY, SO BE BOLD."

**DECISIVENESS** • Nothing makes a crew more restless (or a day more useless) than waffling. While you should encourage input from your crew, make sure they understand that the final call is yours. Once you've made a decision, follow through. If it turns out that you've made a mistake and have to try something else, be just as decisive in that new course of action. No one expects you to always be right, but they *do* expect you to be decisive.

**2 PLAN AHEAD!** During principal photography, time is your most precious, albeit limited, resource. Low-budget features typically have no more than 24 shooting days, and once

that time is up, there's no going back. At such a breakneck pace, it often seems like you're running a marathon at a sprinter's pace, so it's essential to know the twists and turns that lie ahead *before* you begin.

**SPEND TIME WITH THE DIRECTOR** • Invest as much time as possible with the director before you start shooting. When production finally begins, the last things a director needs to worry about are the cameras and lighting. By freeing up the director's time and allowing him or her to deal with other concerns, you've helped improve the efficiency of the entire production.

Early on in pre-production, during the very first week I'm on board, I always sit down with the director and go through the script page by page, in a linear fashion, so that I can get a sense of the "completed movie" that's in his or her head. This is the time to define and develop the movie's visual arc: How will the camera movement, color palette, lens selection and choice of format enhance the main character's journey? What are the coverage philosophies for each scene? Does the director *really* want to shoot that five-page chunk in a single, fluid shot? Clear up any questions ahead of time so that you can plan accordingly.

**SHOT LIST** • The time you spend with the director during pre-production can also be used to generate a shot list. This can be as simple as a list of shot types (i.e. "Close-up of Mary" or "Wide shot of John and Joe") or as in-depth as my preferred method, which I call the "written storyboard." I try to be as specific as possible with my descriptions so that no story beat is left out.

Still, you shouldn't limit yourself—or your talent—by holding too rigidly to your shot list. Think of it as a road map in that it keeps you on course while still allowing you the freedom and confidence to go off-road when necessary (like when you're hit by sudden inspiration or

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the actors start improvising).

Once shooting begins, things are going to change, but the shot list will still be your guide to the basic rules of the scene. If you're filming a handheld scene, a montage where all the dolly moves are left to right or if you're trying not to reveal a particular character's face until a crucial story beat, it will all be noted in the shot list (even if the director decides to move the scene from the kitchen to the rooftop).

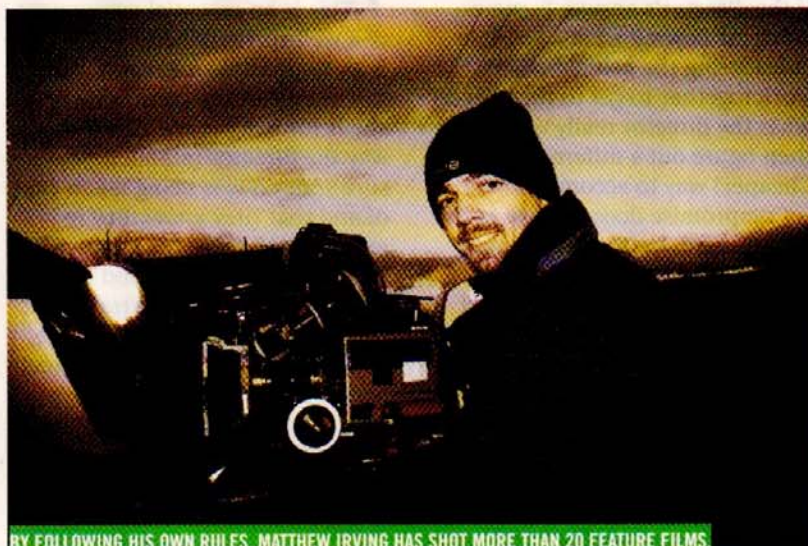
Drawn storyboards are great, too—and absolutely crucial when filming action sequences—but I find that the precise nature of a drawing can be more limiting once you're actually on set.

**LOCATION SCOUTING** • Go on all the initial location scouts that you can. Use a sun finder app (like SunFinder) or an old-fashioned compass and figure out exactly which way the sun tracks through the sky. Come back at various times of day if you have to, as you cannot be too meticulous at this stage of the game. Location scouting is your opportunity to reduce (or at least become aware of) potential challenges when it comes time to shoot, like noise from nearby train

tracks. Never hesitate to voice your concerns about a particular location, even if it is visually exactly what the director wants. The tiniest doubt could come back to haunt you later on, when it's too late to change plans.

**SCHEDULING** • On low-budget features, being an integral part of the scheduling process is just as important as knowing how to light a scene. I've been through many caffeine-fueled all-nighters with assistant directors, during which we worked out more efficient shooting schedules. They know their jobs well, but you're probably the only one who has been in the shot-listing sessions with the director. Your intimate knowledge of what sort of coverage the director wants for each scene will help immensely as the AD determines each day's shooting order. He or she might be resistant to your input at first, but should soon see your involvement as an asset (as long as you're affable about it; refer back to tip #1).

**3 KEEP EVERYONE IN THE LOOP.** Shot lists, storyboards, overhead diagrams... any materials that you generate in planning out the shoot



BY FOLLOWING HIS OWN RULES, MATTHEW IRVING HAS SHOT MORE THAN 20 FEATURE FILMS.

Photos by Jeffrey Calton



should be sent to every appropriate department unless the director or producer specifically requests otherwise. If you and the director want to do a 360-degree Steadicam shot in the driveway, make sure the right people know about it so that there are no trailers or trucks parked in your frame.

Keeping the first AD in the loop is extremely important, since he or she will make sure the correct departments are informed of any need-to-know logistics (though you should follow up personally, just to be sure). Be smart, though, and don't over-communicate information that you know will be outdated in a day or two, as doing so can create confusion. For example, I don't widely disseminate a copy of the shot list until it has reached the final "shooting draft" stage. I'll usually leak earlier drafts to the director, production designer, first AD and any appropriate producers, but everyone else can wait until it has been finalized.

**4 THINK BIG, BUT EMBRACE COMPROMISE.** Encourage the director to think big, even on small projects, then work hard to keep the "soul" of that big thinking intact. For me, this occurs during the pre-planning and shot-listing stage. I ask the director what he or she would want the finished film to look if we had \$100 million to make it. If the director's answer is something far beyond what's possible considering the actual budget, work together to get to the root of what the director really wants and then figure out a different (read: Cheaper) way to accomplish that.

Compromise doesn't have to be a dirty word. In fact, it can end up being for the best. Just look at *Jaws*; Steven Spielberg wanted the shark to be more visible than it could realistically be, considering the constantly-malfunctioning electronic props with which they were working. Necessity led to restraint, which in turn led to one of history's most enduring movie monsters.

**5 LIGHT QUICKLY.** This seems obvious, but it all goes back to the idea of planning ahead—this time on a daily basis. At the start of each day, walk your "keys" (camera operator, first AC, gaffer and key grip) through the entire day's shoot. Fifteen minutes spent making sure everyone is on the same page with how the day will play out will save hours of setup time later, as it will allow your crew to start thinking about how they can best manage their own department's resources. At the end of the day, meet with your keys again to discuss how you can streamline the next day's schedule.

**6 PROTECT YOUR DIRECTOR.** Part of your job is to keep some of the stress away from the director. Early on in your career, you'll probably be working with a lot of first-timers who have enough on their plates without worrying about whether the circular dolly track is going to fit in your location. The director should only be told about a problem when there's a creative decision to be made, and even then, he or she should only be presented with solutions and choices. This type of stress insulation goes a long way toward making you a desirable candidate for that director's next feature.

**7 KEEP UP CREW MORALE.** This is an essential component of a well-run production. The DP is as responsible for maintaining the morale of the crew as he or she is for making the film look the way the director intended. Make sure your crew is being taken care of and that they know they're an integral part of the creative process. Gaffers, grips and camera assistants will go the extra mile if they feel a project is worthwhile or to help a DP to whom they feel loyal. When the crew's positive input and energy is channeled effectively, the project can rise to a new level.

**8 DON'T LET YOURSELF BE ABUSED.** When it comes to working hours and turnaround, every production—even non-union ones—should adhere to union standards. Simply put, it's a safety issue, and safety knows no budgetary restrictions. It's fine to work back-to-back 22-hour days with a seven-hour turnaround on a short film gig that lasts only two days. (We've all done it when we were starting out.) But when you stretch those grueling hours over the weeks it takes to make a feature, people start falling asleep at the wheel—literally and figuratively—and *that* is unacceptable.

**9 DETERMINE THE WORKFLOW EARLY ON, AND KEEP IN TOUCH WITH THE POST-PRODUCTION FACILITY.** Before you capture a single frame, make sure you and your digital imaging technician/data wrangler/digital loader/whomever have communicated fully with the editor and post-production technicians. There are many options available in today's digital world, and each one comes with its own unique set of challenges. If you don't nail down the workflow ahead of time, your footage could suffer the consequences of having to be converted to some unforeseen format, which could result in image artifacts or noise.

**10 MAINTAIN YOUR GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIRECTOR AND PRODUCERS DURING AND AFTER POST-PRODUCTION.** Unfortunately, it's still considered a privilege—not an inalienable right—for the DP to be intimately involved with the final color grading of a film. Continue your good relationship with the director and producers, and you'll be called in when the time comes (though it helps to get that written into your contract, just to be sure). There are many variables that can affect the image during post, and something ugly is bound to happen if you don't keep your eye on the ball. Once you've been included in the process, have a

little patience. Oftentimes the director and producers have been staring at washed-out or over-bright dailies for three to seven months, and as much as it may pain *you*, they've gotten used to it. When you try to adjust the footage to add the color and richness that you discussed with the director during pre-production, you may experience some doubt or resistance. Remember to stay firm and do the job you were hired for in the first place.

Finally, an important “bonus” tip that trumps all others: **DON'T BE AFRAID TO FIGHT THE BATTLES YOU NEED TO FIGHT.**

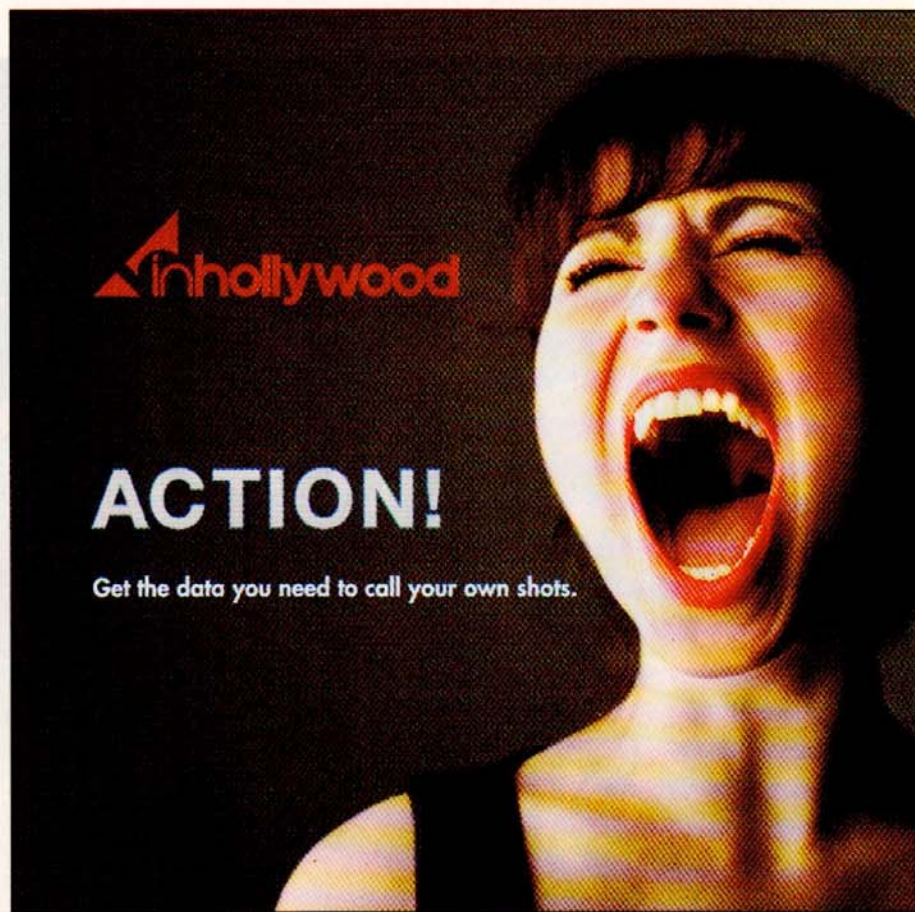
When all else fails, be a perfectionist. Your name is on the film, and you're not doing yourself (or the people who hired you) any favors by being a pushover. The best way to be a team player is to stay firm when necessary in order to protect the integrity of the project you've been hired to create.

If you've built a solid working relationship by using the tips above, the respect you will have earned from the producers and director means that even a “fight” about some aspect of the film shouldn't be much of a fight at all. They will trust you and your judgment. By being decisive, collaborative, bold and affable, you will have made yourself an indispensable part of the team, no matter what challenges arise.

**MM**

Matthew Irving has been the cinematographer on an eclectic slate of 22 feature films, including *Waitress* and *Waiting... Other feature credits include the indie rave film (and Independent Spirit Award nominee) *Groove*, Mario Van Peebles' blues-based road movie *Redemption Road* and the horror film *Quarantine 2: Terminal*.*

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