Fix It in Production: A 1st AD Tells You What Mistakes to Avoid Shooting an Independent Film

Jim McQuaid / www.turnipfilms.com

I've been writing, shooting and producing short films, about twenty of them, since 1999. I've also DP'd several shorts and a zombie feature. I enjoy assisting other filmmakers in North Carolina, where I live, and I've worked as AD over the last five years on both short- and long-form projects. The projects I've ADed have had budgets ranging from the tiny to the small, all well under $100,000. More about my work at Turnip Films.

This article describes what I've learned as AD about how to run a shoot. Everyone I've worked with did their best and turned out some great stuff. The problems discussed in this article are not a reflection on the quality of films produced. Screwed-up productions and exhausting shoots sometimes produce great stuff. The same folks with less hassle and a bit more time will probably also produce great stuff — maybe even greater *and* be willing to work with you again.

We've all heard — and groaned at — the words, "fix it in post." Some things really can or should be fixed in post, of course, but the biggest challenges in production are in pre-production planning. Planning is the missing ingredient in many indie productions. Perhaps the biggest difference between a professional and an amateur production is not the budget but the quality of the planning.

Time: the critical resource

When money is in short supply (almost always) and goodwill is a key resource being spent, running a production smoothly is even more important. You're not paying people enough to waste their time.

As an AD, I am the clock-watcher. It's crazy how many things just bleed time out of your schedule, leaving less and less quality time for the actual performance and shooting. Many of the items discussed in this document fall into that category. But, as just one example, if lunch is 20 minutes late every day in a nine-day shoot, you can easily lose the equivalent of a complete morning of shooting.

Lost time becomes the "death of a thousand cuts." Ten minutes here, ten minutes there, and suddenly it's a fourteen-hour day instead of a twelve-hour day. Cumulative fatigue slows everyone down in a vicious circle.

Before we get on set…
I'd have to say that some filmmakers simply don't learn. They rely on enthusiasm and wishful thinking rather than experience when deciding schedule questions. Then problems in production feel like surprises, rather than inevitable results of bad planning. Let's not confuse passion for filmmaking with a belief that we can ignore time, money and fatigue day after day. Even in a well-planned production schedule, there's plenty of room for fatigue and challenges. It doesn't matter if the director is still ready to press on if the cast and crew are exhausted.

Collaboration
Filmmaking is a collaborative medium. There are many forms of people working together, and a lot of them are called "collaboration" without being especially collaborative. So what do I mean about this in the context of film production?

Well, if the director and the producer and the DP (at least) are not working together in planning, on-set collaboration will become much too time-consuming.

You can work with someone without collaborating in any real sense. The director asks the DP to light the scene, and the DP does his or her general lighting job and you roll the scene. Unless these people have worked together a long time, this is really "delegation." Even a few words exchanged can turn this into collaboration. The director might say, "This should feel cold and harsh." And the DP presents a version of the set, lit to fit his idea of what that meant. This is a good thing. But I believe in involving the DP pretty deeply in the prep of how we are going to tell the story, not just how we are going to light the scene.

Time and pre-production
If the film production is budgeted for, say, $50,000, I think that five to ten percent of that amount should be spent to enable pre-production meetings about the vision for the project. These meetings should include the director, the writer, the principal actors and the DP. It is in the best interests of every producer to foster such a meeting. Communication across this set of folks is critical for a smooth flow during production and for successfully realizing the vision of the project.

Devote two-thirds of the time to the question of vision and meaning, walking through the entire script and the remaining third on logistic planning.

Teamwork in planning
Most schedule issues in productions arise from lack of communication between these key players.

Camera department. How long will it take to light this? Do they have a lighting plan prior to walking on set on the day of shooting?

Director. The director develops a mental shot list. But if the shot list is being developed as the day is happening, it's fundamentally private and then news for everyone else. Written shot lists are great, even when they are incomplete.

Producer. Have all the logistics been fully planned for? Is the schedule made for the budget or for reality? Given that the two diverge naturally, it's an important question.

AD. Is the AD guesstimating the whole schedule when call sheets are created? Red flag! The AD may very well have great insight and experience on the subject of how long things take, but working in a vacuum on this is a bad idea.

Writer on Set: "Here's what I meant"
The writer is often on set in indie film work, maybe in the person of the director or DP, but sometimes just as the writer. If the writer feels compelled at any time to explain the meaning of a scene, a line, or a word in the script, it represents a problem that implies one of several different possibilities.

- First, the script is not that good and the writer's intent does not come through without the writer standing beside the script and explaining what it means.
- Second, the script is more or less fine but the director does not understand how to read a script.
- Third, the script is fine and the director may know how to read a script, but has not actually had enough prep time to read it in enough detail to pick up the subtext.

The core work of the director, of course, with the support of the producer and (ideally) the involvement of the DP, is to fully understand every nuance in the text of the script. If this happens, then there should be no on-set issues with the script. If it doesn't happen, anything is possible!

However, it's fair game if the writer is the one who reminds everyone that the thing in Scene XX has to line up visually or emotionally with that other thing in Scene YY to be shot a week later.

Locations: "halfway" planned
We talked to the owner of the restaurant and he was fine with us coming in to shoot during the day on the days he opens late. His manager would be there to help us. He signed the location paperwork.

All set, right? Maybe not. Here's some things that get overlooked in quick planning that can become mission-critical on the day:

1. Have we even spoken to the actual manager who will be there while we shoot? What does he or she think about this?
2. Have we briefly all concerned on the full procedure of filming, in detail?
3. Did we discuss moving the furniture?
4. Did we discuss turning off the ice machine? Or the HVAC?
5. Did we explain that we would ask for total silence repeatedly during the time we are in the location? Will the manager on duty need to be doing some specific (noisy) work?
6. Did we explain that some of our crew might appear frantic and possibly not as polite as we would like? Is that a problem? (Maybe not if it's mentioned up front)
7. Did we discuss the parking?
8. Did we ask about using the loading dock that looks like it would be convenient (but hasn't been opened in four years, it turns out)?
9. Did we explore where to leave (or take with us) trash?
10. What exactly is the "out" time? Is it, "we are totally loaded out and everything is put back in place?" or is it "done shooting and starting a 75-minute period of packing and cleaning up?"
11. Or is it possible to run later if needed? Does the manager who will be on duty think that's okay? (Who is paying him for that time?)

All of these questions and related thoughts are geared toward managing the expectations of the location owner and the filmmakers. If they do not actually match, there will be problems.

Locations: Logo Police
The issue of avoiding brand logos is a tricky legal question I won't attempt to address. The production challenge is that the initial survey of any location has to address this issue. You cannot show up the day of shooting and decide you need to cover, hide or change dozens (or hundreds) of logos. (Graffiti that's X-rated is a close second.)

If this matters to the production, it needs to be addressed prior to the day of shooting. Either pick a different location, plan how to shoot around this or notify set dressing to prep the work necessary to “cleanse” the set and adjust the schedule accordingly.

Locations: Scouting without sound
Often the producer, director and DP will scout possible or definite locations. Less frequently, a sound professional is included. I’ve been in a number of locations where the look of the location was great, but the location was an audio nightmare: a highway 50 feet away with significant truck traffic, restaurants with intense refrigeration units close to the focal point of the scene. ADR is hard to schedule and a difficult and tricky thing to get right without killing a performance. Picking locations without thinking about audio can create huge headaches.

Storyboard audio
When you plan how to shoot a film, or even just one scene, as a director, you imagine who is speaking, where they are in relation to everyone else and so on. This is exactly the point at which you should be able to say, out loud, to a sound professional: I will need *four* channels of wireless for this scene. Two channels is typical of ENG work, but four or more is often needed for film work. You can and should know this before you ever get on set. and it should become part of the requirements in your search for a sound person.

ON SET

Feeding the production: Craft service
Feeding the cast and crew is important. The more demanding the schedule, the more important this element of planning becomes. Planning how to keep everybody nourished and happy must not be an after thought.

American food preferences range from the sublime to the ridiculous, often within the same person, which makes this a bit harder, but also offers an opportunity, namely, the opportunity to actually ask people and plan for what folks need, want and are not allergic to.

Craft service — the stuff that should be available throughout the day — should be food that encourages sharp attention and high energy. My personal thought is that lots of bags of chips don’t fit this requirement.

Let’s start with drinks. Water is the obvious choice. But plan on enough water to get everyone through the day, with attention to the environment you are shooting in. Hot days and high humidity demand more water than cooler locations. Having enough ice to cool drinks throughout the shooting day is important. Sometimes a cold drink in the tenth hour of shooting is more critical than at the beginning of the day.

Coffee is the other reliable source of caffeine. A classic mistake is to bring enough coffee for the coffee drinkers to have one cup each at the beginning of the day but no more. The coffee drinkers I know tend to keep drinking the stuff all day. Do not deprive them of their caffeine.

Craft services (and meal service) are areas where productions can easily generate a lot of waste. For the “greenest” set provide a source of drinking water and a refillable water bottle for everyone who doesn’t bring their own.

If you have to use purchased water bottles have a PA write a number on the cap of every bottle as the case is opened. I must have set down a water bottle somewhere on set a hundred times and been unable to find my own water bottle among the six partially drunk bottles sitting there, so I started a new one; having any kind of mark or number on every bottle minimizes this problem.

Of course, craft services are limited by the general requirement that everything be finger food. Protein bars, non-messy fruit (grapes are great), veggies like carrot sticks and crackers fit this. Apples and oranges are great but hard to eat in a hurry and can be messy. Plenty of napkins but also wet wipes are very useful. Don’t forget the trash bags.

Feeding the production: No free lunch

Meals! Funny how humans require nourishment. Especially when they are working long hours, dealing with stressful situations and carrying stuff. (Not to mention the requirements of union contracts!)

In my experience, the productions that have a person dedicated to feeding the cast and crew are the best organized. This person doesn’t have to be a cook, although that’s a great solution. They just have to be creative and focused on the task. They should probably also be good at finding their way around.

A dedicated meal provider will be best able to provide appropriate food at the right time and on a known budget. A last-minute decision to use a nearby restaurant is guaranteed to be costly. That is, costly not only in terms of dollars per person spent, but costly in terms of the time required. Everyone has to go from the set to the restaurant and back. It’s actually a company move, with all the time and energy costs of doing that. And, in some situations, leaving the set creates a security problem whose solution (someone stays there and you bring them carry-out) further adds time to getting back to work.

The timing of meals is also far easier to control with a dedicated craft and meals coordinator. The key requirement is that food be available at, or a bit

before, the promised time and that it be in a form that can sit for 30 minutes. You should plan a meal break no later than six hours after the first call time. But you want flexibility; if the current setup just needs a couple more takes, then finish that. (Ask the crew by calling "grace," however, and don't abuse this.) And if the right time to break comes up 25 minutes early, having the meal available early is a huge schedule benefit. Knowing exactly who to call, who is responsible for providing the meal, makes managing the schedule far easier. Relying on the PA who the camera department just sent to Best Buy is not a great plan.

There is one unwritten rule: pizza may be served exactly *once* in any shoot.

Your lunch / my lunch
Of course, if any cast or crew members have special food requirements (vegetarian, gluten-free), you need to be aware and meet them. But I'm talking about the problem created when key cast or crew turn up their nose at the lunch menu and head out to find a better solution in the neighborhood. If you're shooting in a very isolated location, it can't happen. But in almost any other place, it can.

There are two problems here actually. First, if talent leaves the set, they are unlikely to return from lunch when everyone else does and you lose time. Second, this same talent is unhappy with how you are treating them. This is almost always bad, of course, even if the talent in question is being totally a diva.
The solution: fix it in planning. Get talent on board with the meal plan, just in a quick informal way. Better to have one or two special meals available, to keep on schedule, than to risk all of this.

Company moves
Company moves are inevitable and expensive. Obviously, loading everything back into vehicles, finding the new location and unloading and setting up again is extremely time-consuming.

An aside
One rule of indie cinema screenplays is to write a script with a set of characters who are in a single location for most of the film. Consider *Your Sister's Sister* as one classic indie approach or, if you think that was a limited, small movie-only kind of idea, consider *Ex Machina*, nominated for best screenplay at the Oscars and BAFTA.

My experience suggests that you can do one major company move in a day and remain productive. Of course, this depends on the nature of the film and the nature of the moves. If a film is being shot in a single neighborhood, multiple moves "across the street" may not be as costly, especially if there is

some kind of “base camp” maintained throughout the production in those locations.

But if the move is to a different place, it is time-consuming. Even with a small crew (e.g. three-to-five people) and cast (two to four?) it is likely to take a minimum of 45 minutes plus the actual travel time. Optimistic assumptions might be based on travel time during scouting, but the move might actually happen during evening rush hour. Directions or GPS/Google might work great or sometimes not so great. Telling everyone about that one-way street might be really important to a smooth move. Moves are a time sink waiting to happen!

And the fact is that not everyone arrives at the same time. The production stops when the first key person begins packing up and resumes when the last key person finishes unloading. If you schedule one hour for the move and it takes two hours, you have blown your schedule.

Multiple takes
This is not a problem per se; it’s obviously necessary and typical. However, in a production under pressure, running behind, the cost of each additional take grows. It’s a tough decision but the fundamental job of a director is to recognize when enough is enough, instead of doing “too much” and then planning to locate “enough” in post.

“We are going to roll one for *safety*”
The more I see this, the more I question it. I’m not sure what we are trying to be “safe” from? What is the danger?

First of all, if we actually *do* have all the takes, all the performance variations we want, then the “safety” is superfluous from a story-telling standpoint. And it we don’t have what we need, this is definitely *not* “one for safety.”

If the focus was questionable, then we can roll one for better focus. If the performance was off, then we will speak to the talent.

Are we afraid that the entire structure of digital media, the camera’s file system, etc. might become radically untrustworthy at any moment? Shooting on film, it’s possible that film stock could have been tainted/exposed or even messed up in processing. An additional take on additional feet of film does provide a small degree of safety against those problems. What is the digital equivalent?

Here’s the real danger. If we always roll “one for safety” during a long day of shooting, we may be wasting 30 minutes out of a nameless fear. And equally important, we are expending the energy of both talent and cast, slowly wearing them down a little bit more for what may be no good reason.

Coverage
Coverage — the complete set of different shots needed to successfully tell the story of the scene — is another tricky issue. Of course, it is customary and necessary to shoot a variety of angles/setups/framing for many scenes. However, in a production under pressure (all of them, in other words), the director's job includes knowing what coverage is needed and what coverage is not needed. Always shooting a basic set of shots for any scene is a default approach, but not necessarily the most efficient (or artistically sound) approach.
I think of the coverage issue as representative of a set of fundamental artistic concerns or failures.

Coverage: lack of vision
If the director/production has no real vision, the result is typically to shoot a lot of coverage, doing all of the obvious, "textbook" shots in the belief that this will enable a great outcome. It may enable a great outcome but only if the vision discovered in post lies within the obvious, textbook boundaries. I've worked on long-form projects that had all the wide, medium, single shots but never shot an ECU for any scene.

Coverage: Lack of Planning/Storyboards
Storyboards are not some ultimate salvation in my opinion, but they are useful. In fact, preparing storyboards is possibly more useful than following them. (It's like attending that lecture course in college and taking notes. The act of taking the notes is how you learned the material.)

The outcome of having at least some vision, but doing no storyboard or shot list preparation, is that the vision is realized in fits and starts, incompletely and potentially with many contradictions. Again, creating storyboards and sharing them, discussing them with key players is a form of collaboration in planning and will be a big help for collaboration on set.

Coverage: Lack of style
This is a more subtle issue. A lot of commercial projects (okay, not the big-ticket glamorous ones) are simply shot without much thought to style. The only issue is to light the widget well and have the narrator speak clearly and get an insert so you can cut away. I don't think a film should be shot this way, personally, but it's a much larger discussion.

Coverage: Vision and style
I believe that if you have a clear vision of the story, of the scene, and you much developed some aspect of personal style, you will be able to shoot only the coverage needed to tell the story the way you need to tell it.

This will always take more time before production starts, but is likely to take less time once production is underway. I think an extended conversation with the writer and/or with the text itself is necessary. Substantial communication with key actors is extremely valuable for this purpose.

SEQUENCE AND CALENDAR

The toughest scene logistically

Always try to shoot the hardest-to-shoot scene first. This could be the scene with the most extras. It could be the scene with the long, complicated Steadicam move in it. It could be the scene with a lot of complex blocking. It should not be the most dramatically important, in the sense of the big break-up or the lover's quarrel — that's usually big for actors but not for the crew. Save that for when everyone is warmed up and comfortable.

Pickup days — part of the plan

It's not always possible, but it's always a good idea. If our shoot is scheduled for two weeks in June, say, let's get everyone to block one or two days on their calendar in July for (hopefully unneeded) reshoots. Travel and talent from far away make this difficult but even if only some cast (and crew!!) are available on the reshoot days, it can be a life-saver.

All problems are leadership problems

In other words, if the location gets upset because they did not understand what was actually going to happen, it is not their fault. It's your fault for not ensuring that they would be happy with the actual production plan.

The leader (producer or director typically) owns the problems. Rain is only a problem if you planned that rain would never happen. The leader who always complains about how others messed up has failed.

All that matters is what enables your cast and crew to do their best job to tell a worthwhile story. Enabling that, however, is a complex and challenging job, a job that requires planning.

Jim McQuaid has been making short films since 1999 (not counting those crazy 8mm ones in high school). He does just enough commercial video production (mostly training and medical) to support his habit. He enjoys helping other local indie filmmakers, often as AD. He believes that "it's all about the story." Turnip is based in Durham, North Carolina.