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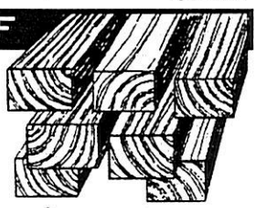
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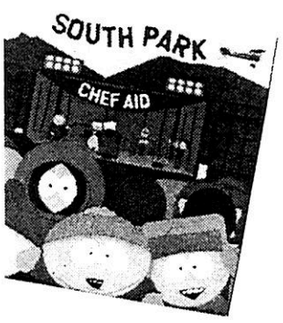

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ON THE SCENE

Film-making in 17 Takes:

How to make a film in Regina without anyone telling you what to do

by Gerald Saul

A translation of our corporate message:
SCN

You pitch your idea to us.
We give you help.
You shoot something.
We show it on our SCN Broadcast Network.
Good people get jobs.
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We like gaffers!

SaskPower congratulates the Saskatchewan Film & Video Showcase '98!

SaskPower

Ten years ago, the idea of being a film-maker in Saskatchewan seemed ludicrous. Now, big stars come here and the media are filled with our successes. Yet the rise of the local film industry and the introduction of large productions has only enabled a very few people to guide a project in which lavish sets are built for big name stars to perform under 100,000 watts of light. The rest of us continue to struggle away on small projects just like we always have. In 17 takes, here's how:

Take 1

Most of us know that a film requires two things, an idea and the money to turn that idea into images. Without a track record, however, money can be nearly impossible to acquire. The trick is to build the creativity and knowledge to reduce the amount of money needed, often so significantly that the process becomes affordable.

Take 2

The University of Regina has an excellent film department. While undeniably small, the only thing it really lacks is reputation. Long hours in collaborative film school projects creates a bond between students that frequently last for years after graduation.

Take 3

The university route is understandably not for everybody. It costs a lot, both in time and money. What you don't learn from film school you should be able to learn at the university library. The more you know, the greater the chance you have of accomplishing your goal.

Take 4

Film crews, where you get paid to learn rather than the opposite, are a good place to be. To get there, apply. Send letters to production companies listed in the phone book to the attention of the production manager. List other skills like electrical or carpentry. If you do not hear back from them, continue to make contact. They all need people from time to time, but are often inclined to hire people whose faces are familiar. Make yours known.

Take 5

Watch movies you like over and over again. Notice how the composition and the editing of the pictures leads you from one scene to the other. Copy them down onto paper using crude drawings. This will come in handy later when you begin to shoot your own picture.

If your inclination is towards drama, consider joining a theatre group or taking acting workshops. Learning the

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art of performance is also important when it comes to directing others. You can also meet people who might be interested in appearing in your first shoe-string production.

Take 6

If documentary is in your line, learn everything you can. You can't go wrong by knowing too much. Your first production won't dazzle with big budget glitz, so hold your audience with interesting content and an imaginative presentation. Be daring and say things that established producers don't dare say. You have nothing to lose.

Take 7

Begin to write everything down as a script and pass it around. With a community as small as ours, I've never heard of ideas being stolen. Actor and crew prospects are more likely to assist without pay if they like your script and have been part of your creative process. Listen to everyone but use your best judgment. Look at the work objectively and be prepared to admit that some of your favourite ideas may not fit and must be abandoned.

Take 8

By now, you have a clear idea of what you want to make, what it should look like and what you need to accomplish it. Get your hands on a camera and get people to work in front of and behind that camera.

Take 9

Deciding between shooting on film or on video will be difficult. Film is superior in most ways to video, but the costs are higher. If film is your choice, your first stop should be the Saskatchewan Filmpool. They have remarkable resources and are very open to newcomers. Although it is not a training facility (they expect you to know why you are there and what you want), you will meet others also struggling away with less than a million dollars (sometimes less than a hundred).

Take 10

Don't make your decision to work with video solely on financial grounds. Before you proceed, look at programs like the one you want to make that have been shot with video. This will prepare you before you pour all your time in that direction.

Take 11

Start! Shoot something; the whole process will be easier once you begin. Even if you can only afford to shoot one roll of film or borrow a video camera for one day, do it. Make every image count. If it is good, then perhaps you can use it to lever money to continue. If you share your images with your crew, they might stick with you to the bitter end. Then all you need are some rentals and some film or tape. If it is sellable, approach SaskFilm. If it is purely artistic, apply to the Saskatchewan Arts Board, the Canada Council and the Filmpool for support. Rumour has it that Cable Regina is developing support for small scale dramatic shoots. Don't be discouraged if the answers come back "no". Money is always tight. Do what you can to keep going.

Take 12

The less money you have, the more hats you need to wear. When your camera operator takes off to a 'real job', take on the camera duties yourself.

Take 13

Don't be ashamed of where you are. All the effort you put toward making Saskatchewan look like some other place will be energy taken away from making your film communicate and entertain. If you see nothing worthwhile here, then you shouldn't be here. If you are really as creative as you think you are, then find ways to make local locations interesting.

Take 14

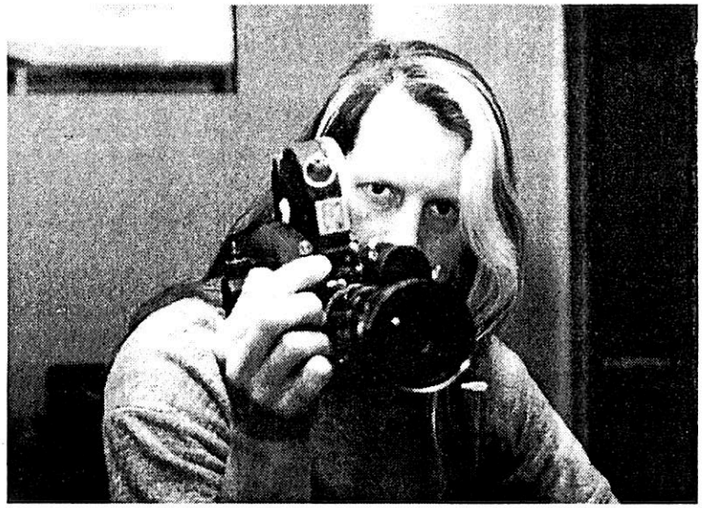
Don't be obsessed with state-of-the-art equipment. Learn to make the best of your tools, whatever they are. If all you have is a beat up old video camera or a super-8 camera from a garage sale, figure out how to use that tool. Efforts spent trying to be what you are not are efforts wasted.

Take 15

Get release forms and establish contracts, even between friends. Small scale productions lead people to believe they will never be seen beyond your own living room. This can be to your advantage in that people might not be intimidated by the process. Feelings may quickly change when their images appear before an audience.

Take 16

Far too often overlooked when beginning a large film venture is personality. If you do not have strong inter-personal skills, attach yourself to someone who does. This will pay off over and over again when you want to use a location or a piece of music or product. With your first film, you can't offer much in public exposure. But that doesn't mean you can't get free use of properties. Being a "glamorous" film-maker is half the fight; saying the right things can close the deal. Don't be afraid to ask for things.



Take 17

In the end, whatever you make, do it with intelligence and passion. These factors will redeem the film of its technical and financial short comings. A good idea can be helped with a larger budget. A bad idea will not. Make a good first movie and the second will come naturally.

That's a wrap!

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