Action Film Making Master Class

By

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS AN ACTION MOVIE?

An action movie is a creation that has a lot of different elements, and it's up to the executive producer, the producer and the director (see the "Cast" list appendix) to bring them all together into a cohesive whole called a MOVIE.

How well that is done in many ways determines the success of the film. Here are the different elements, and a short description of them all. We will go into further detail later in the book.

The Story : Every movie starts with a story, and many times the story makes or breaks the movie. There have been many successful movies that have been made out of basically the same story, just updated and changed a little bit (location, characters, etc.). As Steven King says, "the story's the thing," and for movies that is extremely true. Movies, after all, are about telling a story, and if the story is not compelling, most people will not watch it. A great story will often help a bad movie, while a bad story will tend to sabotage an otherwise great movie. There have been a lot of great stories that have become bad movies, and that just reinforces the credo that nothing guarantees success.

The Screenplay is the element of the movie that provides a blue print for the entire film. The screenplay is the actual written story, incorporating the plot, the dialogue, the physical action and the underlying themes. The screenplay is the foundation upon which a movie is built, and without a strong foundation, the movie doesn't stand much of a chance. The person who writes the screenplay is the screenwriter , often just called the writer, and writers are easily the most under-appreciated and misunderstood people in the entire process of movie-making (of course, I'm a little prejudiced).

The Production Team is the team of professionals that come together to actually produce the movie. Consisting of such

diverse elements as the producer, the director, the assistant directors, the make-up artists, set decorators and even craft services, the production team can be as many as 200 or more people. Depending on the size of the budget of the picture, the production team can be a skeleton crew (just enough people to get by and make sure everything is covered) or a complete compliment, with full departments working on their own particular responsibilities for the picture. The different departments will be covered in a separate section, with complete listings of who does what, how they do it and why.

The Talent: this is anyone who makes their money working in front of the camera. That ranges from the lead actors to the extras who make up the crowds in huge arena fight scenes. In making movies, I've run up against all talent ranges, and without the talent, movies could not be made (though with the advances in animation and virtual reality, designers are coming closer to making it possible to make movies without live talent). Talent can be found anywhere, not just in Hollywood or New York--everyone has to start from somewhere, and if you look at the origins of some of the greatest actors and actresses in the history of movies and you'll see that the majority come from small towns scattered throughout the country, and they just went to Hollywood to fulfill their dreams (or their destiny?).

The Fight Direct" is the person responsible for setting up the fight scenes in an action movie. This person is not normally the regular director of the film, because the director is usually quite skilled in the use of the camera, the elements of drama, comedy and suspense as well as using the actors to get the best possible performance, while the fight director, also known as the fight choreograph" , is solely responsible for setting up the fights.

The Fights: probably one of the most important elements of an action movie, particularly a martial arts action movie. Without great fights, a movie is just mediocre. With great fights, a movie can be spectacular. Take "Enter the Dragon," for example. It's a great movie, but take away those amazing fight scenes with Bruce Lee, and you've got a pretty ho-hum, run of the mill (though very well produced and well made) action picture.

The Production: this section of the book will focus on what actually happens during the production of a movie. Everyone thinks that making movies is very glamorous and loads of fun, but that's rarely true (unfortunately). Once you get over the fact that you are making a movie, and the excitement of that wears off fairly quickly, the actual mechanics of making a movie are pretty dull--a lot like watching a glass of water, or watching the grass grow. Many times we have gotten extras who are excited at 8 am about being in a movie, but by the lunch break, they are so bored of having to stand around and wait for so long, they disappear. That is a major problem with crowd scenes--you usually end up losing your extras because they find out how incredibly dull it is to watch people make a movie.

It's a little more fun when you are actually part of the process, but the hours are very difficult and the work extremely demanding, because you have to be on top of everything at all times. It might be 3 a.m. and you are right in the middle of an important fight scene, and if you succumb to being tired and decide to finish up quickly and get home to sleep, you'll regret it when you are sitting in "dailies" watching the footage, and it stinks. You can't go back and reshoot without incurring an incredible expense, and to live with bad footage is a curse, so you have to make sure you get everything the way you want it, first time around. And, that's tough to remember over the course of an 80 day shoot.

The Realities of the film business are hard to stomach, sometimes. But, you still have to hear about them, even if you aren't going to like them. It's my responsibility to tell you, and you can skip this section if you want to.

Before a movie is produced, a Budget is created, and I'll show you an example of a budget for a low budget movie. It's quite an education to find out just what things cost, and what perks certain stars demand (and get). The cost of making movies is continually going up, and I'll break down the way the money is spent, and show ways that money can be saved.

Although we all want to make good entertainment, the Mon" is definitely a consideration. I'll let you know how much each and every position pays (from starting to being the best)--so you know going in what to expect.

Lastly, we've got to talk about how to Break " . Everyone wants to do it, and it's important that no matter what part of movie making you want to be in, you do it right. Professional presentations (e.g. head shots, credit reels, resumes, sample scripts, etc.) often make the difference between a "wanna be" and a "will be" (sort of a like a "do bee" and a "don't bee" from Romper Room), as well as a commitment to making sure you have what it takes. You might be a great competitor and have a great look, but if you don't take the time and make the effort to become an trained actor, you're not going to go as far as you can.

So, let's get going

CHAPTER 2

IDEAS AND CREATION

Ideas are the life blood of the movie industry, and sometimes ideas generated by people outside the industry are better because they have original ideas. People in movies tend to create movies that are like other movies--recycled, if you will.

People who are in the business tend to think of ideas in terms of other movies: like "'Aliens' meets 'Enter the Dragon',” that sort of thing.

Anyone can have an original idea, no matter who you are and where you live. Just because you are a house painter in Podunk, Idaho, doesn't mean you couldn't come up with a great idea and turn the movie industry on its ear. It can be done--because a great idea is an equalizer.

IDEA GENERATION:

How do people come up with great ideas? Do they just suddenly wake up in the middle of the night with the entire plot line of "Terminator" fully formed? Well, sometimes, but that's pretty rare. The way an idea is formulated is probably as unique as the ideas themselves: what works for me might not work for you, and vice versa. There are some common denominators to the idea generation process, however.

Based on experience:

Many stories, and not just true stories, mind you, are based on the experiences of the writer, or the experiences of people to whom the writer has talked. Obviously, biographies and life stories are based on experiences, but most fiction is somewhere and somehow based on something the writer has experienced: it might be just one character, or it might be the whole story.

To give you an example, in my movie "American Shaolin,” I was able to draw on a bunch of my own experiences in Mainland China and other countries in Asia while writing the script. I didn't actually base the character of Drew Carson on myself, or any one single person, but his character at the beginning was an amalgam of all the "Ugly Americans" I have run into on my travels (and my experiences as a tour guide in China).

On all my martial arts movies, I've been able to draw on my knowledge and experiences in the martial arts. One of the lines

of dialogue used in "American Shaolin" was a lift from a story Keith Vitali told me once. When Keith was fighting competitively, he would routinely carry along two uniforms, one for the eliminations and one for the finals. The meaning was that he was so sure he would get into the finals he prepared a separate uniform for it. Well, I like the confidence this suggests, and I incorporated that line into the character of Trevor Gottitall, cocky to a fault, who answers one of the competitors question of "What's the second uniform for?" with "The Finals!"

Based on history:

Many movies are based on actual historical incidents, and are then elaborated or expanded by fictionalized characters. Some examples: "

Based on research and interviews:

Other stories are the result of intensive research and interviews. For example, movies like "Memphis Belle,”

One of the reasons I continue to write for magazines like LAW ENFORCEMENT TECHNOLOGY, MASS TRANSIT, S.W.A.T. and others is because I get to talk to some many different people from so many walks of life, and this all goes into the hopper--and who knows what will come out!

Based on current events:

Some examples are "JFK,” "All the President's Men,” "Silkwood,” "Reversal of Fortune,” and so on.

Based on other stories:

Sequels are one example of this kind of story, while many low-budget movies fall into the trap of stealing material from other movies. For example, one of Don Wilson's recent movies, "Futurekick" appears to be rip-off of "Terminator". Sometimes that's OK, when you adapt a mainstream story to a martial arts movie, but it's usually preferable (and more challenging) to be

original and unique. Unfortunately, especially in the low budget arena, most people want something that will succeed, and, unfortunately, that often means doing a story that is an awful lot like other successful movies.

That's why, when you walk into the local video store, you see so many obviously bogus rip offs of other movies--the thinking is that even if it's a bad movie, it will still get a certain percentage of the blockbuster's audience, which should be enough to make a little bit of money.

There is a real danger when you base your story on another movie--you can get a very diluted viewpoint, and a movie that has no grounding in reality. One of the problems with some recent movies is that they are based on other movies, and the emotions and situations don't ring true. They are already based on a fantasy, so they are too fantastical.

For example, if you base your characters on movie characters, you are two steps away from reality. If you are doing a police story, the best thing to do would be to do your own research and interviews, basing your characters on real police officers, not ones you've seen in the movies or on TV.

If the source you are using got things wrong, mixed up even the smallest bit, everything will be magnified in your story.

Based on nothing--total imagination:

This is the rare type of story that is so unique and different that it really isn't based on anything else. Some examples would be "Star Wars," "Raiders of the Lost Ark," "E.T." and others.

MY MOVIES AND THEIR BEGINNINGS:

"No Retreat No Surrender":

The story was created by Ng See Yu" and Corey Yu" , and I basically filled it out. It was their idea to have the ghost of Bruce Lee come back to teach the lead character, Jason Stillwell (played by Kurt McKinney), martial arts. I had been a Bruce Lee

fanatic when I started training in the martial arts, so I used that experience to develop the character of Jason. I particularly enjoyed writing and filming the scenes where Jason visits Bruce L" 's grave, because I had always wanted to go there, and got the chance through the movie.

"No Retreat No Surrender 2: Raging Thunder”:

Once again, the story was developed by Ng See Yuen, and he turned it over to me to flesh it out and make it a coherent movie. I liked the initial story I came up with, because it explored an "innocent" (as played by Loren Avedon) coming into Thailand and being out of his element. That is a theme that works especially well in action movies: someone who is not trained nor seems capable to handle something, but does it anyway and becomes a better person.

Unfortunately, during the making of the movie things got changed around, and the movie that was produced did not follow the script that I wrote. Instead of an "innocent,” Avedon's character somehow was transformed into a wise-cracking, man of the world, and the story really didn't work. This is the only movie I am not happy with, and I don't even put the poster from the movie up on my wall.

"No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers”:

I came up with a story to suit the talents of Keith Vita" and Loren Avedon, who we had already signed for the movie. I think both actors are great, and they looked enough alike to pass for brothers. So, I came up with an action story that was basically a frame for a deeper story, a story about two brothers that just didn't get along--until they had to work together to find their father's killer.

Using my relationship with my own brother as a model, I created two brothers that loved each other but just couldn't get along (In fact, the tag line I came up with for this movie was: "These

brothers don't get along...they get even!"). There was jealousy involved, as well as a feeling from the younger brother that the older one thought he was a failure. I really enjoyed working on that script, and I think the story is one of my best, because it's something that people can relate to.

"The King of the Kickboxers”:

We were looking for a story for our next movie, and we knew that we wanted to do something with kickboxing, because it was the hot genre movie. Instead of doing a rip off of "Kickboxer" or "Bloodsport,” which had already been done several times over, I developed this story about a New York city undercover cop who is loaned out to pose as a fighter for "snuff films" in Thailand. I still think it's a great story, and it was fun filming the "film within a film" storyline.

It also was a great framing device for the fights--and we had some great stuff in that movie. One of the best fight scenes I've ever seen was in "King,” where Keith Cooke (a great screen fighter!) faces off against 5 guys outside his home. He does some things in that scene that are incredible, and they make quite an impact!

The idea for the snuff movie came from a news story I saw in the local Lancaster newspaper--it mentioned a group of Americans trying to buy teenagers for use in a snuff video. These guys had only placed a couple of ads, and passed the word around, and the FBI caught them (thank goodness!), but it planted the seed in my brain.

At the same time, a writing student of mine showed me some newspaper clippings about women in Asia and their experiences being tricked into moving to Asia. They were told they would become movie stars and high fashion models, when in reality they were going to be in X-rated films, or worse, forced into

prostitution. This developed into the sub plot involving the woman, Molly, and her position in Thailand.

I also made a trip to Thailand before I began writing the script. I feel it is important, if possible, to visit the location where the story is going to take place--nothing beats first hand knowledge of an area, its culture and its "feel". if you were going to write about the Amish in Lancaster County, PA (like in "Witness"), it would be very difficult to "get it right" without visiting the Amish country and walking the roads, talking to the people and seeing how it is, up close and personal.

That doesn't mean that if you are writing a story about murder that you actually have to go out and kill someone, but your story would probably benefit from talking to convicted killers, or doing as much research as you can into celebrated murder cases.

"American Shaolin":

I had written a story about 7 years before called "The 18th Lohan," about an American teenager who went to the Shaolin Temple to train and had a tough time fitting in. Seasonal was looking to do a story in Mainland China , and I pitched this idea to Ng See Yuen. He loved it, and I went to work changing and updating the story for "American Shaolin". I've always been interested in the Shaolin temp" , so I'd already done quite a bit of research on the Shaolin Temple: history, legends, stories, pictures, methods of training, etc., and I got the chance to apply all of that in "American Shaolin". This is the script and the movie that I am most proud of, because it tells a good, wholesome story that young people especially can get something out of.

I try to infuse my stories and scripts with lessons to be learned through the martial arts, and "American Shaolin" is

chock full of them. Hopefully people can not only enjoy the movies, but learn something at the same time. That's been my goal.

CONCEPTS:

There are basically two kinds of concepts: HIGH and LOW.

High concept stories are stories that are simple and universal, and can usually be explained in one paragraph or less (the best high concept stories can be described in one sentence!). These stories don't call for much deep thinking, and most action movies fall into this category. Some examples:

Low concept movies are harder to pigeonhole, and cannot be explained or described in one paragraph. They are normally relationship movies (like "Driving Miss Daisy," "Steel Magnolias," etc.

Most action movies, and probably 99% of all martial arts movies, are high concept. These aren't movies for deep thinkers. In many cases, the story becomes just a time killer between fights. I remember when we were selling "No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers" at the Milan Film Festival, a Japanese customer was viewing a videocassette of the film because he was interested in buying it for his territory.

I came into the room to see if he had any questions, and I found him fast-forwarding through the dramatic scenes to get to the action scenes. Needless to say, I kicking him out of the office and we didn't sell him "Blood Brothers". I was particularly proud of that story, and felt it was worth watching.

Paradigm:

Most stories fit a paradigm or standard model: the movie paradigm goes like this:

START--PLOT POINT #1--PLOT POINT #2--CLIMAX--DENOUEMENT

The majority of movies have a definite beginning and an end, and usually the end is a few twist and turns away from the

beginning. If a movie is too linear and easy to follow, it gets boring. So, about 10 minutes into the movie, along comes PLOT POINT #1, which serves to spin the story in another direction. After that plot point, the movie goes along telling its story, and the audience is settling into it, enjoying the story and thinking they know where it's going. Then comes PLOT POINT #2, which spins the plot in a completely different, and usually unexpected direction.

After PLOT POINT #2 (which is normally about 20 minutes from the end of the movie), the movie rushes towards its CLIMAX, or conclusion. Sometimes after the climax comes the resolution, which wraps up the loose ends of the story.

Let me take this model and apply it to one of my movies, and then to a movie that is mainstream, so you can see how it actually works:

AMERICAN SHAOLIN:

In "American Shaolin," the movie opens with Drew Carson (played by Reese Madigan) getting the stuffing beat out of him, losing in a major tournament to his nemesis (Trevor Gottitall, played by Trent Bushey). The audience is watching, and thinks that the movie is about a tournament.

Then, when the tournament is over and Drew is sitting on the beach, despondent, he gets the idea to go to the Shaolin Temple to train--PLOT POINT #1!

He gets to China, and we have the middle section of the film, where Drew gets into the temple, adapts to the routine the temple imposes on him, he rebels and gets thrown out of the temple, then comes back in and learns his lessons, goes through the challenges (the quest, the wooden man chamber, etc.) and becomes a full-fledged fighting monk. The audience is now enjoying the story (hopefully) and thinking that the movie is about this young man and how he succeeds at the Shaolin Temple.

Then, Trevor Gottitall shows up at an international exhibition in Shanghai, China, and Drew has to face the ghosts of his past--PLOT POINT #2!

After first declining to fight Trevor, Drew climbs into the ring and the end fight starts, the movie rushing towards its CLIMAX, when Drew beats Trevor and stands victorious over him, only to extend a hand of friendship to him.

Let's take a look at a mainstream action movie, and apply it to this model:

DIE HARD:

I believe that "Die Hard" (along with "Aliens" and "The Terminator") is an almost perfect action movie. The movie starts with Bruce Willis' character flying to Los Angeles to visit his wife for Christmas. The audience doesn't really know what the movie is about--could it be an action movie about a domestic relationship?

Then, when Willis gets to the building where his wife's Christmas party is being held, all hell breaks loose, and everyone is taken hostage...everyone but him! PLOT POINT #1

The middle section of the movie follows, where Willis tries to stay alive and tries to stop the bad guys. It turns into a pretty basic good guy vs. bad guys story, until something happens...

The bad guys find out who he is, and take his wife hostage, threatening to kill him if he doesn't stop doing what he is doing. PLOT POINT #2!

After this, the movie rockets towards its conclusion, with Willis beating all the bad guys (the CLIMAX) and getting his estranged wife back in the process.

There is also a resolution after the Climax, where the reporter who was dogging the story the entire way and who caused quite a

lot of problems, gets sucker punched by the wife. It's an interesting resolution, and unusual for an action movie.

There you have it, the model as applied to a couple of popular movies. Try to take it and apply it to other movies. There are some movies that just do not fit into it (like "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and true-story movies, which have to loosely follow true events), but the majority of action movies will fit into this pretty well.

IDEA PROTECTION:

Can ideas be protected? No! Copyright law says that ideas are not copyright-able (because, after all, everyone can get them), but the expression of those ideas can be protected by a copyright. The hard work is in the expression of the idea--if you consider several of the hugely popular movies (like "Raiders of the Lost Ark" or "Home Alone") were not necessarily great ideas (we all might have come up with those), but the way they were written and then made was far superior to anything out there.

Should you worry about someone stealing your ideas? In the movie industry, everyone has ideas, and everyone is paranoid about having it even seem like they would even consider stealing an idea. It's much easier, and safer, to hire the person who came up with the great idea--if they can't handle the script, then they purchase the idea and hire someone else to write the script.

It's also a conceit to think that your idea is yours alone. Many times, in conversation with other writers and film people, I've found many similar ideas and scripts coming from very disparate people--because so often ideas come from recent events, or other similar sources, the genesis of the movie could be exactly the same, and the resulting product can often be similar.

Those law suits when someone sues a studio for "stealing" an idea just make me laugh: like the guy who thought that Steven Spielberg stole the idea for "Raiders of the Lost Ark"--and this lawsuit appeared only after the movie went on to make millions and millions worldwide. Ideas are strange beasts--no one knows exactly where the idea comes from, and maybe the germ of a great film is an idea you hastily sent out to a studio, or a producer. But, most probably, maybe not.

The best way to protect yourself is to not send out IDEAS, but to send out TREATMENTS or COMPLETE SCRIPTS, which CAN be protected.

I apply for copyrights on everything major I write, whether or not it is going to be produced right away. In order to recoup any money, in the event that someone does steal your work, you need to have a registered copyright, and any monies due you accrue from the date of the copyright registration.

For example, let's say you wrote the script for "Raiders," but didn't register it until yesterday--well, you couldn't touch any of the money the film made up until the day it was registered.

So, copyright anything you feel is "stealable". It only costs $30. For more information contact the Copyright Office at:

Register of Copyrights
Copyright Office
Library of Congress
Washington, D.C. 20559
TEL: 202 707 9100

IDEA GENERATION

I rely on the brainstorming process for my idea generation. Brainstorming is the process by which you free your mind to come up with ideas: any kind of ideas, no matter how hackneyed, how far out, how silly...or how good.

Brainstorming is totally non-judgmental. In other words, you come up with ideas and write them down and don't think about their quality. There is plenty of time to go back and review these ideas and toss out the bad ones. For now, the first step of brainstorming, create and revel in the joy of creating, without any bounds.

Things to avoid in this first step: labeling your ideas bad or good. DON'T censor yourself at this point. Just write everything down, and try to get the longest possible list of ideas.

The next step in brainstorming is to let the ideas you've just written SIT. Don't look at them right away--let them lay around for a day or two, and then take them out, when you have a fresh perspective.

It's amazing how your perception changes in just a couple of days. Many ideas I thought were dynamite or diamonds, lost their bang or luster when I reviewed them in the cold light of day. And, on the flip side, ideas I thought were not very well conceived or written very well turn out to be pretty good after they have sat for a while.

So, after a little time has passed, pull the ideas back out and go through them, putting the better ones to the side. Never throw any idea out--it might not be right for just now, but it could resurface later (or be combined with something else), so file everything related to ideas.

When you get the list of your best ideas narrowed down to five or ten (or 2 or 3, whatever), decide which one you want to work on right away. It's too difficult and confusing to work on more than one idea at a time. Concentrate on one, and do the best job you can on that one, and move on to the others when you finish the first one.

You should brainstorm pretty frequently, because like any other engine, your creative machine can get rusty from disuse. I try

to brainstorm at least once a week, and sometimes more. It helps me to combine a brainstorming session with some physical activity: a run, shooting baskets, a martial arts workout, etc. I find that sticking some ideas in my subconscious and letting my mind go on autopilot while I do something else can be very profitable.

It's also a great excuse to play!

RESEARCH:

When you are a writer and a creator, anything you do can be research. As I mentioned earlier, experience is one of the best backgrounds for the creation of a story. It's vital for a writer to EXPERIENCE. If you are going to write about the tournament scene in the martial arts, but you've never been to a tournament, or never competed, you're not going to be very accurate in your description of one, and your entire story is going to be flawed.

WRITING WITH AUTHORI" :

Know and enjoy what you are writing about, and that will show through and make your story more compelling and much better

CHAPTER 3

TALENT:

Though talent is required for any job in the movies, for this chapter, the talent I am referring to is acting talent--in front of the camera.

Talent is elusive, mercurial and very difficult to pin down. Who has talent, and how have so many people who don't seem to have much talent succeeded for so long, are questions that many people more qualified than you or I have been unable to answer. We all know of people who appear to have a great deal of talent, and are slogging through painfully bad movies, while others with seemingly little talent get huge roles and big, blockbuster movies.

How to explain it?

You can't really. Talent is difficult to define or catalog, and it often seems that talent and huge blockbuster success are mutually exclusive.

There are, however, some things that the movies are looking for that will help determine whether you or someone you know has what it takes to succeed in front of the camera.

ACTION:

First and foremost, action/martial arts movies demand high quality action. That is why such competitive champions like Chuck Norris, Bill Wallace, Billy Blanks, Keith Vitali, Keith (Hirabyashi) Cooke, Cynthia Rothrock and Don Wilson have been so successful in the movies. There is nothing they don't know, or haven't done, in the martial arts, and that experience and the skills champions like them possess is invaluable.

That's not to say that if you're not a champion you can't succeed: not at all. It just makes it easier to succeed--champions already have proven themselves in one competitive arena, and the fact that they are known in martial arts circles

is a big marketing advantage. After all, if you follow a champion's career while he/she is fighting, chances are you'll pay to see that same champion in an upcoming movie.

Remember when Concorde Films tried to orchestrate the "challenge match" between Don Wilson and Jean Claude Van Damme? That was nothing but a marketing ploy to emphasize to the film audience that Wilson is a champion and Van Damme is not--when in reality, this has nothing to do with popularity or the quality of the movies.

Speaking of Van Damme, there is some controversy over whether or not Jean Claude really was a champion kickboxer in Europe. It really doesn't matter! Being a champion can help you when you are just starting out (and, just for the record, I don't remember anything about Van Damme being a champion when I met him during "No Retreat No Surrender," but that doesn't mean it's not true, and he sure would have been talking about it then), but after you are established, it's all up to how your movies and videos perform.

And, right now, very few stars in any genre perform better than Van Damme at the box office and in video stores.

So, Van Damme is an example of a star who has succeeded despite not being an ex-champion. Steven Seagal is another, while still another one, and probably the most famous, is Bruce Lee - there's no doubt that Lee was a brilliant and very skilled martial artist, but he was never a champion.

It can be done, but there is a common thread through it all for successful action movie stars: they are excellent martial artists. Champions or not, they know their stuff. Van Damme is one of the prettiest kickers I've ever seen, while Seagal is a true aikidoist and the champions like Norris and Vitali paid their dues on the tournament circuit, and no one in their right mind can question those credentials.

If you want to become an action star, make sure you can handle the action. Get all the training, and work at those kicks and punches and reactions as much as you can.

If you get into films, it'll pay off.

FALSE BILLING:

In the course of casting the pictures I've been involved in, I've interviewed and watched the audition performances of hundreds upon hundreds of actors and actresses. Usually, unless the role we are casting for requires no martial arts, we put out a "casting ca" " for martial artists: either actors who are martial artists or martial artists who are actors.

It's easy to find either martial artists or actors. Finding people who are both is very challenging indeed.

One of the things that really gets me, and angers every true martial artist I know, is the people who list "martial arts" on their resumes even though they only trained for two months, and that was 15 years ago (when they were 9).

You'd be surprised how many of these I've seen.

It can be pretty embarrassing, too. If we are casting for a fighting role, we always ask the fighter to perform a little martial arts for us.

That's when the excuses start.

"I haven't trained in quite a while..."

"I don't know how much I remember..."

Or my personal favorite:

"You want me to do WHAT?"

I am always tempted to ask them if they aren't prepared to perform martial arts in the audition, why did they: #1, answer the casting call when we specifically stated we were looking for fighters, and #2, why do they list expertise in martial arts when they obviously don't have any?

But, I'm too polite to do either of those, so I usually let them embarrass themselves on the stage, and then politely thank them for coming in.

What is even worse is when actors list themselves as "champions," and I've never, ever heard of them. And no one I know has ever heard of them.

And, they can't perform worth beans. They throw kicks like a rank yellow belt, and still have the nerve to list "martial arts champion" on their resume!

The point of this diatribe? Don't claim to be something you're not. If you're a brown belt, put that down, and if you perform at black belt level, it'll be a pleasant surprise to the people casting. If you list yourself as a champion, and can't do a spinning kick without falling down, you'll impress all right--all the way out the back door.

When we were casting for "NRNS 3: Blood Brothers," I went out to LA with my good friend Keith Vita" , and I introduced him to the president of Seasonal Films. He had heard of Keith, naturally, but he wanted to see his skills. Keith changed into a gi and started throwing some kicks, and after he had thrown 3 or 4 kicks, the president smiled and said that was enough. He knew he was in the presence of an expert.

The same thing happened while we were casting "The King of the Kickboxers". We were casting in an office somewhere in Hollywood, and the people were coming and going, but no one was very impressive. We were all getting tired of seeing faux martial artists, when in walked first Keith Cooke, and then when he was done, Billy Blanks came in. I could feel the energy change in the room--everyone knew, as soon as these guys started moving, that they were champions.

We never let them get much past a few kicks, because there was no need. I already knew them both quite well, of course, and it

didn't take much to convince the people at Seasonal Films. We hired them right after their audition, and they went on to make an incredible impact in the film.

ACTING:

Acting ability is more elusive than fighting ability: after almost 10 years in the business, I can spot pretty quickly if someone has the martial arts moves to make it in front of the camera. But, with acting, it's so subjective that what is great acting for one person could be horrible to the next.

We get that a lot with the actors we use in our movies. Some people love them, others hate them. For example, Loren Avedon, who starred in "No Retreat No Surrender II and III" and "The King of the Kickboxers," is a very good actor. But, audiences either love him or hate him--it's never lukewarm. One buyer will tell me how much they love Loren, and how he's going to be the next big star, bigger than Van Damme, while the next buyer will caution me (always in some quiet corner) to find someone else.

Because acting is so subjective, you have to make sure you have as much training as you can. Most of the martial artists who have been successful in films have done at least one thing in common--they've pursued acting with the same kind of dedication which they pursued martial arts training. They remember what it was like to be a beginner, and they know what it took (practice, training, patience, a good attitude, etc.) to achieve success.

All the former champions I've worked with have either trained extensively with acting schools or private coaches, or are still training between movies. They know that martial arts skills aren't enough to succeed in this business--they might be able to carry a fight scene well enough, but they also want to be convincing in a love scene, or just a dramatic moment.

And, they prepare for that by getting the training they need.

The lesson here is to start now to get the training you need: both in the martial arts and in acting. Seek out coaches and programs that can help you become the best you can be (it's not just for the Army!).

EVALUATION:

In this day and age where it's hard to get a straight answer from anyone, how do you honestly evaluate if you have what it takes? It's difficult, especially because no one will come straight and tell you you don't have any talent--they'll make all sorts of excuses...it's pretty much up to you to come to the decision that you should try working in another field.

The best place to start is with family and friends. Ask them to watch you perform (either as a martial artist or as an actor), and then get feedback from them. You can tell them not to worry about your feelings, but they are still going to--and that's OK. That's why they are friends and family--they worry about you and your emotions.

When you are performing for your friends and family, pay particular attention to your feelings. Do you like performing in front of people? Do you enjoy it? If the answers to these are "No," you might be more comfortable working behind the camera, if you still want to be involved in the movie business at all.

If you still want your talent "validated," you can get a professional opinion: enroll in an established acting school, and during the course of the instruction you will be evaluated several times, at least. See what your instructors say, and listen to them. They don't have an ax to grind, nor do they have to see you every day. They are as objective as you can find--if they say you have some talent, develop it. If they say you don't, consider this will a grain of salt, and then make a decision to develop the talent, or try something else.

Be leery of having to pay someone to evaluate your talent. Agent or casting agent who ask for payment to see new talent are usually involved in a scam, because one of their jobs is to evaluate and sniff out new talent--and they get paid for that already, if their instincts are correct. Stay away from these.
Do local theater, with schools, local theater companies, dinner theaters, other groups, etc. Try to take advantage of all the opportunities available to an actor. Each experience you can get is extremely worthwhile--and don't worry about the money, because in this kind of community theater, there isn't much money to speak of. Consider this your investment.
And be prepared for a host of people doing exactly the same thing you are. One of the nice things about pursuing the "acting life" is that you can do it with a minimal investment--like writing, where anyone with a pencil and a piece of paper can be a writer, anyone with a yen for rejection can be an actor, but it also means that a disproportionate number of people will have the same idea as you. It's not like starting a new automobile company--after all, there are only four in this country and the investment involved is incredible, so you don't see auto companies springing up all over the place.
But you will see plenty of actors and actresses trying their hand at acting, giving it a shot.
Just like you.
The odds are high and will often seem stacked against you, but that's the playing field on which pretty much everyone is playing.

HOW TO GET NOTICED

Succeed in the martial arts. You don't have to be a champion, though that wouldn't hurt, but you do have to be the best martial artist you can be. Train hard and keep training, so you

are always ready, and so that you develop a reputation for your skills.

Do demonstrations whenever and wherever you can. Even if, at the start, it's just for the local elementary school--DO IT. Get comfortable in front of a crowd, because when you get right down to it, a gymnasium full of screaming 10 year olds isn't much different from auditioning in front of Steven Spielberg (their attention spans might be just about the same).

THE PACKAGE

One important thing to keep in mind is that you have to develop a package that you can send out, a package that is representative of you and the special qualities you have. Too many times to count I've been given material by people, and they always say that what they are handing me isn't very good, but it's the best they could do at that time.

What does that tell you about the person? It tells you that they haven't taken the time to do it right, and if they won't take the time now, what guarantee do you have that they will do it right when they are working on the film?

None!

I've met a bunch of actors and actresses who come to audition" looking like they just slept in their clothes, and you have to shake your head and wonder what they were thinking. Now, I'm not one for wearing three piece suits or anything like that, but I will still show up for most meetings in nice, clean casual clothes. I want my appearance to say that I am proud of myself, and that shows through. You can tell when someone takes care of himself or herself, and it certainly helps in a casting call. If you take yourself seriously (but not too seriously), others will too.

So, when you are submitting material (pictures, resumes, video tape samples, etc.), make sure that it is in the best possible

form it can be. On the flip side of that, don't delay too long trying to make it incredibly brilliant: just make sure it adequately reflects you, and then send it out.

PICTURES:

Most actors and actresses work from a standard format for the "head shot": 8" x 10" black and white. It's a good idea to have a couple of different shots:

-head shot (from shoulders up)

-action shot (your best move)

-different poses (don't go crazy, however)

Get these professionally done, by a real photographer. You should shop around for the best deal you can find, and the price differences can be very wide, but make sure these look great. I've known actors who have spent very little money, and gotten horrible results, and also others who have spent a fortune, and still couldn't get work.

RESUME:

Have your resume professionally done.

-don't lie, but you can be creative

-Resumes are designed to make you look GOOD, not to point to the problems you've had in the past, or especially not to highlight your lack of experience.

-do something creative with the lay out (pictures, etc. are a no-no, but you can do a little bit with the presentation).

-check for typographical errors, and fix them. Don't make changes by hand and try to get away with it. If you make a mistake typing it, start over again. Better yet, have someone put it on their computer and print it out on a laser printer. There are many small businesses who do nothing but layouts like this, and most full service printers can do the same thing. Spend the extra $10 and get yourself a resume you can be proud of.

VIDEO CLIPS:

-watch the film quality

-don't go crazy, but do it nicely

-if you appear on TV, get the clips and assemble them together. Usually you can purchase the footage from the TV station for a nominal fee. Give them a call and ask them.

-be careful of the generations

-with the video equipment currently available, you can do some incredible stuff for only a little bit of money

-to give an idea of your acting ability, perform a scene on the tape (use scenes from established plays or movies, so the scenes are recognizable, and whoever is viewing the tape can concentrate on you, not what you are saying).

(More on packaging in a separate section

CHAPTER 4:

FIGHT SCENES

Fight scenes are the life blood of a martial arts action movie. If you rented a martial arts movie and there weren't any fight scenes, you'd feel cheated, and you would be very angry. For all the attention and detail I pay to the story, dialogue and the other elements of a film project, the bottom line is that a martial arts action picture lives or dies on the fights.

If the fights are good, the picture usually does well (assuming that the rest of the picture is up to snuff), but if the fight scenes are poorly done, the film has less of a chance to succeed.

There are some notable exceptions to this, however. "The Karate Kid" is one: though I loved the movie, the fight scenes were very poorly done, from a martial arts standpoint. It was very easy to tell that none of the major actors had had any martial arts training. Lead actor Ralph Macho was painfully bad as a fighter, but tremendous as an actor.

However, "The Karate Kid" was not really a martial arts movie: it was more of a mainstream movie that was set in the martial arts. And, they cast the movie with that in mind: they weren't necessarily looking for fighters, they were looking for actors first, and faked the action.

FIGHTERS:

If a film is a martial arts picture, it's imperative that the talent be martial artists. I've had enough trouble with martial artists, even considering using someone without a strong martial arts background is almost unthinkable. I've only done it a couple of times, and regretted it just about every time.

Trent Bushey (who played "Trevor Gottitall" in "American Shaolin") is a great athlete, and that is what saved us when we hired him. He could handle the action because he was very

athletic, and was able to pick up the movements very quickly. On the soap opera he worked on for several years, Trent played an aikido master, so he had plenty of practice faking it.

Because of Trent's unfamiliarity with martial arts action (punching and kicking), we had an accident that threatened the climactic fight scene and our ability to finish the film. While filming the final fight scene of "American Shaolin," which involves Trent's character facing off in the ring against first Gao (Daniel Dae Kim) and then Drew (Reese Madigan), we were laying out the movements for Trent. Because of the actors' martial arts inexperience, we had to spend an inordinate amount of time rehearsing and going over the moves of the fight scene. During this set up and rehearsal time, Trent blocked a kick thrown by Daniel Kim with his open hand, and immediately started screaming. The kick had bent back Trent's fingers, and the index finger was standing straight up from his hand, so it looked as if it could have been broken.

I took him to the hospital immediately, which was an adventure in and of itself, because we were in Shanghai and it was difficult to travel through the congested streets at any speed. We finally got the hospital and I took him into the emergency room. We got some X-rays taken, and it was determined that it was only a dislocation, and the doctor put it back in, and bandaged him up.

Trent was able to continue shooting, all be it with a large bandage on his hand (which we covered with skin-colored make up). It isn't really noticeable, except in one shot. If you look carefully, you can see the bandage.

Because Trent was not a martial artist, he didn't know that you have to block with a closed hand, and his inexperience could have cost a great deal of money, if his finger had been broken

and he had been unable to continue. As it was, we got lucky and were able to finish the final scene as scheduled.

At one point during the development of "American Shaolin" I was considering casting a "big name" in the lead role--someone who wasn't a martial artist but had a marquee name that would assure us big time distribution. I was thinking of Jason Bateman (from "Growing Pains" and "Teen Wolf Too"), John Cusak ("The Journey of Natty Gann," "True Colors," etc.) or Corey Haim ("The Lost Boys," "Fast Getaway," etc.), but all our negotiations with these people fell through for various reasons (they didn't want to shave their heads, they wanted too much money, etc.).

We ended up hiring an unknown, Reese Madigan from New York, who was a black belt in Shotokan and had extensive acting training. Even though he had a number of years of martial arts training, it was still difficult for him to handle all the action of which he was required. As we were filming in China, and struggling through a fight scene, having to settle for less than perfect at times, I would shake my head and thank my lucky stars that we hadn't hired a non-martial artist. Imagine how long and difficult the days would have been if the lead, who had to be in about 19 fight scenes, couldn't throw a kick or a punch? Sure, he could be stunt doubled some of the time, but the audience is going to want to see their hero do some of the moves himself. Luckily, Reese improved as the film went along, and by the end of the picture, he was becoming quite a "Shaolin Warrior".

The point is that in martial arts action movies, fight scenes are extremely important, and it's equally as important to have talent who can handle the action needed in the fight scenes.

REAL FIGHTING VS. SCREEN FIGHTING:

Ask any film goers anywhere in the world who the best fighters, the best warriors, are and 9 times out of 10 Stallone and

Schwarzenegger would be the answer. But, in reality, are they what they appear?

Can they really fight?

Probably not.

You see, real fighting and movie fighting are two completely different animals. What looks good on screen, and what works in the street are miles apart. Bruce Lee, that movie icon who made his living by kicking and hitting people in the head in his films, once remarked that in a real situation, he'd never go for the head. It's too small, he said, and too hard to hit. He'd go for the leg or the groin, instead. Well, why don't you do that on film? he was asked. Because it wouldn't look as good, he replied.

And he was right.

Fighting on the screen is designed to be entertainment, and those that have tried to make fight scenes realistic have been rewarded with cinematic failure. When an actor controls an opponent to the ground, it's not very dramatic. But, when an actor jumps 5 feet in the air and spin kicks the bad guy in the face, whipping his head around and sending him down three flights of stairs, it's...well, you get the idea.

ARE THEY REALLY HITTING EACH OTHER OR WHAT?

Well, the actors aren't supposed to hit each other, but often they end up doing just that. Actors are a considerable investment for a production company (with Stallone making upwards of $10 million a picture, who's going to hit him in the face?), and the producers cringe every time a punch comes too close, or pain screws up those beautiful, and expensive, features. Having a star injured means expensive down time, which in some big budget pictures can be as much as $100,000 a day. So, the stars are not supposed to be throwing or taking the punches. Which is why, in most big budget pictures, and most TV

shows, they use professional stunt men. Even in the TV show about stunt men starring Lee Majors, "The Fall Guy,” they routinely used a stunt double for Majors.

In lower budget pictures, or movies that use real fighters, stunt men aren't normally used, and they let the actors and actresses fight it out. The thinking is, if the actors are fighters, they ought to be used to the pain, and they'll get over it.

How can you tell if the movie you are watching is using stunt people instead of the stars? If you can see the actors' faces during a fight scene, they aren't using stunt doubles. If for most of the action, including the difficult bits, all you see of the star is his back, BINGO--Stunt double! For most of the action in the film "Beverly Hills Cop,” for example, Eddie Murphy is doubled--probably by order of the producer. On the flip side of that, one of the kings of martial arts movies, Jackie Chan , refuses to use a stunt double...ever. And, it has cost him--he injured his head very badly in a fall, and spent more than a month in the hospital, and has had a host of other injuries.

Even when the actors are really the ones fighting, the agreement is that there should be no contact to the face, and only light contact to the body. But, mistakes do happen.

On the set of "No Retreat No Surrender,” martial arts star Jean Claude Van Damme ("Bloodsport,” "Kickboxer,” "Double Impact,” etc.) was supposed to jump crescent kick Pete "Sugarfoot" Cunningham, as he rushed across the set, barely missing him. When the director called "Action,” Van Damme jumped and smacked him right in the face, knocking him out immediately. Pete, a middleweight kick boxing champion, fell to the ground like a stone, and Van Damme finished the shot without pausing to see if he was OK--which is exactly what you are supposed to do.

You see, if you do make contact, and then stop in the middle, before the director calls "Cut," you won't just hurt your fellow actor, you'll ruin the shot. And that means you'll have to do it again.

As it was, Van Damme had to do the scene again, just for insurance, in case something was wrong with the first shot, and he hit Pete again, though he didn't knock him out this time. It turned out that the first shot was good, and that was the one that ended up in the movie. It looks realistic, and painful--which it certainly was.

Speaking from a production standpoint, one of the hardest things to do is to see a man get hit hard during a fight scene, and not break concentration before the director says "Cut". After all, these are human beings, and you care about them, but you have to wait until the director ends a scene before you rush into the shot and wipe up the blood.

Keith Vitali, a veteran martial arts actor ("Revenge of the Ninja," "Blood Brothers," "American Kickboxer 1") and former 3 time National Karate Champion, tells a story from his making of "Meals on Wheels" in Spain. "The director, Samo Hung, and the star, Jackie Chan were good friends, but they had a natural rivalry," Vitali explains. "There was a scene where I had to kick Jackie in the chest with my side kick. Now, my side kick is my trademark, my most powerful kick, and as we were going through the scene, I was hitting him pretty hard, but Samo kept asking for 'More Power!' So, I hit him harder, and Jackie kept dropping to the ground, cringing and crying, then Samo would call for us to do it again. I hit Jackie so hard I thought I was going to kill him! Samo thought it was great fun!"

Cynthia Rothrock, a former forms champion and action actress ("No Retreat No Surrender I" , "China O'Brien I & II," "Lady Dragon," a slew of Hong Kong action pictures, etc.), tells some

of her horror stories about making movies in Asia, where the rules are all different. "One thing about working in Hong Kong--it's very dangerous," says Rothrock seriously. "So many times I've done Cantonese films and I think that this is my last one--why am I doing this to my body? But then I recover, I get better and I see it on screen and I'm really impressed, and I look forward to the next one.

"When we film, we hit hard," Rothrock continues, with a smile that only comes when remembering long-healed injuries. "I hit hard and they hit hard, so of course, we all get bruised up. You get bruises on your hands and your arms, and you have to take hits into your face. I think the most serious was when I was working on my first picture, and I was fighting with a guy who is known to be a really tough and strong fighter, and I had to duck under his leg, and his leg would hit the wall, then I would come up and he would kick my head off the wall.

"When I went under, I thought I heard the director say 'Cut' because his leg hit the wall in the wrong position, so I came up," Rothrock continues. "He didn't hear 'Cut' and he hit me right in the jaw with the heel of his foot as hard as he could, and I was almost knocked out. My ears started bleeding, and I thought I was going to die. I went to the hospital, and what happened was that he had hit me so hard in the jaw that he had split the internal tissue of my ear open.

"And then, after all the tough Hong Kong films I've done, I broke a finger on 'China O'Brien'!" she continues. "The action in 'China O'Brien' was much easier than in Hong Kong, because in Hong Kong we do all those intricate stunts. It was a freak accident--I was pulling a guy and the finger got caught in his jacket. I pulled him and he resisted, and I snapped my finger."

HOW DO THEY DO IT?

It's not done with mirrors. As Vitali and Rothrock explained above, sometimes it's just a matter of really hitting the other guy. But, most of the time, it's done with camera angles.

It's called "cheating" the audience.

You see, when the camera is behind the action, it's very easy to fake a punch or a kick, and have it look like it really connected. The actual point of contact is hidden by the one who is getting hit, so you can't really tell. It happens so fast, it really does look like the other guy got clobbered.

The thing that action film makers don't want is "air". By air, I mean the space between a fist and a face. If the audience can see the "air," they know that the punch was fake. And that spoils the magic.

So, the camera angle has to hide the air, the space, and they do that by being behind the one getting hit, behind the one doing the hitting, or off on an angle that allows the point of contact to be hidden in one way or another. Next time you are watching a movie and a fight scene comes on, concentrate on where the camera is, and you'll see what I mean.

If the camera is in the right place, an actor can miss the other actor by as much as a foot, and it still looks like he creamed him.

But, the timing is critical, and all the players involved have to be expert fighters, or mistakes crop in, and people get hurt.

IT'S ALL IN THE WRIST...UM, THE REACTION:

Reaction is incredibly important. Most of the effect of a fight scene comes from the reaction of the person getting "hit" more than that of the technique. So, in addition to a star that can look good on screen, and a camera man that positions the camera correctly, you need thugs and bad guys who can really take a hit--and I don't mean stand there with no reaction. We're talking about guys that can whip their heads around in perfect

timing with the strike, spitting out fake blood toward the camera and fly through the air without being touched at all.
When we were filming "No Retreat No Surrender" out in Hollywood, I had to step in and be a thug during a fight scene. It was my first time on camera and I was very excited. The star, Kurt McKinney, was to jump spin kick me in the face, and I was then to go with the kick and fall down on the ground. Well, I rushed in, he threw a perfect kick and I turned with the force of the kick in what I thought was a very professional spin and fall. When it was over and I asked the director how I did, he said, "It was pretty good. But when you got kicked, you turned the wrong way!"
Not exactly an auspicious debut. After that, I left the fighting and the thuggery to the actors, and stayed behind the camera. It's definitely not as easy as it looks.
Saying that I stayed away from being in my movies isn't exactly true, though. I have been able to fit myself in to all the movies I've made. In "Blood Brothers," I was a cop in the first scene, surrounding the bank.
I was riding in the back of a real patrol car, my fake gun ready, the back door cocked a little bit so I could jump out right away, as soon as the car slid to a stop. Well, on the first real take, the driver stopped the car COLD, and the force of the stop shut my door.
Well, the doors on the inside of the back of a police car can't be opened, so here I am, inside a police car, watching as the camera rolls through the first take! Luckily, we had to do it again, and I made sure my door didn't close again!
In "King," I played the part of a snuff movie actor who gets "killed" by Billy Blanks. Now, I'm a black belt in Karate and a pretty fair fighter, but after working out with Billy in Thailand, it's safe to say that no matter what I did, Billy

would be able to kill me, so it wasn't too much of a stretch to get killed on screen. He did hit me pretty hard, maybe for the lack of sufficient good food on the set--I'll have to ask him. In "American Shaolin," I played the part of a judge during the final fight scene. The problem with taking larger roles is that if it involves a lot of screen time, I just can't physically commit to it, because I have to be doing so much on set. So, I can take small, extra sort of roles, and make my token appearance. I still get razzed for whatever I do, and that's why I don't even want to think about doing any dialogue--I can hear the phone calls now! No way!

It's easy to underestimate the value of good thugs and bad guys. Many producers don't concentrate on the people being hit, but concentrate on the hitters. Well, as I explained above, it's as important to have actors who can "sell" the hit by turning violently and flying to the ground. You could have the prettiest kicker, like Van Damme, but if you don't have anyone who can react, he's not going to look like he has any power.

I remember a time during the filming of "The King of the Kickboxer" : we were doing the scene where Jake meets Molly for the first time. The scene is set up so that Jake sees a bunch of thugs chasing Molly through the Pat Poon section of Bangkok. He follows them, and then pretends that he wants to get in on some of the action.

The thugs push him out of the way, closing the gap and giving Jake the opportunity he is waiting for. He starts the fight then, taking the guys out. Well, the thugs we had hired were, in a word, terrible. They couldn't react very well, and Loren Avedon, who played Jake and who is a spectacular screen fighter, was having a very difficult time. The thugs were not hitting their marks, and we were forced to do take after take. It was a night shoot, and here we were in a smelly Bangkok alley at 4 am,

struggling to get the scene done, racing the sun. We knew we couldn't come back to that alley, so the scene had to be finished that night before the sun came up.

We ended up improvising as much as we could and doubling the thugs with our Hong Kong stunt people. One stuntman ended up playing every one of the thugs--putting on their clothes and donning glasses or a wig to make him look more like the part. We finished the scene that day, but we were wrapping up the dialogue at the end of the scene while the sun was steadily rising in the sky, and the sounds of Bangkok waking up built towards a crescendo. In fact, we lost the last part of the scene, which ended up on the cutting room floor, because it was too light (not to mention too noisy) and didn't match the rest of the scene.

On the other hand, when all the elements are right, things go extremely smoothly. For another scene in "The King of the Kickboxers," one of my favorite fight scenes in any movie, Jake (Loren) is going back to see Master Prang (Keith Hirabyashi Cooke), and tries to break up a fight between some local thugs and Master Prang. Prang tells him to mind his own business, but Jake still tries to help him, and ends up in danger. Prang has to show his real stuff and save Jake, and that's where the fun began.

The best fight choreographer I've ever worked with, Yuen Kuai (Corey Yuen, from "No Retreat No Surrender I & II," "The King of the Kickboxers," "American Shaolin," and many other Hong Kong films) had a half day to shoot that scene, because he had to return to Hong Kong to finish another fight scene (busy man!) and Keith Cooke had 5 or 6 fighters to take care of. In anyone else's hands, that might have taken 2 or 3 days to shoot, but Yuen Kuai got it in that one afternoon, in about 6 hours, and it

is a classic film fight. I'd put it up against any of the Bruce Lee fights, and I think it holds its own.

Yuen Kuai was able to get what he wanted because he had n absolute expert in the martial arts (Cooke), as well as very qualified and experienced stunt men, so that we didn't have to do a thousand takes of the different sequences. The stunt men hit their marks, and Cooke hit them, and it all went smoothly.

ACTION SEQUENCES:

Action sequences are by far the hardest to shoot. After doing fight scenes, long dramatic dialogue scenes are welcomed by the actors. Says action star Keith Vitali, "I look forward to the dramatic scenes, because I know I'll be able to walk the next day."

The fight scenes are physically demanding, because they take so much time to film, and the fighters have to do the moves over and over again--first to memorize them, then to perform them. And when they are performed, they have to be done at full tilt, or they don't look good. That means lots of sweat, tears and pulled muscles--and worse, if the actors aren't in great shape.

Sometimes, especially in martial arts movies, the camera is slowed down to 22 frames per second (normal is 24 frames per second), so that when it is replayed, the action is speeded up (e.g. "slow motion" is actually film taken at more than 24 frames per second, then played back at regular speed). This helps to bridge the normal "gaps" in the action.

During the making of "No Retreat No Surrender,” the dialogue scenes averaged about 6 takes per shot, while the fight scenes averaged about 15, and during one particularly difficult scene, the director insisted that it be redone more than 26 times! The record for takes on my films is about 36, but I have heard about Jackie Chan shooting a single movement over 300 times to get it exactly right.

American fight choreography is actually, compared to that of the Orient, rather backward. It seems that our idea of a good fight scene is where the hero throws a good right cross and knocks the bad guy out. As anyone who is familiar with fighting knows, that usually doesn't work--nor does it cause much suspense. It makes the lead actor look really incredible, and Steven Seagal has used this philosophy with great success, but it ultimately harms the action and gets unbelievable after a while.

Good choreography means breaking the fight scenes down into very small pieces, then making those pieces as perfect as possible, then putting them back together again.

For that reason, fight scenes have to be shot in order, so all those piece do fit together. You see, standard film making is not like reading a book--the director doesn't start at the beginning, then film the middle, and finish with the end. Instead, he jumps around, maybe doing the middle first, then the end, and ending with the beginning--whichever is easier, faster and the least expensive. That can work with dramatic dialogue scenes (but there is a school of film making that says that even dramatic scenes should be shot in the order they are written, so the emotions build up naturally), but with fighting, so much depends on positioning that it's almost impossible to go out of order and keep it all straight.

Going in order, and taking great care with every shot, means that it takes a lot of time. Though working on a film is glamorous and exciting in theory, in reality it's really quite dull. It's a lot of hurry up and wait.

A fight sequence that takes up 5 minutes of screen time might take two complete days, or more, to film. The end scene of "American Shaolin," which runs about 10 minutes on screen, took us 9 16 hour days in Shanghai (and we could have used more).

EXPERT ADVICE:

Most production companies, if they aren't using real fighters, will usually hire an expert to be on the set to advise the director on the way things are really done (and this is also true for movies that use a lot of firearms). But, unfortunately, in many cases his advice isn't listened to. Whatever fits the story is used.

For example, the successful and very well made film "The Karate Kid" used actors who were not martial artists, so martial arts expert Pat Johnson was hired as a consultant. Still, however, the producers and director decided to film it in a way that was totally opposite what really happens in Karate tournament fighting--but they did what they felt had to be done, and since they're paying for the production, what they say goes.

LEARNING TO FIGHT ON SCREEN:

For many actors, it's a process of relearning techniques. Kurt McKinney, from "No Retreat No Surrender," was a karate black belt with years of experience, but still had to learn to fight all over again. For movie fighting, he had to learn to perform linear, sweeping techniques, because the kicks and punches he was taught to perform just didn't look good on screen. Techniques that are snapped back, as they are supposed to be executed to maximize speed and power, don't have the visual impact of techniques that are left hanging out. Even though it's considered bad form to do just that in training!

Also, you have to try to train yourself not to make contact. Jean Claude Van Damme, currently a really hot item in action movies, had a problem with contact and hurting the other actors when he first started. Van Damme had one of the actors, and a former Shotokan world champion at that, scared to step onto the mat with him in a scene because he was afraid he would get hit in the face. You see, Van Damme came from a kick boxing

background, and he wasn't used to pulling his techniques--after all, in kick boxing, you're supposed to make contact.

TELLING LIES FOR FUN AND PROFIT:

The standard format for action pictures and fight sequences is to place the hero in mortal danger, against odds that would make the strongest and bravest of us raise the white flag, then let them fight their way out of it. Movies like "Commando," "Rambo," "Enter the Dragon," "Die Hard" and others make their money that way.

Sure, it's not believable that Rambo could take on the entire Russian army in Afghanistan, but what the heck, let him try. If we had to believe everything that we saw on the movie screen, there sure would be a lot less to choose from.

Movies are myth and magic, and making the warriors of the silver screen look invincible and phenomenal, and like they are truly great fighters, is what it's all about.

KEEPING IN SHAPE FOR THE FIGHT SCENES:

Stallone is famous for training for his films (for the Rambo and Rocky movies), and most action stars will tell you how important it is to be in tip-top physical shape. Many stars FILM bring trainers and exercise consultants to the set with them, so they can take advantage of the breaks between filming to do their workouts. On my last film, "American Shaolin," actor and martial artist Cliff Lederman bought a complete set of free weights in Shanghai and carted them throughout China, so he would always have someplace to lift.

I've worked with some of the best fighters of all time: Van Damme, Keith Vitali, Billy Blanks, Keith Cooke, Jerry Trimble. Even guys like Jeff Speakman and Dolph Lungren are accomplished martial artists first and foremost, and they know how important it is to stay on top of their game.

The most grueling part of movie making is the production process. It is a nightmare of logistics, long days and nights, bad location food, and interrupted exercise schedules. It can cause incredible bodily changes, and the stars have to pay particular attention to how the schedule is changing the way they look. Over the course of the 4 months shooting "American Shaolin," the strange food and heavy filming schedule really took a toll on everyone, including the actors. I went to China weighing 180 pounds, and after 3 months in the boonies of China, I arrived in Shanghai weighing 163 pounds. Luckily, I work behind the camera, so it didn't really matter what I looked like.

Reese Madigan, Billy Chang and Daniel Dae Kin were all in great shape when they arrived in China, but by the end of the shoot, they had all lost weight and an incredible amount of muscle tone. Cliff Lenderman, who played the drill sergeant in "American Shaolin," was one of the only ones who really stayed on top of his physique. Called "Jeet Kune Do's Strongman" because of his large muscles, Cliff purchased a set of weights as soon as he got to China, and he stuck to a lifting and training regimen throughout the shoot. Despite his best efforts, Cliff still lost a good deal of weight, but he was still able to maintain his muscle tone.

"As soon as we got to a major town in China, I insisted on buying a set of weights," Cliff said. "I carted those weights from town to town, and it was a real pain because we mostly traveled in buses and vans. It was worth it, though. 'American Shaolin' was a big break for me, and I was committed to making the best impression I could make."

Film making is "hurry up and wait" at its finest, and it can be incredibly boring. To give you an example, most film crews shoot between 1 and 3 pages of the script a day, and they do that in a

14 hour day. In film, a page of a screenplay equals roughly a minute of screen time--so it takes 14 hours to film at best 3 minutes of usable footage! It's like watching grass grow. Except for the action scenes. Though some crew members dread when the fight scenes start, they call it "fight hell" because it's impossible to predict how long any given fight scene is going to last, for me it is the most exciting part of the film making process.

THE BEST FIGHTERS ON SCREEN:

There are plenty of great screen fighters out there, but if I had to pick a top 10, here they are, in no particular order (with their best fight movies listed behind them):

Bruce Lee ('nuff said): "Enter the Dragon," "The Chinese Connection," "Fists of Fury"

Jackie Chan, a fighter who combines great comic moves with incredible athleticism in his fight scenes: "The Big Brawl," "Police Story I & II," "Drunken Master"

Jean Claude Van Damme, an incredibly graceful fighter; "No Retreat No Surrender," "Kickboxer," "Bloodsport"

Keith Cooke, who combines raw power with incredible techniques: "The King of the Kickboxers," "China O'Brien"

Billy Blanks is the complete package: an incredible physique combined with incredible kicks: "The King of the Kickboxers," "Bloodfist"

Chuck Norris --a true champion who pioneered "American" martial arts movies, Chuck works out ALL the time, and still looks great: "A Force of One," "Good Guys Wear Black," "The Octagon"

Keith Vita" , a three time National Champion, he has the best side kick I've ever seen: "No Retreat No Surrender III: Blood Brothers," "American Kickboxer," "Revenge of the Ninja"

Steven Seagal--he has great aikido moves, but he ends up doing a lot of the techniques over and over; not much of a puncher or kicker: "Above the Law," "Marked for Death"

Jerry Trimble: martial arts "Golden Boy," he is a great screen fighter that can back it up anytime, anywhere, with anyone. My one regret is that we didn't utilize his ability more in the scene from "The King of the Kickboxers".

THE FUN OF IT ALL:

Filming is hard, long work (14 - 16 hour days, 6 days a week), but it's also a lot of fun. Creating images that people will appreciate all over the world is exciting, and being able to work with some of the greatest action heroes in the world is something I wouldn't trade for anything.

Next time you see an action movie, keep your eyes on the star and try to figure exactly what he can do! You might be surprised...

CHAPTER 5

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCREENPLAY:

How important is a screenplay?

I believe that the screenplay is the bible of a movie. A great movie cannot be made without a great screenplay, but a great screenplay can be made into a horrible movie. Figure that one out, will you?

I know that statement makes it sound like the screenplay is not at fault when a bad movie is made, but that's not true. A great many failures at the box office (or the video cash register) can be directly traced to the screenplay. My point is, without a great script, a movie has little chance to be a success.

The one thing you have to do, should you have a great script, is make sure your work is in the correct format. Some people fool themselves into thinking that since their work is so good, it doesn't matter what format it's in, so they submit their ideas on toilet paper, or on loose leaf note paper written in pencil--the reality is that for your work to get serious consideration, it has to be professional.

And, to be professional, it has to fit within certain format guidelines.

FORMAT I:

The format of screenplays is quite different from any other form of writing. Unlike novels or non-fiction, there are not that many words. Where a mainstream novel can easily be upwards of 400 pages, or in the case of Stephen King over 1,000 pages, the average screenplay is about 100 pages long.

And, half of that 100 pages is empty space, so that the words fit into the confines of the screenplay format.

That's not a lot of writing, really. But, what is down there on the page has to be really well done.

And, when it's well done, it can be worth quite a lot of money. Witness the $3,000,000 spent for Joe Esterhaus' script for "Basic Instinct," or "The Last Boy Scout" by Shane Black, which featured Billy Blanks in the opening, a script which brought Black $1,500,000.

The stakes are high in the game if it is played right.

SEEN, NOT READ:

One very important thing to keep in mind when writing a screenplay is that it is not, in reality, meant to be read. It's meant to be SEEN.

That means that lengthy exposition or narrative or even description is not a prerequisite of a screenplay. In fact, it often just gets in the way.

Economy of words is important to a screenplay, as you have to tell the story within a limited number of pages. With a novel or a non-fiction book, you can tell your story in as many pages as you want, and you can spend all the time you want on beautiful, flowing passages, but you can't and shouldn't do that in a screenplay.

Why?

First off, you'll look like an amateur.

And, secondly, you're wasting your time. Remember that in a novel, you're trying to create a world, but in most movie screenplays, you are writing something that is going to be filmed in the real world. In other words, why go through the trouble of describing it, when everyone associated with the movie is going to see it?

To give you an example, let's say you are setting up a scene in a suburban neighborhood bustling with activity. The set up, when written in novel form, might read like this:

The neighborhood, called Falcon Ridge, was like any other middle class neighborhood in any small town. The grass was green, the

houses were well-kept, and there was always the sound of a power tool or a law mower running somewhere.

Neighbors dressed in gay summer clothes, the faces tanned golden brown by the sun, chatted over iced tea, leaning on decorative fences, smiles easily coming to their faces. The sound of laughter was like the tinkling of crystal bells, subdued and elegant.

Children of all ages played together in the bright sunshine, their balls going every which way, with only the occasional cautioning yell from a mother or father. One of the children stopped to pull out a squirt gun and sprayed the gaggle of housewives between the houses, but they barely seemed to notice. Perhaps grateful for the respite from the heat of the sun, they simply laughed a little harder, wiping the cool water from their bare sun-tanned arms.

Cars going down the street, Falcon Court, in keeping with the 'Falcon" theme of the development, took their time, enjoying the beautiful setting. No one hurried in Falcon Ridge. No one, that is, except for Donnie Simpson...

But, in a screenplay, this would have to be severely distilled down to a paragraph that starts the action, but also sets up the scene immediately. For example:

EXT. FALCON RIDGE STREET--DAY

ESTABLISH SHOT OF NEIGHBORHOOD: Kids playing, lawns immaculate, sun shining off well-kept houses, housewives gossiping on their decks, with the SOUND of several lawn mowers CUTTING GRASS in the b.g.

ANGLE ON A CAR as it drives by on the street, its occupants happy to soak in the calm and 'family spirit' of Falcon Ridge.

ANGLE ON MAN, who BURSTS out of one of the houses, the screen door flying and SLAMMING into the side of the house. The man,

DONNIE SIMPSON, heads for the street, screaming obscenities at the TOP OF HIS LUNGS.

CUT TO:

A little different, huh? The screenplay format set up the scene and included more action in 101 words than possible in the novel format, which took 200 words.

Certainly, you still have to set the tone, and give the people a sense of what the story is going to look like, but the actual physical look of the picture is not determined by you: it's up to the director and the art director. For example, the writer of "Batman" with Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson set the "tone" of the picture, but the actual "look" of the movie was up to Tim Burton (the director) and Anton Furst (the art director).

And in the case of fantastical stories (like "Aliens," "Star Wars," etc.) where the world described doesn't exist anywhere but in the imagination, these screenplays rely more on tone and feeling than actual description. And, we've all seen the incredibly detailed storyboards that are created for these movies--certainly NOT done by the screenwriter.

You have to impart a certain amount of immediacy and purpose to a screenplay, because when you get right down to it, there can be wasted pages in a novel, but every scene in a screenplay has to have a reason for being there. It costs so much to shoot a movie, and every scene takes so much time, it's important to realize now, even this early in the game, that you can't just write a scene because you like it.

It has to work in the overall picture, and if it doesn't, cut it.

There have been wonderful scenes I've written that I've wanted really badly to shoot in different movies, but on closer examination, I realized that they didn't really help the movie. So I cut them.

That doesn't mean that they were wasted: they're great scenes, and chances are they, or something close to them, will appear in another screenplay, and another movie. The ideas are still good, they just didn't fit into the movie at hand.

We all know of novels that have been turned into movies, and to be quite honest, they are usually a disappointment. A novel can be so much broader in scope and depth than a movie could ever be that it's almost asking for trouble to take a best-selling book and try to adapt it to the movies.

One celebrated recent example is the attempt to adapt Tom Wolfe's best-selling "The Bonfire of the Vanities". Documented in the book, "The Devil's Candy," the movie was plagued with troubles from the start. Everyone had an opinion about the casting, and there were attempts to simplify and alter the story in subtle ways that, the studio thought, would increase the audience and ensure success.

Well, everyone was wrong, and the movie flopped.

There have only been a few novels made into successful movies: "Gone With The Wind" and "The Godfather," to name a few. It's a tough job to make it work, but chances are people will continue to try to turn successful books into movies. The mythical lure of a "built in" audience is too great for the powers that be in Hollywood.

Most of the hugely successful movies are original stories, not taken from a successful book. Some movies are made from short stories (e.g. "Total Recall," "The Lawnmower Man," etc.), and this is easier to do, because in many cases the movie has to expand on the existing story, rather than distill it.

For action movies, the story is usually an original one, but too often it is a retread of another, already successful, story. I have always made it a point to try to do something different--to make a movie that wasn't like any others. Even if the movie fits

into a genre, as all my movies have, I try to make sure that it has something to distinguish itself from other, similar movies. A good example would be my fourth film, "The King of the Kickboxer" . At the Milan Film Festival and Market (MIF"), I was busy selling "Blood Brothers" (known here in the US as "No Retreat No Surrender 3") for Seasonal Film, when buyers approached us about a kickboxing movie. At that time, Van Dam" 's "Kickboxer" was all the rage, and everyone wanted a kickboxing movie. Suddenly, the president of Seasonal Films told the buyers we were working on a new movie called "The King of the Kickboxers"! I hid my shock and just nodded in agreement, even though we were working on no such movie, but the buyers loved the title, and that became our next project.

It was my job to come up with a story that would suit the title, and we all knew it couldn't be just a retread of "Kickboxer". It's legal to slightly rip-off a successful movie, but I don't think it's ethical. So, I went to work, trying to come up with an idea that would combine kickboxing with something else from the action genre.

And I came up with the storyline for "King". I made a trip to Thailand to soak up the ambiance and learn more about the customs, and quickly learned than anything and everything was possible in that country. I love Thailand, and especially the Thai people and their food, but it's a pretty wild place.

When I got back to the US, I was doing some research, and came across a news report about "snuff movie" here in the US--the FBI had arrested some people who had tried to buy a young boy for a snuff video, a video in which the boy would be killed while the video camera rolled. That struck a cord, and the plot for "King" came together.

THE FORMAT:

Most screenplays fit into a standard format, and the only way to understand the format and recognize how your story has to fit into it, is to look at a bunch of correctly formatted scripts. Why? Because, although there are some conventions, the format of a screenplay varies greatly from screenplay to screenplay, and any rules or regulations I give you will be proven wrong by the first screenplay you read.

There are some general guidelines to follow, and you can experiment with what you are comfortable with, and mix and match the different formats you will see. It's not so important to be exactly like another script, but to be consistent throughout your script (for example, if you are only capitalizing the first occurrence of character name, but then in the middle of the script, you start to capitalize everyone's name, it can be disconcerting for the reader, and suddenly they are concentrating on the formatting, and not the story)--inconsistencies in formatting stand out!

You want the reader, if it's a producer, the hottest star on the planet, or an agent you want to represent you, to focus on the story and not be distracted by anything else: cutesy language, pictures, formatting problems, typos, etc.

Here are some general guidelines;

1.> Character names are capitalized on FIRST use, then are in lower case from then on (except in when used to identify who is speaking the dialogue, where they are usually capitalized and centered on the page).

2.> Scenes in a spec script, or a non-shooting script, are not usually numbered.

3.> Pages are usually numbered at the top right and the bottom center.

4.> If the scenes should be numbered, they are numbered in the left margin AND the right margin, because screenplays are bound

on the left side, making it very hard to see the scene number in the left margin.

5.> Dialogue is set off by indents from the margins.

6.> Often, screen directions that include ACTION or SOUNDS are capitalized for effect.

7.> Camera movements (which should be kept to a minimum in your script), e.g. BOOM, RACK FOCUS, ZOOM, PAN, are normally capitalized.

TERMINOLOGY:

INT.: Interior
EXT.: Exterior
B.G.: Background
O.S.: Off screen
V.O.: Voice Over
C.U.: Close Up
ECU: Extreme Close Up
ZOOM: Change of Image with Lens
PAN: Camera swivel
BOOM: Camera movement up and down
DOLLY: Camera movement on a track
CRANE: Higher Camera movement
RACK FOCUS: When the lens focuses quickly from one object to another (usually front to back or back to front)

WRITING FIGHT SCENES:

The most powerful, troubling and frustrating words in an action screenplay are...

They fight!

These two simple words can result in 3 - 8 (or more) days of work, and the expenditure of a great deal of hard work, time, bumps and bruises and lots of money.

I've seen scripts where the fight scenes are called out in depth, while in others these two words say it all. It's up to the writer, ultimately,

In my scripts, I don't bother calling out all the details of the fight. I set the situation up, establish the basic parameters and the tone of the scene, make sure I delineate any special features of the fight, and then wrap it up in an interesting way, but the meat of the fight is going to be done by someone else anyway (usually a fight coordinator or stunt director), and they are going to change almost everything I would write, so there's no reason to write it.

In a spec script, however, you might want to spell out the details, though it doesn't have to be in blow by blow fashion. Just a general feeling is good enough.

I remember when we were filming a fight scene on the set of "No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers.: I was co-producer of the film, and we were setting up the scene in a parking garage not far from the Sailport Resort in Tampa, where the cast and crew were staying. The scene called for the elder of the two Donohue brothers, played by Keith Vitali, to be saved from a gang of terrorists by his younger brother (Loren Avedon). The focal point of the scene, aside from the great action sequences, was to show that Loren, though a great fighter, was out of his league when it came to fighting and killing terrorists, something that Keith as the older brother did all the time.

As written, Loren saves Keith, but because he is not trying to kill the terrorists, they keep getting back up and finally are about to kill him when Keith comes to the rescue, shooting the final three terrorists. Loren registers shock, and Keith consoles him, telling him that this is the big leagues, and he should stick to teaching Karate in his dojo.

An important scene, with important things to illustrate.
While the scene was unfolding on the set, I was watching it all carefully, to make sure that it was going according to the story I had created. At one point in the fight, however, the fight choreographer was having Loren disarm one of the terrorists, then grabbing his sword, and in one beautiful movement impaling the terrorist on his own sword, killing him.
It looked great, but it obviously couldn't happen.
If Loren was to register shock at Keith killing the terrorists at the end of the fight, how could he kill one of them earlier in the fight? I went up to the fight director, Tony Leung, a great guy and a masterful fight choreographer, and mentioned this to him. It turned out that he hadn't even read the script (!), and had no idea of the content of the scene--he was just in charge of the physical moves themselves. He quickly changed the scene around, and instead of killing the terrorist, Loren cuts him with the sword blade and continues fighting.
This kind of subtlety can easily be lost, even when you mention it in the script. That's your first line of defense: to make sure that everything of importance gets stated in the script. Whether it gets acted upon or ignored is kind of out of your hands (unless you're fortunate enough to be on the set when it is getting made--which is becoming increasingly rare in today's motion picture industry), but at least you spoke your piece.
DIALOGUE:
Dialogue is the words that the actors say during the movie. Most movie dialogue is scripted, and has to be appear in the screenplay. There are times when ad libs are called for--but you want to keep this to a minimum. Actors are not known for being creative about ad libs, and too often I've been treated to dirty words and other expletives when I've asked for ad libs.
A rule I've learned the hard way:

"When in doubt, script everything."

There are times when the actors will have some input into their character, but you have to remember, as the writer, you know the characters better than anyone else. You know what the character would say and how he/she would say it--so don't back off your position. You can listen to what someone has to say, and if it's a good idea, you can let them do it. But, you have to be careful--if you let actors change the dialogue too much, they'll get the idea that they are in charge of their character.

And they are not.

They are in charge of the performance of their character, but you are the one who created the character. And, you are the ultimate authority over what he or she says. Period.

Why is dialogue so important? After all, films and videos are visual. True, the best possible way for a film to tell a story is to show it, but some things also have to be spoken--and that's where dialogue comes in.

Dialogue at its best will do several things at once: it will advance the story, it will illuminate the character talking (and perhaps other characters), and it will touch the audience.

Dialogue at its worst will jar the senses, will make the audiences shake their heads in disbelief, and just kill time between action scenes.

To give you an example: I wrote the story for "No Retreat No Surrender II: Raging Thunder" based on an idea that Ng See Yuen had. I wrote the lead character, who was played by Loren Avedon, to be an innocent, naive young man who found himself way out of his element at the beginning of the film. By the end of the film, he had grown in many different ways, and he had become a very capable adult.

So, the first few scenes in the script, the lead's dialogue had to be almost tentative. I wrote the dialogue so that the "fish

out of water" (one of my favorite themes, by the way) idea would be communicated right away. Unfortunately, the producer of the film, who also fancied himself as a writer, changed the dialogue so that the lead came off as an egotistical, confident he-man--and thus made it so that entire story didn't work.

The lead character had nowhere to go. Where I had created a character that was shy and naive, though a great fighter who would come to realize his potential through the adventure, was transformed into a cocksure hero from the beginning, and thus there was no character growth.

And, the situations were all the same, it was just the dialogue that was different.

EXPOSITION:

Exposition is the imparting of essential knowledge that the audience has to have to understand the story. Many times, there isn't a need for exposition in dialogue. For example, the idea of love between two characters doesn't have to be said, the audience can get it from a look, or a kiss, or from what isn't said.

But, essential plot elements sometimes cannot be shown, and have to be said. It's a general rule of thumb in any kind of writing to not have your lead character do any exposition. Exposition is usually the domain of secondary characters.

Let's say you have a scene where the audience, and the other characters, are going to find out that the lead character's wife and children were brutally murdered by the big bad guy. Well, the worst possible way to handle this scene would be for the lead to do this:

LEAD

(screaming)

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND! My wife and kids were brutally murdered by that bastard! I have to get him! I can't let him live...

You see, the lead is talking almost directly to the audience, explaining a piece of information that is vital to the story. This is better handled in a more subtle way, perhaps by having the lead leave the room and have someone else explain that he is upset because the bad guy killed his family, or maybe have one of the other characters find the newspaper clipping about it, or have the lead bad guy boast about it, or something, anything, besides have the lead handle the exposition.

ASSIGNMENT

To find out how much dialogue contributes to the storyline, try something: rent a movie that you haven't seen before, and watch a couple of scenes with the sound turned completely OFF. Watch what is happening, and watch the expressions and actions of the people involved, and see if you can tell what is going on without the sound. Then, watch the same scene again and this time listen to the dialogue. How much did you miss without the dialogue? What ideas and plot points were imparted solely within the dialogue?

ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT:

Take one of your favorite movies and concentrate on one of the pivotal scenes. Watch the scene from the movie, then turn off the TV and come up with some ideas of how the scene could have been changed. BRAINSTORM these changes, without making any quality decisions, and just list the different changes you could have made.

Then, go back through this list and pick out the best idea for changing the scene.

Now, change it. Rewrite the scene you've chosen, and play it back through your mind. Decide whether it's better, and why.

PROFANITY:

Profanity and bad language are parts of life, and I've always had a debate with the people at Seasonal Film about swearing in

our movies. On the one hand, for a story to be realistic, there should be swearing, because people swear. Bad guys, drug dealers, etc. swear all the time--every other word out of their mouths, usually, is an expletive, so shouldn't the characters in a movie, if they are to be realistic, swear too? I guess so, but I hate to have swearing in my movies. Why? Because I think it shows a distinct lack of creativity. It's easy to write swear words, and I'm always reminded of the saying that people swear because they can't think of anything witty or intelligent to say.

Then there's the question of audience sensibilities: I think that some swearing is OK in an adult movie, but too much swearing is like too much sex--people get bored with it. I've sat through movies where every other word is the f-word, and I've fast forwarded through the dialogue. I can't take all that swearing.

I'm also concerned about kids in the audience. Kids shouldn't swear, but if they hear their heroes in the movies swear, they'll swear too. They hear enough profanity--they don't have to hear any more from my movies.

That's my position, and why my movies don't have a lot of swearing in it. The one exception is "The King of the Kickboxers," which was a conscious attempt to create a very hard edged, realistic action movie. I am proud of the film, but I wouldn't want kids to watch it.

Well, I take that back. At a local film festival here in Pennsylvania, "King" was being shown on the big screen at a local theater, and I took my kids to watch it. I figured that since it was probably the last chance they would have to see it on the screen, they should watch it. I had forgotten all the bad parts (blood, sex, bad language, etc.), and I spent the entire movie trying to shield my kids from these parts.

I don't think they'll be irreparably harmed by watching the movie, but they could have lived without it.

"American Shaolin" was a response to "The King of the Kickboxers" over-the-top quality. Where no kids could go to see "King," everyone could go to see "Shaolin". There was no sex, no over-the-top violence, no swear words--nothing bad, and a wholesome story about a teenager trying to find himself. I am extremely proud of that movie, and people all over the world have come to love it!

SCENE"

Rule #1: Enter a scene at the last possible moment:

Rule #2: Leave at the first possible moment:

Rule #3: If a scene doesn't do more than three things at the same time, consider getting rid of it.

Rule #4: If your scene doesn't advance the story, cut it.

Rule #5: Each scene should have a beginning and an end.

MAPPING IT OUT

I outline every scene in a screenplay before I write, so I know exactly where I am going, who is going to say what, and how it is going to start and end. I try to see it unfold in my mind, on my own internal screen, before I write it.

That doesn't mean that I am going to follow this outline completely--I might get some additional ideas during the writing, which I will incorporate into the scene, or I might decide to write the scene a different way later, but at least it gives me a framework to follow.

You don't have to do things this way: there are some writers who don't outline at all, who just sit down and bang it out. There are stories about screenwriters who have written a complete script on the plane from LA to Cannes, or lock themselves into a hotel room for two weeks, and then emerge with a finished script.

I'm not like that. I'm more methodical, and I refuse to rely on any muse, or inspiration, for my writing.

FITTING YOUR STORY INTO THE FORMAT:

Once you become familiar with the form and format of screenplays, it's a relatively easy matter to conform your story to this format.

It's easy to shrug off that additional work and tell yourself that it really doesn't matter that much, that whatever format your work is in is OK, but don't do it. Go the extra mile and redo your script--make sure it's in the best possible shape before you send it out. You'll be glad you did.

Even if whoever you send it to doesn't like your script, they'll be impressed by the "package" and the professionalism the script represents, and it will be easier to "pitch" your next project. Or, you might get work as a result of that person's familiarity with your work.

Hey, it happens. It doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen.

SELLING THE STORY

When you are just getting started, there is one thing that a screenplay has to do better than any other medium: GET READ. Once you are established, it's easier to get people to read through a script because you have credits. But, with a first script, you are competing with dozens (sometimes hundreds) of other scripts. And, you only have about 10 pages to really grab someone and make them keep reading, because most busy executives give up on an unknown script if it doesn't make them keep reading after the first 10 pages.

William Goldman, the novelist and screenwriter with such credits as "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," "The Princess Bride" and "Magic," is one of my favorite writers, and his screenplays are perfect examples of selling the story. He maintains that a screenplay should be "a good read," and you can tell that by his

screenplay writing style. Humor is laced throughout, and not just in the dialogue but in the screen directions and the exposition in the screenplay itself. His scripts are a pleasure to read, and a great education in the technique.

One of my favorite "industry" books is Goldman's "Adventures in the Screen Trade," which also happens to include the complete script for "Butch Cassidy". It's a great book, and a great deal, and I recommend that you buy and study it.

THE PACKAGE

Scripts are printed on white, high-quality bond paper, and usually bound using a three hole punch with brass fasteners. Sometimes they are spiral bound, or bound in some other way, but the most common (and probably the cheapest) is with brass fasteners.

There is always the temptation to do something different, to differentiate yourself from the rest of the crowd, and that might mean printing your entire script on neon yellow stock, or to insert graphics or clip art throughout your script. I have one piece of advice here: resist the temptation!

Certainly, you want to set yourself apart from the crowd, but the place to do it is not in the presentation of the script itself. You might do it with your resume, or with the cover of the script, but don't tamper with the words themselves.

The danger is that whoever reads the script might be turned off by a certain color, or might just throw away scripts that don't fit into the specific guidelines they have, or the colors and graphics might distract the reader from concentrating on your story--and that's the last thing you want.

There are Hollywood legends about the screenwriters who have packaged their scripts in unique ways to get a producer's attention, but the funny thing is that you hear about these

people getting their scripts read, but not selling them. You'd be better off spending the time and energy writing the script, not on the packaging.

Know what I mean?

There is a trend towards some cover art on the front of the screenplay, but the danger here is that if you can't afford high quality artwork or graphics, you end up looking worse than if you only had the title on the cover. Unless you have some dynamite art that looks incredible (and other people think it looks incredible), leave the front page blank except for the title and perhaps your name.

TYPOS: Don't have any. I know that's hard to do, but in this day and age of word processing equipment and spell/grammar checkers, there's no excuse for having typos in your work. If you don't have access to a computer, ask several people to proof your work, and have them mark up the script. Then, go through and change the typos--don't just white them out and hand write the changes in: put the script back in the typewriter and make sure it looks perfect.

I'm a little bit particular about this: before I send anything out, it has to be as close to perfect as I can make it. That means if there is a smudge on one of the pages, I redo it and then send it out. Quality control in any business is vital, and it's also true in the writing business. Make sure the words on the page are perfect AND correct--then you can send the work out with confidence--and that confidence will show through.

I've gotten a lot of scripts and treatments for movies that look hastily done, and to be honest I try to give them all the consideration they deserve, but it's a lot easier to do that when the scripts are legible, free of typos and easy to read.

CHAPTER 6

"Production is war"

This is one of the major lessons I've learned from working on ten feature films and numerous videos: production is tough and demanding WORK. It's not glamorous, it's not a great deal of fun (oh, there are fun times, but too much fun and not enough work gets done), and the hours are really, really long.

It's not so bad on the talent side, because there are tremendous lulls between shots, etc., but on the production side, especially if you in a position where you have to watching everything (like a producer), there is little chance to relax during the work day, and that work day is usually (for low budget) 14 to 16 hours long--and sometimes more--my longest work day was 26 hours (so far).

Multiply that by up to 80 days ("American Shaolin" was 86 shooting days, and there were times when we went 9 days in a row without a day off), and you have a feeling for what production is like, and what the people go through making a movie.

Given this incredible time and effort commitment, it's imperative for a production to be well-organized. Even with great organization, problems happen every hour upon the hour. If you're not organized, the problems will probably happen every second!

There are basically four phases to production, and here they are:

DEVELOPMENT:

The "development" stage is when a project is given the "green light" to go forward...in theory. Many projects, once they are put into development, are then never made. Development means that the go-ahead is given for the script to be written and the principals (e.g. director, production team, major stars, etc.) to be contacted and then attached to the project.

Stars and directors are very fickle, and they may not like one version of the script, or one star might not want to work with a certain director, so development can be any range of time. For me, development (the actual time it takes to write the script) takes about 2 months, and then we proceed into the next phase, pre-production.

I've read about other projects and their development, and I know that this development stage can last up to 5 or more years. One project, the recent "Alien 3," was referred to in the press as "the development deal from hell". Because ideas are so intangible, what one person likes another might hate, and if too many people are involved in the development process, you can have a very difficult time. I am a firm believer in the "vision" of a writer or creator, and if you try to listen to too many people, that "vision" will ultimately get distorted and lose the special ingredient that it had in the beginning.

A real tip off to a project that has problems is when the writers are not the same as the person/people who created the idea.

When there are more than two writers on a project, watch out!

PRE-PRODUCTION:

Pre-production is the period immediately before the actual filming of the movie starts. In development, the money is not necessarily all there yet (usually, there is enough to pay the writer and maybe make a down payment to the producer or production team), but in pre-production, the money for the production is usually in place. There have been productions that have been ready to go, and have had the plug pulled the night before they started filming, but that's relatively rare.

Pre-production is when all the hiring for the production is done, locations are nailed down, casting is started and completed, equipment is rented, props are arranged for (bought,

rented, created, etc.), sets are started on, script revisions are done, wardrobe is purchased, makeup tests are done, and rehearsals are started with the talent.

HIRING: Filming a movie involves assembling anywhere between 60 - 200+ crew people and getting to work. This is a small, independent company, and everyone has to work together to create a movie. Before you can film a movie, you have to hire all these workers, known as the "crew".

All the crew members are basically independent contractors, freelance workers who work on a number of films and other projects throughout the year. Often, the camera crew will be more or less a unit (cinematographers usually have their own people that work with them on most of their shoots), but all the other people will come from all sorts of background, and may not know each other. All these people have to be found and hired, and their schedules have to agree with your shooting schedule. This is more difficult than it seems, because not everyone you want is going to be available. One assistant director might be available for the first three weeks, but then he/she has to leave and go to another movie on which he/she is already contracted to work, while this Director of Photography can go now, but if you have to delay, you're going to have to find another Director of Photography. It gets pretty interesting, and it's a real challenge to put together a crew that can work together well.

One of biggest problems on a film set is the working conditions: hours, amenities, pay, etc. As mentioned above, the hours are very long, and the work itself can be very difficult. Because of this, film people are usually paid more than others (also, because the work is so sporadic, the pay is higher to compensate for the down times), and attention is paid to the working conditions (making sure there are comfortable chairs, the meals

come on time, there is plenty to eat and drink between meals, etc.).

For all my talk about hard work, however, I have to be honest. Working on a film set is difficult, and taxing, and exhausting, but it sure beats digging ditches or working at McDonald's, or any other kind of back breaking work. And, I try to keep that in mind when I'm on the set, and it continually runs through my mind when someone on the set complains that the right mineral water isn't there, or bitches that the meal is 5 minutes late. I am tempted to tell them to get a job in the real world, and remember how lucky everyone is, including myself, to be working in the film industry--and making the kind of money we are getting paid.

There are many levels of pay on a film set, and before the end of a shoot, most everyone knows how much everyone else is making--and that can cause a great deal of friction" Usually, pay is equivalent with talent and experience, but not all the time. For example, sometimes the drivers on a film set make more than the people actually making the movie, and that doesn't seem quite right. But, the Teamsters Union is behind the drivers, and they negotiate (sometimes with force being a factor) for the drivers very zealously, and you have a situation where someone who drives the truck to the set, then sits around sleeping all day will make more than someone who actually has a responsibility to make an impact on the film. Sure, you can make a case for the driver making an impact on the film (making sure everything is there on time, making sure the truck is safe, etc.), but it wears a little thin when you take it too far.

Then you run into the actor or actress with a recognizable name or face, and the pay they receive is so out of proportion to what other people are making, all you can do is shake your head. A has-been actor, who has a face that people will recognize (but

not necessarily equate with quality) can cost up to $25,000 a week, or more.

And, then you have the "fresh face" category--every one is looking for the next "flavor of the month," the next Van Damme or Bruce Lee. Sort of like first round draft picks in football, you really don't know what you are going to get when you hire an unknown. These actors and actresses, and their agents, trade on their "potential," and ask for incredible amounts of money.

For example, I was negotiating with an actor that I would not have known from Adam, and we were considering making him an offer that we thought was quite good given his background and experience. He had played some small roles in pictures that really didn't go anywhere, and he wasn't a great martial artist, but he had "something".

I called his agent and made a nice offer, and was extremely surprised to have his agent counter with $250,000 for 10 weeks of work--this for an actor with two small roles in features! It was unbelievable, and so out of the question that I couldn't help but laugh. Needless to say, we didn't use the kid.

ABOUT MOTIVATION:

When I'm making a movie, I'm concentrating so much on getting everything perfect that I often forget about such luxuries as dinner and time off. I don't really forget, I'm just willing to sacrifice these things in order to get things right. That's a commitment not everyone is going to share with you.

In fact, very few people will share it with you. Because it's your story, or it's your first break, or it's your face up there on the screen, you don't mind missing lunch, or working a little harder or longer.

The technicians working on the film will probably not feel the same way, however. To them, making this movie is just another job--a good job, sure, but just another job. They are often more

concerned about filling their belly than they are about getting the shot just right, and when it comes time to working longer and harder, they want to get to bed, or just get off so they can go out on the town.

Don't get me wrong: the majority of film people are very interested in the "art" of making movies, and they don't mind working hard as long as they are rewarded, and they believe in what they are doing. But, as in everything, there are those workers who want nothing more than to punch the clock, put their time in, and then go home. They don't want any hardships, and they will complain at the drop of a hat.

It's best not to hire these people, obviously, but sometimes the way a person acts in an interview is completely different from how they behave on the set. I've had several confrontations over the years, and I always have a hard time dealing with it. To me, it boggles my mind when an adult will cause a big deal over dinner being 30 minutes late--there are bigger considerations, or at least I think there are. Then again, if I was the person waiting for dinner, I might be different. I'm calling the shots, and it's easy for me to forego dinner, or a rest break.

I'm not sure I've been especially effective in dealing with people like this. I don't know the right way to handle this kind of a situation--I just want to let you know that as you make movies, you will run up against people like this...and I guess in a subtle way I am advising you not to have an attitude like these workers.

Believe in what you are doing enough to sacrifice small things (like meal breaks, some comforts, etc.) for it. If you can't do that, get out of the industry.

When dealing with unions, there are rules that govern everything from meal breaks to turnaround (the time between getting off work and going back to work--for actors, this is usually 12

hours) to overtime pay. I have had my share of dealing with unions (like the Screen Actors Guild, SAG, the Teamsters, and others), and I have found them to be particularly inflexible and very unsympathetic to the unique problems of filming. Some examples of union "logic":

>When filming a scene in New Jersey, we ran into a clause called "preference of employment" for actors. We were supposed to hire actors from New York, but if we hired someone from Southern New Jersey (where we were filming), we had to pay them as if they were driving from New York...

>Even if a SAG actor is late for the crew bus, the company is penalized. There might be 10 other SAG actors on the bus, but they get paid from the moment they get on the bus, regardless of the fact that it is another SAG actor who is causing the delay.

>There are lists of penalties to production companies a mile long, but no penalties whatsoever for actors.

SCHEDULING:

Scheduling is the art of mapping out how the movie is actually going to be shot, on a day to day and week to week basis. Movies are not normally shot in sequence--they are shot according to a number of different considerations: whatever is easiest (without harming the performances), whatever is cheapest (no matter the harm to the performances) and whatever seems to be the best way to do it.

OUT OF SEQUENCE:

Sometimes the end of a movie will be filmed first, because the location is only available during that time, while the beginning might be last thing shot. It all depends on the variables (locations, actor schedules, etc.) unique to each production. It is up to the production manager to handle the schedule, and to make changes as the movie proceeds.

And things do change. Sometimes (actually, this happens quite often), scenes take much longer to shoot than they were scheduled to take, and that impacts on the rest of the schedule. When we were filming the bar fight in "No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers," we originally scheduled it for 14 hours, and it ended up going an extra day, and that final day lasted 20 hours! That meant that the rest of the schedule had to be adjusted to make up for the extra day, plus the rest the crew needed to compensate for the 20 hour day! As you can see, the schedule cannot be written in stone, and keeping up with the schedule can get very complicated.

Usually, the schedule is designed so that the scenes in a particular location, or scenes with the same group of actors, etc. are lumped together. If you have a particularly expensive actor, you will want to be able to film that actor's scenes in one group, so that the actor isn't stretched over several weeks, when one week could do it. In "No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers," we used Joe Campanella, a great guy and fantastic actor. Because he was a bit pricey, we managed to schedule his scenes in the movie over a week, and we got him in and out quickly, and were able to spend the time we needed with other actors. With professionals, it's possible to schedule scenes quite tightly, because (supposedly) they can perform on cue. That means that actors who are paid less are normally scheduled over a greater period of time--now, this can actually be in an actor's favor. Let's say that you are working on a feature, and you are getting scale wages--about $1,400 a week. Not bad, but the lowest allowed by the union. Compare that with another actor who drove a harder deal and increased his weekly payment--well, the producers are going to schedule his time more tightly, to get him on and off the set much quicker. But, in your case, they will be much more flexible with your time, and you will end up

being in more scenes, more shots and you will probably get a lot more exposure. Depends on how you look at it--you have less waiting around time if you are scheduled tightly, but you could also be less of a force in the film.

Sure, you ended up getting less money, but you have to balance that off with the screen time you ended up with. If you make a real impact in that movie, you can ask for money next time around. It's all a trade off, and when you are just starting out, you can and almost have to be much more flexible with time and money.

Filming has so many different variables, it is impossible to predict what is going to happen. In the most innocent and simple scenes can turn out to be nightmares. In "The King of the Kickboxers," we had hired an established actor to play a part, and were expecting a very smooth day. It was a simple scene, on a set in Hong Kong, and I expected to be out at my favorite Thai restaurant by 5:00 p.m., when this actor came rushing up to me right before the shoot started.

"Keith, I can't remember my lines," he said, looking very worried. I thought he was joking, and tried to usher him onto the set, where the director was waiting. He wasn't joking--he couldn't remember his lines, and I've never had a more frustrating and longer day. Every section of dialogue had to be chopped to bits so that he could deliver the dialogue line by line. We hid lines of dialogue throughout the set, so he could look off camera and have his lines right before him. If you watch closely, you can see him find the dialogue and then begin talking. In fact, we allowed him to put on his glasses in the blocking of the scene, so that he could use them to read his lines!

In situations like this, often there is nothing you can do but carry on and hope for the best--no amount of anger or yelling is

going to make that actor remember his lines. You just have to be patient and pray that you will get through it.

The most maddening part of this above story is that before we actually started filming, this actor said to me, "Keith, I'll do anything you want me to do today. I'll work as late as I have to to get the scene. But, if we have to go into tomorrow, you'll have to pay me an extra day!"

Imagine, it was a problem of his own creation and he still had the gall to tell me that I'd have to pay him if we went over! We finished with him that day, and put him on a plane out of Hong Kong (and my life) right after that. And, I never got to my Thai restaurant.

There's no justice in this world.

IN SEQUENCE:

Sometimes a film, or at least part of a particular film, HAS to be shot in sequence: in "American Shaolin," we had to film all the scenes where the lead character, Drew, had hair, before we shaved it all off. It was difficult, because we had a couple of different locations and it would have been easy (and saved quite a lot of time and money) to get all the scenes in these locations at one time, but we couldn't do it because of the head shaving problem. Drew and the other disciples had to have their hair shaved off: we couldn't use a wig for all those scenes that required hair, and we couldn't use a skull cap for the ones where the heads had to be shaved.

We did cheat a couple of scenes: the actual Shaolin Temple was the last location on the schedule, because it was so far out of the way. Most of the filming we did took place in a 20 hour driving radius around Shanghai, while the Shaolin Temple required an overnight train trip, and a plane flight. So, we put a wig on Drew for those two short scenes, and I can tell, but I'm not sure anyone else will be able to tell.

REHEARSALS:

This is a point that I have given quite a lot of thought to: it is my opinion that rehearsals are vital in the making of a motion picture. Not everyone agrees with this. Director Lucas Lowe (who did NRNS 3, "King" and "American Shaolin") looks at them as pretty much a waste of time.

My perspective is the more preparation you can get done before you actually film the better. If you are getting ready to shoot a scene and find out that an actor has a predefined idea of the scene (or the character, or the story, etc.) that doesn't jive with the director, the set is not the place to settle this confusion. You should hammer that all out in rehearsals, so you make sure that everyone is clear about the story, about the different characters, and have a sense of where the film is going, and how it is going to get there.

I prefer to involve the actors in the process, and understanding is vital for this, and rehearsals are great for ironing out differences and getting input. It's also a great time to hear again what the script sounds like, this time coming out of the mouths of the actors themselves, and giving me the opportunity to make last minute revisions or additions.

Lowe is more a dictatorial type of director, and he doesn't want any input. He sees the actors as little more than props, and just wants them to show up for work and do what they are told. American actors, however, don't normally work that way. They like to understand why they are doing what they are doing, and they don't take kindly to being ordered around.

This was the biggest cause of friction on the sets of our movies: the clash between Lowe's method and the way the actors wanted it. Sometimes we met in the middle, sometimes Lowe wouldn't budge, and the actors wanted to kill him. I didn't agree with his methods, and often I was at loggerheads with him

about his interpretation of the script, but that's the way it is on a film set.

And, about the actual images that end up on the screen, the director has the final say. The writer can make a stink, the actors can argue and bitch, but the bottom line is that what the director says, goes.

That is, unless the producer steps in and tells the director to do it a certain way or he or she is going to have to start looking for work.

Now do you understand why I wanted to become a producer as well as a writer?

PRODUCTION

The best characterization of production is "hurry up and wait". Everyone rushes around trying to get things exactly right, then everyone ends up waiting around for some item that someone forgot.

Especially in action movies, where a lot of the filming is of fight scenes, everything is rushed to get the point of actually rolling the cameras, and it might an hour or two to get one particular shot. This hurrying up and then waiting is a lot like a martial arts tournament--where you warm up, then sit around, then fight, then warm up again, then fight, then sit around...It can be remarkably draining if you're not prepared for it.

A TYPICAL DAY:

The standard day starts with a 7:00 am call, which means that is when people are to report to the set. Usually, some of the people will show up earlier than that to "prep," to get the set ready. If, for example, the lights have to be set, the lighting engineers are called in ahead of time to get that done, so everyone on the crew doesn't have to hang around waiting for the lights to be set.

The actors aren't normally called in until close to the time that they will be used. So, if the entire crew has a call of 7:00 am, but the lead actors won't start filming until 11:00 am, they are given a call of 10:00 am (to give them enough time to get into wardrobe and makeup, and be ready to film at 11:00 am). This part of scheduling the production day can get a little hairy, because if things go really smoothly and quicker than expected, you can end up just sitting around on your hands waiting for the talent to arrive at their call time. But, if you have the talent come in too early, they will just sit around, burning time and money. It's a delicate balancing act.

So, if the call is 7:00 am, the first thing that everyone does is eat breakfast off the "craft services" table. Craft service is the department that is responsible for the food and drinks on the set. Usually, this spread of food is quite nice, to make up for some of the difficulties of shooting. It's important that the crew members, who can't just run out to the local Quick Mart to get a drink or a snack, can pick up something to eat when they are hungry. Crew members and talent cannot leave the set, so the things they might need have to be on the set. If they're not, you end up with a lot of disgruntled and unhappy employees. After everyone gets a donut or a yogurt or a bagel or a cup of coffee, the work day begins. The efficiency of a crew can be gauged pretty well by the amount of time it takes to get off the first shot. Usually, I strive to have the first shot rolled within 45 minutes of everyone showing up for work. Sometimes, given the complexity of a scene and the amount of preparation that has to be done, that can be very unrealistic, so this expectation has to be revised depending on the circumstances.

I truly believe that the pace of the day is largely dependent on the kind of start you get--and I think that's true for writing,

or working out, or almost anything. If you get a clean start, without a lot of delays, the day seems to go much smoother.
The actual pace of production is pretty slow. A 14 hour day of filming is lucky to finish a little more than a page of the script, and some days it's impossible to get even that. Since one page equals one minute, just imagine that 14 hours of work results in about one minute of usable screen time. Pretty slow work, huh?
There are days where you can get as much as 5 pages done in the script, if it's heavy on dialogue or simple action. But, I have been on location and only gotten one paragraph of the script (remember the words "they fight"?) in a whole 14 hour day.
The amount covered in a day is also gauged by "set ups". A set up is a camera location move: meaning that if the camera and lights are moved and 'set up" in another position, that counts as one set up. I like to average between 25 and 35 set ups a day. I've heard of movies where the average is about 5 set ups a day--they must either be very difficult shots, or the movie has a lot of money to burn, or both!
Why does it take so much time for a "set up"? Because whenever the camera is moved, the lights have to be moved, the set has to be rearranged, and the blocking of the actors for the camera has to be altered to make sure everything is exactly right. This takes time, and lots of it.
BLOCKING:
"Blocking" is the mapping out of how actors are going to move through a shot. Though it doesn't seem to be that critical, even if a shot only requires an actor to walk across a room and sit down, the actor has to be able to walk exactly where the director and the DP tell him to--that's called "hitting his mark". If an actor can't hit his marks, the shot will probably be useless and have to be redone.

Why? Like any other camera, the film camera has to be manually focused, and the camera angle and position has a great deal to do with how attractive the shot is. If the actor is not where he is supposed to be, the focus could be off, or the composition of the shot could be affected, or the other actors in the scene could be thrown off by the one who made the mistake.

Because there is so much attention paid to the composition of a shot in feature films (it's not enough to just point the camera at the scene and shout "Action"), it's vital that actors and extras all hit their marks.

RETAKES:

Though preparation of a shot is the most time-consuming process on a film set, shooting one shot over and over can almost be as bad. There are times when a simple action, or even just a simple line of dialogue becomes extremely time-consuming and wasteful--eating up precious production time.

There was a shot of a bell on a judge's table in the final scene of "American Shaolin.” The extra who was supposed to ring the bell just couldn't get it right. We shot that single action for about an hour, trying extra after extra and getting more and more frustrated. We finally got the shot, but I know it wasn't worth the aggravation--it takes about 1 second of screen time, and nobody after seeing the movie is going to say "Great shot with the bell!"

The point here is that while some shots are vital and have to be done perfectly, there are a lot of shots that don't have to perfect. On the flip side, however, you have to be wary of compromising so much that the overall quality of the film is lowered. You have to know which shots are vital, and which are marginal--and make decisions accordingly. That comes with experience and a feeling for the medium.

CUTTING SCENES:

The most painful thing for a writer is cutting whole SCENES, not just shots. I hadn't really had much experience with having to cut scenes until we started filming "American Shaolin," and for some reason things that we had shot ended up on the cutting room floor, and scenes we hadn't even shot yet were being cut.

I said "for some reason," but I know the reason: the direction. Scenes that were scripted for 2 minutes were filmed to run 4 minutes, and if we had shot everything in the 106 page script (remember 106 pages should equal 106 minutes) the movie might have been 4 hours long. Our first rough cut of what we did shoot was 20 reels, about twice the length it should have been!

So, I was faced with the unpleasant job of deciding what scenes we had to do without. I didn't like the job, but better me than someone else to make these calls. There were some great scenes (see Appendix #1) that were cut before shooting, and it hurt, but I knew we couldn't keep them and sell the film (nobody wants to buy a 4 hour action picture when a standard action picture is about 90 minutes).

There were some scenes in particular that were difficult to shoot and time-consuming, without a whole lot of benefit to the film. One such shot was a night scene of the group of disciplines passing through a street party for the "Mid Autumn Festival". It would have taken an entire night to shoot the scene, and it was basically a transition from the temple to the real scene--of a party at a local girls' school. We cut the scene, and the movie flows just fine from one scene to the next.

There were definitely scenes we couldn't cut--scenes that included information necessary to understanding the characters and the plot. We have all seen movies where the plot is very unclear--and many times it's because crucial scenes have been cut, deemed as "unnecessary".

MEALS:

As mentioned above, there is a craft service "breakfast" in the morning, and then 6 hours into the shoot comes a hot, catered lunch. If the production goes longer than 6 hours past lunch, and it often does, the crew normally gets a "walking meal" (which means that we don't actually break from shooting to sit down and eat, but that everyone just stands where they are and eats the meal--usually pizza or chicken, etc.) or a "wrap meal," which is a meal that is served right after "wrap" is called. The meals are normally pretty good--maybe not nutritionally, but they taste great.

THE "WRAP":

The three best words after a long day are "That's a wrap! The signal to end the production day, it is a moment for celebration. It is at wrap that the next day's call sheet is handed out, the schedule of scenes for the following day.

If the production company is coming back to the same location to finish a scene that is in progress, the set is called a "HOT SET," which means that nothing is to be touched or moved, to leave it exactly the same for the set up for the next day. If the set is wrapped too, it can be broken down and removed.

The "Abbey Singer" shot on a set is the second to last shot of the day. It was nicknamed the "Abby Singer," I am told, after a producer of the same name who would continually say a shot was the last shot of the day, only to remember a shot yet to shoot.

The "Martini" shot is the last shot of the day, and you have to be very careful about announcing the Martini shot. If you do it prematurely, and it turns out it's not the last shot, you can get a lot of people angry at you in short order. Nobody likes being told they are about to go home, and then finding out they are looking at another hour of work!

POST PRODUCTION:

Post production is the portion of the process that concerns itself with readying the film for actual distribution. It is during this phase that the editing gets done, the music gets chosen and matched to the picture, sound mixing is done, looping (where actors re-record dialogue and sounds that weren't captured perfectly when the movie was shot) is performed, and the actual promotion of the picture (the generation of advertising copy, posters, etc.) gets started.

Production, in short, is a huge headache, from start to finish. It is, however, worth it when the film you end up with is a good one. I could never imagine spending that kind of money, time and incredible effort on something that I really didn't care about.

My worst, and at the same time my most worthwhile, production experience was "American Shaolin" . It was the hardest picture of all, but it is easily our best.

We had problems from every possible department and some problems we never even expected. We had problems with the actors, problems with the community, workers, problems with the film stock and the camera equipment, problem with the food (in many cases it was inedible!), problems with the technical ability of some of the crew, problems with injuries, and many, many others. We had people trying to kill the director, and actors holding out for more money at the last minute. We had an actor that wanted to go home as soon as he got to China, and a director who was having so much fun he didn't seem to want to finish the picture.

We even had communist cadres who were questioning the content of the film, and monks who wouldn't stop chanting while we filmed dialogue scenes.

On the one hand, it was a production nightmare, but on the other hand it was probably the most gratifying work I've done, because I truly believe the movie is a great one. It's the best thing

I've done to date, and I know things will just get better from here on in.

The work is hard, harder than many things I've ever done, and it certainly is not glamorous. It's not bright lights and big cities for production people (it's usually motels and TV dinners), but it's fun. The people you work with can be fantastic, and you can form friendships that will last forever. Some of the people I have worked with, Keith Vita" , Michael DePasquale, Jr. and Cliff Lenderman, will be my friends for the rest of my life.

Let me be candid on one point: I hate being on location. It takes me away from my family (I have a wife and two sons) for months at a time, which is very hard on them, not to mention on me!

Also, I like working, and there is so much frustrating waiting on the set that I find it hard to be on location. At the same time, I have so much invested in my screenplays that I insist on going on location.

My work schedule when I am at home is usually 5:30 am - 5:00 p.m., and then usually a couple of hours a night on the phone to the Orient, or on the computer on line service teaching screenwriting and writing ("America Online"--screen name, KeithS821@aol.com). I am doing something every minute of the day, and I am in control of what I do and how I do it. When I go on location, I am not always in control (there is only a certain pace that people can move at, and no amount of supervision or pressure will make them safely move faster than that), so I am often at the mercy of fogged lenses or actors in make up, and it's frustrating.

But, the bottom line is that to me, it's worth it if I can get a story made that says something: entertaining people in a different way

CHAPTER 7

WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE A MOVIE

Money.

It takes money to make a movie, and lots of it. The range of budgets for motion pictures is very wide, from $10,000 to $50,000,000, and everything in between. The majority of martial arts movies are relatively lower budget, usually under $1 Million--that seems to be the most lucrative budget level for martial arts/action adventure movies.

Still, there are a handful of higher budget martial arts movies made: Jean Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal usually make one or two a year, while there might be a couple of others made with relative unknowns every year. These movies come in at about $10 - $15 Million, which is close to the average of a independent or small scale studio picture nowadays (running up to $25 Million). Then, you get the blockbusters, the huge pictures like "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" or "Batman Returns" or "Hook" which have extraordinary budgets, and are star-studded and crammed with enough technical wizardry to justify the huge dollar amount spent.

Why are movies so expensive to make? There are a number of different reasons:

STARS:

When Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger get up to $12 Million for their role in a movie, the entire budget gets incredibly inflated. In "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves," Sean Connery was paid $500,000 for one day's work as King Richard! When you are paying that kind of money, it's very hard to control the budget.

THE PRODUCTION:

When you are making a big budget picture, the cost of the other cast members and the crew members goes up proportionally to the

cost of the lead--the thinking is that you can't skimp and save on pictures like this. Everything has to be top drawer: and they end up paying through the nose for it.

THE EXPECTATION:

Nobody that has been making big budget movies wants to go back to making low budget movies--except maybe the person who is footing the bill. So, when it's a big budget, Schwarzenegger vehicle, everyone has expectations for payment: from the craft service people to the owner of a given location. We used a lot of locations in Florida during the filming of "No Retreat No Surrender 3: Blood Brothers" for no cost at all, because we were a low budget, martial arts picture. If we had been a "Tom Cruise Picture," those locations would have suddenly become extremely expensive.

People expect a big budget picture to pay big money, while lower budget movies can make better deals. Big budget pictures tend to throw money at a problem when it rears its ugly head, because they have the money to throw. In low budget, sometimes called "guerrilla film-making," the money isn't there to throw, so you have to come up with a way to solve the problem without paying any money.

It's makes for an interesting challenge, I'll tell you that.

BUDGETING:

Before a film can be started, you have to have an exact idea of what things are going to cost you--so you know that you have enough money to get the film finished (though there have been films that have been started without enough money, and the film already shot was used as a proof of quality to get more money). This means that every single item (down to donuts and yogurt for the crew in the morning and up to the stars' wages) has to be accounted for (as well as emergency categories for those expenses that crop up every day--like when the kid with the boom

box won't stop playing his music loud while you are doing an intimate dialogue scene until you give him $50)--and listed in the budget.

TALENT:

A large portion of the budget goes toward the talent--the actors. In a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) movie, there are regulations for minimum wages that must be paid, including pension and welfare payments and pension plan payments (11% of the total amount paid).

DIRECTOR:

The director is a very important person to the film, and he is paid accordingly. The director is the visionary, the one who is able to take the written word and translate it to the screen. The difference between a mediocre movie and a good one could be the direction.

The director is responsible for the overall look of the movie, the feel of the picture, as well as for the performances of the actors throughout the movie. Sometimes the director is involved in the editing process, but it is rare that a director has the final say in the editing--that's up to the editor and the executive producers.

Recently, many movies that didn't particularly succeed at the box office have come out on video with special "director's cuts" (some movies that did do well financially have also done this--"Lawrence of Arabia," "Dances With Wolves," etc.)--the idea is that the director thinks he knew better than the studio, and the studio or distributor is going to see if he's right.

So, the director is paid quite a lot of money, though nowhere near the wages of the best actors. The fee paid to a director can range anywhere from $20,000 (for a first time director on a low budget film) to a Million dollars or more.

In today's day and age, people go to see Van Damme movies, or they see Tom Cruise movies--the majority of the movie going public doesn't really go to see movies by a particular director. Sure, there are some directors that almost guarantee quality (Spielberg, Coppolla, etc.), but these are rare and are at the highest echelons of the current crop of directors.

SCREENPLAY:

The cost for production companies to buy the rights to film a screenplay is all over the board. Joe Esterhaus received $3 Million for his screenplay of "Basic Instinct" (and then they hired another writer to do a rewrite!), but that was the highest price ever paid for a screenplay (or so it appears). There are, however, writers out there working in the low budget field who are working for $2,500 (and sometimes less! Sometimes FREE!) for a complete script. Both extremes are ridiculous, and most screenplays fall somewhere in the middle. Bigger budget productions pay between $250,000 - $500,000 for the script, while lower budget movies have to pay significantly less because of their budget restrictions.

I have been approached by production companies who pay lip service to wanting a quality script, to wanting to get the script completely right, but then aren't willing to pay any money at all for a script. I've been offered $5,000 for a complete script (I turned them down, of course), and I've been offered $10,000 and $20,000 for the same, and I turned those down too. To me, the script is the blueprint for a movie, and a great deal of the success of a picture depends on the quality of the script and the quality of the ideas inside the script. If a company is not willing to acknowledge the importance of a script, and pay money commensurate with that performance, then I don't want to work with them.

It's tempting to take these jobs, especially when I'm between projects and need the money, but I have to stick to my guns. My ideas, I think, will make the movie succeed, and if I'm not going to be compensated for the creation of those ideas, it's not worth it.

Unfortunately, there are many companies that think that the most important part of a film's success is the video box, and they spend more money on the design of the poster or the box cover than they do on the script--and the movies stink!

PAYING YOUR DUES:

Just starting out, however, you might have to work with a company like this, just to get some credits. Look at Roger Corman, President of Concorde: Corman specializes in spotting undeveloped talent, and exploiting and taking advantage of that talent until the talent wakes up and refuses to work for him anymore. Jack Nicholson, among others, started out with Roger Corman--and you know you'll never see him working for Corman again.

I basically worked for nothing on my first picture: I was paid $12,000 for writing the script and acting as second assistant director and translator: for four months work! You might think that I got the raw end of the deal, but I didn't really. I was able to parlay that experience into a good career, and I've been able to make more money with each picture, while still working for the same company.

You can't expect to get paid a great deal of money up front, right away. If you don't have a track record, why should anyone pay you anything but entry-level wages--the worst in the industry? It wouldn't make fiscal sense to pay someone who is basically unproven anything more. After you get some credits, and have proven yourself, the money will start coming.

It's the same in any other industry (except professional sports)--but you have to be prepared for it. Most people who try to get into the film industry expect the money to be great from the start, and it's not. Go into the film industry with your eyes open--know that you are going to have to pay your dues, and have some money saved up for this time so you don't starve.

I've been very fortunate, I think. I got involved with Seasonal Film Corp., which is a very ethical and quality company. I have heard horror stories about other companies, and have had some experience with the shysters out there. I had a deal with a company out in Hollywood to write a screenplay that they were going to film in the Philippines, but they backed out before I started the script, and I was only paid a portion of the deal because I hadn't started writing the script.

On another deal, the company got as far as advertising the new picture at the Milan Film Festival, but the deal never went through. They wanted to buy the screenplay at such ridiculous, unfavorable terms to me that I just had to say no. It was tough to do, but I think my dedication to my ideals will be rewarded eventually.

Either that or I'll be working behind the counter at the next McDonald's you walk into. You want some fries to go with that Big Mac?

PERCENTAGE POINTS:

The one portion of the formula that I haven't dealt with yet is "points". Sometimes, with the best deals, you can negotiate a percentage of the revenue of the pictures you work on. In some cases, very low budget films will do this: defer payment until the film has been sold--meaning that they don't pay anything up front (or they only make a token payment), with the promise of future payments to be made when the movie starts to make money.

Big stars can command a percentage of the gross revenue of a film: Jack Nicholson supposedly had a gross percentage of "Batman," and his take was incredible because of the worldwide success of the movie. Kevin Costner also had a portion of the worldwide gross of "Dances With Wolves," which turned out to be very lucrative.

What's the difference between gross points and net points? Money. Net points are the percentage to be paid out after all expenses (and gross profit participants) are paid for: which almost always translates to: no money at all. Take for example the picture "Coming To America," a phenomenal worldwide hit starring Eddie Murphy. Despite its grossing an incredible amount of money all over the world, Paramount (the producer and distributor) claimed that it hadn't made any money. Expenses and gross point payout had swallowed all the money--and net profit participants didn't get a cent (this may all change with the fall out from the Paramount Pictures - Art Buchwald law suit).

Let's say you are a net profit participant, for 2%, in a picture that grosses $10,000,000 domestically: production costs amount for $2,000,000, the cost of prints and advertising for the theatrical release is $4,000,000, the share paid out to the theaters is $4,000,000--already, that $10,000,000 is gone. The video revenues will be eaten up by video advertising and duplication costs, as well as corporate overhead. So, even though you have 2% of the movie, and it has been successful, you'll never see any money.

If you were a gross participant, however, even at 2% of the gross, you would have made $200,000!

It's very hard to make a gross deal--actually, near to impossible unless you are a major star.

But, it's something to shoot for, that's for sure

CHAPTER 8

MECHANICS OF THE CAMERA:

To understand the film making process, it's important to at least have a working knowledge of the technical side of making a movie. Despite all the politics and the headaches of production, and regardless of the complexity and beauty of the script, if the camera doesn't work properly, it all goes for naught.

I haven't had a great deal of experience with faulty equipment (usually the cameras rented are meticulously maintained and extremely well operating, so, aside from small glitches, there aren't a lot of problems), but when it happens, there is nothing you can do until you get it fixed.

Sure, you can rehearse, you can go over the schedule one more time, you can do a bunch of other things, but you can't do the one thing you have paid all these people to be on set for--film.

During the filming of "American Shaolin," we had some equipment problems, where the film somehow got damaged (either because of a faulty camera, or because the lab that developed the film had a problem), and several very important portions of scenes were unusable! We had to go back and re-shoot these scenes, at an incredible cost of time and energy, not to mention having to redo something that was already perfect--except for a technical problem.

When something like that happens, you have to be prepared for it by having a general understanding of how a camera works, and how it can go wrong. That doesn't mean you have to be able to fix the camera when it breaks down--that is usually the responsibility of the camera department, or the equipment house--but at least you can understand what the problem is, and what it means for the production.

Even if all that means is that you'll be able to nod understandingly when you are told the production has to shut down.

FILMING:

Even though a film shows "action" on the screen, there is really no actual movement: the movie camera is basically just a very high quality camera taking still photographs at a high rate of exposure. Standard shooting format for 35mm photography is 24 frames per second: that means that the film is pulled past the "gate," the exposure aperture, at a rate of 24 frames of film per second. The aperture or shutter clicks open and shut to expose these frames, and when the film is shown, played back, at normal speed, there is the illusion of motion and action on the screen (kind of like those "flip books" from long ago--if you flipped them fast enough, you'd see a "movie").

Slow motion is, surprisingly, not accomplished by slowing down the camera but by speeding it up! More than 24 frames per second go through the camera, and when the film is played back at normal (24 frames per second) speed, it appears that the motion is slowed down on screen.

In many martial arts/action films the fight scenes are speeded up so that unnatural and ugly pauses are eliminated or skipped over--this is more apparent in some movies than in others--and this is done by slowing down the frames per second speed during filming. Many Hong Kong fight scenes are slowed down during exposure to 22 frames per second, or even 18 or 20, and this speeds up the action considerably when the film is played back at normal (24 frames per second) speed.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

As an actor: the most important thing an actor needs to know is when he/she is and is not on camera, and how to find the camera when he/she is not on camera. For example, there might be a

crowded scene, with lots of people, and that means a great chance to get blocked. You have to be aware enough of the camera to make sure it sees you--the standard rule of thumb is that if you can see the lens, the lens can see you.

A great actor "feels" the camera, and knows how to move so that he/she is never blocked, and is always in the best possible position in the frame. Bruce Lee had a remarkable sense of the camera, and knew what stances and body positions look best on screen. Jean Claude Van Damme has also developed a great feel for the camera--he almost never looks out of position.

How can you get the "feel"? Short of appearing in dozens of films, probably the best thing you can do is get a video camera and experiment. Get comfortable with the medium, and try all different sorts of things. Stage fight scenes and look at them with a truly critical eye--did the techniques look good, what could have been done better, what moves didn't work, etc.? Play around with the lenses, the framing, and everything else.

This is not to say that everything from video to film is transferable--it's not. But, if you can get comfortable and have a sense of the camera and where you are in the frame, you'll be a step ahead everyone else--the people with no experience.

I remember the first couple of weeks working with a lead of a movie who had never even appeared on film before--because this actor had no idea of the medium, he was operating in the dark. He didn't know how the movements he was doing would look on screen, and the biggest problems we had with him were with blocking and a sense of the camera.

For example, he might be doing a fall, and he would do a great fall, and it would look very realistic, but he'd fall with his face AWAY from the camera, and we'd cut. "What?!?" he'd wonder, until we told him that it was a great fall, but you have to make

sure the camera sees your face. It's frustrating, and it's hard to learn the lesson.

Many people have a hard time doing this, because it doesn't seem natural, but the thing to remember is that it doesn't have to feel natural, it just has to look natural. There are times when you aren't supposed to look at the person you are talking to, but should instead "cheat" your look about 3 feet away from them. You might think this is ridiculous and will look that way on film, but in reality, it would look strange (on the screen) if you looked straight at the person.

In "American Shaolin," one of my favorite scenes is the football scene, outside the temple. Drew teaches the other disciples at the Shaolin Temple how to play football. It's a great scene, but during the filming the American actors were continually complaining that the movements they were being asked to do were unnatural and would look stupid.

What these guys didn't realize that no matter how well they threw the ball, or how expert they looked while playing football, if the movements were done off screen, the audience couldn't see them. You have to work within the confines of the frame of the camera, and adapt everything you do to that.

Regardless of how much experience you have with video, or film for that matter, don't assume that you know more than the director or the cinematographer. They are paid to make decisions as to blocking or framing--I have seen actors argue with the director about how things are going to look, and they are always going to lose that argument. The director is in charge of the image, and the performance, so what he/she says pretty much goes.

I've also known some directors who, if you make them angry, will go out of their way to make you look bad (without hurting the film). One director in particular, who is a very petty and vain

individual, was known to cut close ups and "vanity shots" if he didn't like an actor. This didn't hurt the film, but it certainly hurt the impact the actor could have.

That doesn't mean you have to kiss up to the director--just use your head and basically do what you are told.

Take any opportunity you have to look through the camera, so you can increase your understanding of the process. A movie camera is much different from a video camera, and there are many times when the camera is set up but not being used. Usually there is a camera assistant guarding the camera, but if you become friends with him or her, you can usually look into the camera when you aren't getting in someone's way. Do it, and remember what you see so you can use it when you're in front of the camera.

CAMERA DIRECTION:

The production people use the camera as point of reference when setting up shots and telling people where to stand. So, if someone says you should stand "Camera Left" for example, that means left from camera perspective (i.e. if the camera is pointing North, camera left is West, and camera right is East). Get used to hearing directions spoken of in this manner, because the director of DP will tell you to look Camera Right, or sit Camera Left.

THE CAMERA FOR WRITERS:

As a writer, it's important to understand the process so you can know what's possible and what's not. If you write it, it's not by any means certain that it can be done. Also, you have to have an idea of what is going to very difficult (e.g. if you write in a shot where the camera swoops down over the Grand Canyon, you better have a damn good reason). You have to know what's going to be difficult for the camera to perform--so you don't waste your time writing it.

WHAT THE CAMERA SEES:

Have you ever seen those shows on TV where they go behind the scenes of a movie being shot? What they shoot through the video camera is often incredibly different in look and texture from the clips they then show from the film. That's because the medium is different, and the quality of film is much higher than video (that's why many big budget television projects are shot on film, like L.A. Law, Quantum Leap, Home Front, etc., then transferred to video).

In the same vein, what you see with your naked eye differs from the way the camera sees it. You might think that a shot was incredible, but when you go to dailies, it turns out that the shot wasn't really all that great. Knowing and understanding the differences just takes experience with the camera, and the results of filming.

With our minds we concentrate on given portions of an image or a scene, and not necessarily on the image in its entirety. The camera can't do that, and often what you think you are focusing on (with a still camera, for example), doesn't come out the way you though you saw it.

DIFFERENT LENSES:

The lens that it used on the camera will change how the image is recorded. A long lens, for example, compresses the image, and focuses only on the object desired, while the background is "soft," while a short lens adds depth and increase the depth of field, meaning that more things besides the subject are in focus. A fish eye widens and many times distorts the image, while a zoom lens gives you the flexibility to adjust the focal length without having to change lens, or change perspective of the subject without having to move the camera.

There was a time when many low budget pictures shot most of their film with zoom lenses--they didn't have to take the time to change lenses, but just adjusted the focal length of the

zoom. In reality, however, you sacrifice quality, because fixed lenses deliver a better quality image than a zoom. Now, zoom lenses are used exclusively for zoom shots.

I'm not going to pretend to be an expert at the mechanics of the camera, or the delicacies of constructing a quality image, but I do enough to tell you...

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION:

There are several good resource books to give you a better understanding of the mechanics of movie making. They are:

The Film Director's Team: A Practical Guide to Organizing and Managing Film and Television Production by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (Arco Publishing, Inc.)

Directing for Film and Television: A Guide to the Craft by Christopher Lukas (Anchor Books

CHAPTER 9

PACKAGING

Because making movies is about image, and Hollywood puts a premium on the perception of the image (sometimes more than the image itself), it's extremely important to have the best PACKAGE you can.

What do I mean by "package"?

Your package is the collection of materials that you send out to producers, production companies, studios, agents, and other people who can get you work.

No matter what position you are looking for within the film industry, it pays to have a package you have to put together that you can send out. As a writer, I have a package that lists my credits, which includes some poster and promotional materials from my movies and presents the best possible information about Keith W. Strandberg.

There is nothing negative in my package: anything that could possibly be perceived as a negative has been studiously weeded out, so that nothing but extremely positive and upbeat information is provided. For example, if I didn't have any movie credits, I wouldn't say that--I would emphasize the experience that I did have, so that the attention was taken away from my lack of experience in movies, and put into another area.

For example, when I was first starting out in films, I didn't mention my lack of experience, I concentrated on my credits in other fields (like the writing I had done for BLACK BELT, KICK ILLUSTRATED, etc.; my fluency in Chinese; my black belt in Isshinryu, etc.). I made a case that I was a writer who was an expert in the martial arts, which got me my foot in the door.

It's important that you do the same: make the strongest package you can, then send it out to as many producers, agents, production companies and studios as you can.

For packages, I have broken down the categories into three basic categories:

ACTORS

Head shot: you have to have a professionally produced head shot (usually black and white, sometimes color). Normally, your resume and vital information is placed on the back of your head shot. Do NOT put your home phone number or address on this--you never know where it's going to end up. List your agent's name and number, or just list your phone number (if you have nothing else).

Action pictures: Especially for the martial arts or action movie genre, it's important to provide the casting people with an image that will convey your ability. Sometimes this is a flying kick, or an action pose, or a particular stance that shows your uniqueness and something about your character. You have to play around with this to decide what's best for you.

Resume: Mentioned above, this should go on the back of your head shot. If you don't feel comfortable doing this, go to a professional. With the advent of home computers, there are plenty of people throughout the nation who specialize in this type of thing. For a minimal fee ($30 - $75), they will create a professional resume that you can use for almost any kind of submission. Or, should you want to do this yourself, you can get some resume books out of the library (and there are some resume-creation software programs on the market now that are quite good).

Clips: If you have clips from movies or TV shows that you have done (even if it's only an interview from the local TV station), assemble them on one clip, and have this professionally reproduced so that you can hand them out to people when they request them. It's vital to give the casting people something they can watch to get an idea of how you look on screen.

Sometimes they will shoot their own video of the casting sessions, but if you have your own stuff, give that to them as well.

Some people don't perform well in auditions, and the ability to hand people a tape is a great opportunity. On the tape, hopefully, you can perform up to your ability, without being nervous or put off by the whole audition process. Also, having the casting person review a tape is more powerful than just being one of 200 actors and actresses they have seen. It's easier to get noticed on tape than it is during an audition.

I've hired several people on the basis of their tapes: sure, I had to see them in person, as well, but the tape got my attention. One such person was Cliff Lenderman, who played the part of the Drill Sergeant in "American Shaolin". He read my column in KARATE INTERNATIONAL and sent me some pictures. I was intrigued by his look and his background, so I sent him a letter asking for some stuff on video.

He sent me the video, I watched it and was very impressed. We met in Seattle later that year, and then I convinced Seasonal to hire him for the role. And, he turned out to be one of the best actors on the entire film. He's got a great future in action films, and all because he believed in his chances enough to put together a great package, and to send it out whenever he could.

If you don't have any movie credits, or clips from TV shows (e.g. interview shows, news stories, etc.), don't worry. Get a good camera and make your own. What I look for in a sample video is the following:

-Action: show what you can do. Throw kicks, punches, etc. Don't bother making up a fight scene (unless you are sure it is of high quality), because most "made up" fight scenes are so pathetically bad that I can't even watch them any more. Spend your time showcasing your kicking and punching ability. If you

have any set self defense routines (one steps, etc.), do these with an accomplished partner--these routines give a pretty good indication of how you handle set movements.

-Acting: if you don't feel comfortable doing this, do it anyway. If it's no good, don't include it on your sample video. Get some copies of movie scenes {refer to the books for actors called Film Scenes for Actors (two volumes) edited by Joshua Karton (Bantam Books)} and run some of these scenes for the camera--do something that's recognizable, so that the people who are watching it don't really have to listen to the words, they can watch the way you act.

Again, if you do it and it really isn't any good, just send the clips of the action. The acting can come later. If you feel it is good, include it and send it out.

WRITERS

Resume: Tailor this resume to your writing. Make sure it reflects who you are and what you have done. You may want to have a couple of different resumes: one for regular stuff, and another for writing. This way, you won't be approaching studios with a resume whose "Objective" states that you want to manage a local McDonald's restaurant.

Credits (both film and non-film): I routinely include my publication history with my resume, to show what I have published in the past. I also have developed a "fact sheet" that focuses on my film work, and gives it all at a glance.

Clips: In the writer's world, "clips" or "tearsheets" means actual articles or work you have had published. This helps to establish that you are a professional writer. The world is full of people who want to be writers (my favorite line, which I get all the time, is "I have a great script idea, and I know it would be a blockbuster, if I only had the time to sit and write it down"--as if all it takes to write successfully is the

TIME!). To separate yourself from the rabble, you have to have credits.

Credits show that someone has paid you to write in the past, thus making it easier for other people to pay you in the future. Credits prove that you are an established entity, and people will trust in your ability to deliver.

Advertising material from projects: I like to enclose some color copies of posters and promotional materials (only ones that show my name prominently), to sort of WOW them with what I have done.

Samples of scenes: If you don't have a complete script done, you can at least send some sample scenes if they want to see some samples of your writing. This means that you have to take the time to sit down and write it. This is where the beef is separated from the bull. Write the best scenes you can, and take great pains to get the format right. This is your chance to show off your writing--make sure you put your best foot forward.

Should you send scene samples out to everyone?

NO!

Only send samples out to people who have asked to see them. The first step is to send a "query" letter, which asks the person (agent, production company, studio, producers, etc.) if they would be interested in seeing some samples of your work.

If they respond that yes, they would like to see samples, then you send them the samples scenes. Don't just routinely enclose them with anything you send out, because most likely they will get thrown away.

Sample Scripts: To have the most complete writer's package, you should really have a sample, complete script. I know, this means that you have to actually sit down and write one, which can take anywhere from 6 months to 10 years (give or take some months or years), but it's vital. Your sample script shows how well you

can write, and that you can carry an idea the entire way through a script.

Who knows? When you send out your sample script, whoever reads it might just buy it! Or, they'll like your writing so much they'll hire you to write something they have in house.

So, best of all possible worlds is that you sit down and write a sample script, get it printed up and bound, and have it ready to send out when someone shows some interest.

PRODUCTION PEOPLE

Resume: Gear your resume towards production positions.

Credits (what productions you have worked on--no matter what the position)

Technical skills: State clearly on your resume just exactly what you can do. Don't embellish, because you may be hired to do just what you say you can do--so you better be able to do it.

HOW TO GET AN AGENT:

Agent listings are available through a number of sources: the Writer's Market, the Writer's Guild, the Screen Actors' Guild, agent listings in phone books in New York and LA, etc. The best way to begin finding an agent is to send out letters to all the agents you are interested in, and see what the response is like.

Something to be aware of: agents take you on as a client based on what they think you will do in the future, not what you'd done in the past. Even though you might have all sorts of credits in television or the movies, if the agents don't think you'll be able to do anything more, they won't represent you.

An agent makes his/her money when you make money--a standard agent's fee is 10 - 15% of your salary. So, for example, your agent lands you the starring role in a big budget picture, with your salary being $1,000,000, your agent will get between $100,000 and $150,000, depending on your deal.

For that money, your agent will have done the following: made sure the producers and casting people know who you are, gotten you to the auditions, negotiated your contract and in general looked out for your best interests.

Agents in this business are a necessary evil. They are the buffer between the artists and the business people, and sometimes they have to be quite ruthless, in order to take care of their clients. A good agent is very hard to find, and you might have to go through several before you find the right mix--someone who believes in you and your career, and someone with whom you can get along.

A warning: be wary of agents that charge a fee to consider you or your work. This is a disturbing development, and it's only a way for non-qualified agents to get some money. The way agents make money is when they get their clients work--part of their job is to weed through the riff-raff to try to find the diamond in the coal pile. Many agents pride themselves on being able to spot talent--why then, if this kind of searching is integral to the job, should they get paid for it?

Because, in this dog eat dog world of everyone wanting to be an actor or a writer or a director, they can get away with it. Everyone is hungry, and everyone wants to get the break, and these unscrupulous agents fool these people into thinking that if they pay $200 they will have a better chance of getting spotted.

That's bull! All they have a better chance of doing is getting cheated out of $200.

If you run into an agent that insists on being paid before they consider you, tell him or her to forget it.

You now know better.

CONTACTING CASTING DIRECTORS:

In the same vein: it's important to get to know as many casting directors as you can. Casting directors are hired by the production company to line up people to see. For example, when we were casting "American Shaolin," we hired a New York-based casting agent to oversee our auditions in New York. She handled the arrangements for the actors and actresses: we just told her what we were looking for, and it was up to her to find the people that fit the bill. She also handled the preliminary negotiations with the actors, to make sure that we were all in the right price range.

Casting directors pride themselves on knowing who does what and who fits which part, so it's a good idea to have your package before as many casting directors as you can. You might not be right for Project A (and they'll be sure to tell you), but you might be right for Project X.

Be wary of casting calls where you pay to be looked at--once again, it's part of the casting directors' job to look at new talent. Everyone wants to "discover" the next rising star, and they shouldn't be making money off struggling actors and actresses while they are doing it

CONCLUSION

So, there you have it--the information that you will need to try to break into the film business. It's not going to be easy, nor is it going to be especially quick, but if you stick to it and don't get discouraged easily, you have a good chance of succeeding.

You have to remember, however, that rejection is going to come from all sides as you try to break into the film business. It's not just going to come from film companies and agents, though this will be a plentiful source--it's also going to come from friends and family (and even strangers), people who mean well but don't share your same vision.

Stick with it.

Fight the good fight.

Give it your best shot.

Whatever your favorite cliché is, use that and hold onto it, at least until you've given it all you can. If this is what you really want, or think you want, you deserve this much, don't you?

MORE INFORMATION:

Even though you have been presented with a great deal of information, you can still seek out more, and here is a listing of the kinds of information, and the source:

List of Agents (where to get)

List of Production Companies

Hollywood Reporter Market issues (Cannes, MIFED, AFM)

Variety Market issues (Cannes, MIFED, AFM)

Producer's Directory

QUESTIONS:

If you have any questions, or something isn't clear, please feel free to write and ask me. Given enough time, I will either answer you directly, by mail (no phone calls, please), or answer

your question in my column so that everyone can benefit from your questions and its answer. Please write me at the following e-mail: KeithS821@aol.com

Show up at my door and I promise I won't talk to you, but write me and I'll respond (it might not be quick, but I'll eventually respond). If you want me to take a look at your package or any other material (videos, scripts, etc.), feel free to send it, but make sure you have a copy because you won't get it back.

In the same vein, if you're looking to break into the action movie business, send me your information to keep on file. I do about a film a year, and I'm always looking for new talent (as any producer is). I can't promise that you'll get selected for every project, but I will promise you that you will be considered, and you will be treated fairly. How's that sound?

THE FUTURE:

The future, for action movies in general, is pretty bright. Remember, martial arts and action movies are two of the most stable genres around. There will always be a market for these kinds of movies, so someone, somewhere will be making another one--you just have to find out where and with whom, and then get yourself in the door. BE A CONSUMER:

Keep watching these movies. Every successful martial arts movie means that there will be more of the same, and thus more opportunities for everyone involved in the industry. If we don't go out and support our local martial art or action movie, and that means buying tickets and renting videos, the end result will be a smaller market.

So, go to the local theater and put down your $7, or visit your local video store and rent the latest Van Damme, Seagal or Keith W. Strandberg film--enjoy it, and learn from everything that you see.

Until we meet again, keep kicking!

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