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# Making Movies

SIDNEY LUMET

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MAKING  
MOVIES



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*A Division of Random House, Inc.*

*New York*



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About the Author

I once asked Akira Kurosawa why he had chosen to frame a shot in *Ran* in a particular way. His answer was that if he'd panned the camera one inch to the left, the Sony factory would be sitting there exposed, and if he'd panned an inch to the right, we would see the airport—neither of which belonged in a period movie. Only the person who's made the movie knows what goes into the decisions that result in any piece of work. They can be anything from budget requirements to divine inspiration.

This is a book about the work involved in making movies. Because Kurosawa's answer stated the simple truth, most of the movies I'll discuss in this book are pictures I directed. With those, at least, I know exactly what went into each creative decision.

There's no right or wrong way to direct a movie. What I'm writing about is how I work. For students, take it all; take what you want and throw the rest away; or throw it all away. For a few readers, perhaps it might make up for the times a movie crew has tied you up in traffic, or shot in your neighborhood all night long. We really *do* know what we're doing; it only looks as if we don't. Serious work is going on even when it seems as if we're just standing around. For everyone else, I'll try to tell you as best I can how movies are made. It's a complex technical and emotional process. It's art. It's commerce. It's heartbreaking and it's fun. It's a great way to live.

A warning about what you *won't* find in the book: There are no personal revelations other than feelings arising from the work itself—no gossip about Sean Connery or Marlon Brando. Mostly I love the people I've worked with in what's necessarily an intimate process. So I respect their foibles and idiosyncrasies, as I'm sure they respect mine.

Finally, I must ask for an indulgence from the reader. When I began making movies, the only crew jobs available to women were as script girls and in the editing department. As a result, I still think of movie crews as male. And in fact, they still predominantly are. I've therefore developed the lifetime habit of using male pronouns. The word "actress" or "authoress" always struck me as condescending. A doctor's a doctor, right? So I've always referred to "actors" and "writers," regardless of their sex. So many movies that I've made involved police before women played any significant role on the force, so even my casts have been heavily dominated by men. After all, my first movie was called *12 Angry Men*. In those days, women could be excused from jury duty simply because they were women. The male pronouns I use almost always refer to both men and women. Most people working in the movies today have been brought up in a far more equally balanced world than I was. Hopefully, such indulgences won't have to be asked for again.

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## The Director:

### The Best Job in the World

The entrance to the Ukrainian National Home is on Second Avenue between Eighth and Ninth streets in New York City. There's a restaurant on the ground floor. The odor of pierogies, borscht, barley soup, and onions hits me as soon as I walk in. The smell is cloying but pleasant, even welcoming, especially in the winter. The rest rooms are downstairs, always reeking of disinfectant, urine, and beer. I go up a flight of stairs and walk into an enormous room the size of a small basketball court. It has colored lights, the inevitable revolving mirrored ball, and a bar along one wall, behind which are stacked sound amplifiers in the suitcases, empty cartons, boxes of plastic garbage bags. Setups are also sold here. Stacks of folding chairs and tables are piled along the walls.

This is the ballroom of the Ukrainian National Home, where loud, stomping accordion-accompanied dances are held on Friday and Saturday nights. Before the breakup of the USSR there would be at least two "Free the Ukraine" meetings held here every week. The room is rented out as often as possible. And we have now rented it for two weeks to rehearse a movie. I've rehearsed eight or nine movies here. I don't know why I feel like this, but rehearsal halls should always be a little grungy.

Two production assistants are nervously awaiting me. They've started the coffee machine. In a plastic box, amid ice cubes, are containers of juice (freshly squeezed), milk, and yogurt. On a tray, bagels, Danish, coffee cake, slabs of wonderful rye bread from the restaurant downstairs. Butter (whipped and packaged) and cream cheese (whipped and packaged) are waiting, plastic knives alongside. Another tray holds packets of sugar, Equal, Sweet 'n Low, honey, tea bags, herb teas (every kind imaginable), lemon, Redoxon (in case anyone has the first signs of a cold). So far so good.

Of course, the PAs have set up the two rehearsal tables the wrong way. They've placed them end to end, so the twelve or so people due here in half an hour will have to sit stretched out as if in a subway car. I have them move the tables side by side, putting everybody as close together as possible. Newly sharpened pencils are lined up in front of each chair. And a fresh script. Even though the actors have had their scripts for weeks, it's amazing how often they forget them on the first day.

I like to have as much of the production team as possible at the first reading. Already present are the production designer, costume designer, second assistant director, the Director's Guild of America (DGA) trainee (an apprentice), the script girl, the editor, and the cameraman, if he's not out doing tests on locations. As soon as the tables are in place, they descend on me—all of them. Floor plans are rolled out. Swatches. Polaroids of a red '86 Thunderbird and a black '86 Thunderbird. Which do I want? We still don't have permission for the bar on Tenth Street and Avenue A. The guy wants too much money. Is there another location that will work as well? No. What should I do? Pay him the money. Truffaut has a moment in *Day for Night* that touches the heart of every director. He's just finished a



arduous day's shooting. He's walking off the set. The production team surrounds him peppering him with questions for tomorrow's work. He stops, looks to the heavens, and shouts, "Questions! Questions! So many questions that I don't have time to think!"

Slowly, the actors come wandering in. A false joviality hides their nervousness. Did you hear the one about—Sidney, I'm so glad we're working together again... hugs, kisses. I'm a big kisser myself, a toucher and a hugger as opposed to a groper. The producer arrives. Usually, he's the groper. His object this morning is to ingratiate himself, particularly with the stars.

Now, a huge burst of laughter rises from downstairs. One of the stars has arrived. The star is also ingratiating himself, showing what a regular guy he is. Sometimes there will be an entourage. First, a secretary. This is discouraging, because it means that on a ten-minute break, the secretary will bring in eight messages so urgent that the star will be on the phone instead of resting or studying the script. Second, the star's makeup person. Most stars have a contractual right to their own makeup person. Third, a bodyguard (whether needed or not). Fourth, a friend, who'll leave quickly. And last, there is the teamster driver. He gets a union minimum of about nine hundred a week plus overtime. And there is lots of overtime, because most stars have the earliest call in the morning and are the last to leave at night. The teamster will have nothing to do from the time he drops the star off at rehearsals until he picks the star up at night to take him home. So the first thing the teamster does is head for the coffee machine. He tries a piece of the coffee cake, then a Danish. A glass of orange juice to wash down the coffee, and then a bagel, heavily buttered to get rid of the taste of the Danish. A little egg salad, a little fruit, and finally he tiptoes back downstairs again, to do whatever it is that teamsters do all day.

Not all stars keep an entourage. Sean Connery will bound up the steps two at a time, rapidly shake hands all around, then plop himself down at the table, open his script, and start studying. Paul Newman treads slowly upstairs, the weight of the world on his shoulders, pupils drop in his eyes, and makes a bad joke. Then he opens his script and starts studying. I don't know how he manages *without* a secretary. Paul leads one of the most generous and honorable lives of anyone I've ever known. Between his popcorn and salad dressing and his other merchandising, all for charities he's created, which serve people overlooked by other charities, not to mention his movie work, his days are packed. But he does it all and never seems pressed.

The unit publicity person is there too. They're annoying, publicists, but their lives are hell. The actors hate them because they're always asking for an interview on the day the actor has to shoot his most difficult scene; the studio is always letting them know that what they're sending to the West Coast is crap and unusable; the star's personal publicity people, jealous of guarding their turf, want all requests to go through them; and we all know that nothing the publicists do now matters, because the picture won't be out for at least nine months and whatever photo was in the *Daily News* will have been long forgotten—and besides, the title of the movie will have been changed.

Often the last to arrive is the writer. He is last because he knows that at this point he is the target. At this moment, anything wrong can only be his fault, since nothing else has happened yet. So he moves quietly to the coffee table, stuffs his mouth full of Danish so he won't have

to answer any questions, and tries to become as small as possible.

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The assistant director is trying to set up the last of the medical exams for the insurance company (leading cast members are always insured). And I'm making believe I'm listening to everybody, a phony warm smile on my face, just waiting for the minute hand to reach straight up (the start of the hour) so we can begin the reason for all this: We're here to make a movie.

Finally, I can't wait any longer. It's still three minutes of, but I glance over to the AD. Nervous, but with a voice filled with authority, he says, "Ladies and gentlemen"—or "Folks" or "Hey, gang"—"can we take our seats?" The tone the AD uses is important. If he sounds like Santa Claus chortling "Ho-ho-ho," the actors know that he's afraid of them, and he'll have a rough time later. If he sounds pompous and officious, they'll surely screw him somewhere along the line. The best are the British ADs. Out of years of English good manners, they go quietly from one actor to the other: "Mr. Finney, we're ready for you now." "Miss Bergman, if you please."

The actors gather around the table. I give my first direction to them. I tell them where to sit.

Actually, I've been directing this picture for some time. Depending on how complicated the physical production of the movie will be, I've been in preproduction anywhere from two and a half to six months. And, depending on how much work had to be done on the script, perhaps for months before preproduction began. Major decisions have already been made. There are no minor decisions in moviemaking. Each decision will either contribute to a good piece of work or bring the whole movie crashing down around my head many months later.

The first decision, of course, was whether to do the movie. I don't know how other directors decide. I decide completely instinctively, very often on just one reading. This has produced very good movies and very bad ones. But it's the way I've always done it, and I'm too old to change now. I don't analyze a script as I read it for the first time. I just sort of let it wash over me. Sometimes it happens with a book. I read *Prince of the City* in book form and knew I desperately wanted to make a movie of it. I also make sure that I have the time to read a script straight through. A script can have a very different feeling if reading it is interrupted, even for half an hour. The final movie will be seen uninterrupted, so why should reading the script for the first time be any different?

Material comes from many sources. Sometimes the studio sends it with a firm offer and a start date. That, of course, is the best of all worlds, because the studio is prepared to finance the movie. Scripts arrive from writers, agents, stars. Sometimes it's material that I've developed, and then starts the agonizing process of submissions to studios and or stars to see if financing will be forthcoming.

There are many reasons for accepting a movie. I'm not a believer in waiting for "great material that will produce a "masterpiece." What's important is that the material involve me personally on some level. And the levels will vary. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is everything one can hope for. Four characters come together and leave no area of life unexplored. However, I once did a picture called *The Appointment*. It had fine dialogue, by James Salter, but a dreadful story line that had been handed to him by an Italian producer. I presume Jim needed the money. The picture had to be shot in Rome. Until then, I had been having gre

difficulty in finding out how to use color. I'd been brought up on black-and-white movies, and almost all the movies I had made until then were in black and white. The two color movies I had done, *Stage Struck* and *The Group*, had left me dissatisfied. The color seemed fake. The color seemed to make the movies even more unreal. Why did black and white seem real and color false? Obviously, I was using it wrong or—much more serious—not using it at all.

I had seen a movie of Antonioni's called *Red Desert*. It had been photographed by Carlo Di Palma. Here, at last, was color being used for drama, for furthering the story, for deepening the characters. I called Di Palma in Rome, and he was available for *The Appointment*. He happily accepted the picture. I knew that Carlo would get me through my "color block." And he did. That was a perfectly sensible reason to do the movie.

I've done two movies because I needed the money. I've done three because I love to work and couldn't wait anymore. Because I'm a professional, I worked as hard on those movies as on any I've done. Two of them turned out to be good and were hits. Because the truth is that nobody knows what that magic combination is that produces a first-rate piece of work. I'm not being modest. There's a reason some directors can make first-rate movies and others never will. But all we can do is prepare the groundwork that allows for the "lucky accident" that make a first-rate movie happen. Whether or not it *will* happen is something we never know. There are too many intangibles, as the following chapters will reveal.

For anyone who wants to direct but hasn't made a first movie yet, there is no decision to make. Whatever the movie, whatever the auspices, whatever the problems, if there's a chance to direct, take it! Period. Exclamation point! The *first* movie is its own justification because it's the first movie.

I've been talking about why I decided to do a particular movie. Now comes the most important decision I have to make: What is this movie about? I'm not talking about plot although in certain very good melodramas the plot is *all* they're about. And that's not bad. A good, rousing, scary story can be a hell of a lot of fun.

But what is it about emotionally? What is the theme of the movie, the spine, the arc? What does the movie mean to me? Personalizing the movie is very important. I'm going to be working flat out for the next six, nine, twelve months. The picture had better have some meaning to me. Otherwise, the physical labor (very hard indeed) will become twice as exhausting. The word "meaning" can spread over a very wide range. *The Appointment* means that I had the chance to work with Carlo. And what I learned made a difference on all my subsequent pictures.

The question "What is this movie about?" will be asked over and over again throughout the book. For now, suffice it to say that the theme (the *what* of the movie) is going to determine the style (the *how* of the movie). The theme will decide the specifics of every selection made in all the following chapters. I work from the inside out. What the movie is about will determine how it will be cast, how it will look, how it will be edited, how it will be musically scored, how it will be mixed, how the titles will look, and, with a good studio, how it will be released. What it's about will determine how it is to be made.

As I said earlier, melodrama can have its own justification, because the question of "What happens next?" is one of the delights that's carried over from childhood. It was a thrilling feeling the first time we listened to "Little Red Riding Hood," and we're still thrilled when w

see *The Silence of the Lambs*. That is not to say that *The Silence of the Lambs* is only about its story. Due to Ted Tally's fine writing, Jonathan Demme's extraordinary direction, and Anthony Hopkins's magnificent performance, it is also an exploration of two fascinating characters. But first and foremost, it is a nail-biter, a brilliant story that keeps you terrified and guessing.

Melodrama is a heightened theatricality that makes the implausible plausible. By going further, it seems more real. *Murder on the Orient Express* is a first-rate whodunit that keeps you completely off balance. I remember, when I first read the script, shrieking with joy when it was finally revealed that they *all* dun it. Talk about implausible! And after a bit of thought I realized it was about something else: nostalgia. For me, Agatha Christie's world is predominantly nostalgic. Even her titles are nostalgic. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (what a name!), *Murder on the Orient Express* (what a train!), *Death on the Nile* (what a river!)-everything about her work represents a time and a place that I never knew existed, and indeed, I wonder if they ever did. In subsequent chapters I hope to illustrate how the concept of nostalgia affected every single department that worked on *Orient Express*. And in the end, this forty-year-old Agatha Christie whodunit wound up with six Oscar nominations.

But there was another reason I wanted to do the picture. I had always felt that I'd seriously hurt two movies by directing them too ponderously. They were *The Group*, by Sidney Buchman, from Mary McCarthy's book, and a little-known picture I did called *Bye Bye Braverman*, by Herb Sargent, adapted from Wallace Markfield's novel *To an Early Grave*. They simply weren't made with enough lightness of spirit.

Certainly *The Group* would have benefited from a lighter comedic feeling in its first twenty-five minutes, so that its deeper seriousness could emerge slowly. One of the book's leading characters, Kay, suffered from taking *everything* in life too seriously. The most minor problem would, in her eyes, become a crisis; the most casual remark could change her relationship with another person. Toward the end of the movie, Kay is leaning out a window, binoculars in hand, looking for German planes during World War II. She is convinced an air attack on New York is imminent. She leans out too far and falls to her death. The moment needed the kind of comic madness which turns to tragedy that, for example, Robert Altman is so good at.

*Bye Bye Braverman* was practically a perfect script. And I wound up with a pancake instead of a soufflé. A cast of wonderful comic actors—Jack Warden, Zohra Lampert, Joseph Wiseman, Phyllis Newman, Alan King, Sorrell Booke, Godfrey Cambridge—was left floundering like fish on the beach by a director who takes funerals and cemeteries too seriously.

I knew that *Murder on the Orient Express* had to be positively gay in spirit. Some things we are naturally talented for, and some things we have to learn. Some things we just can't do. But I was determined to get this movie gay, if I had to kill myself and everyone else to accomplish it. You've never seen anyone work so intensely on something meant to be light in spirit. But I learned. (Again, the specifics will be dealt with in later chapters.) I don't think I would have handled *Network* as well if it hadn't been for the lessons I learned on *Orient Express*.

I could go down the list of my movies, dissecting the reasons I did them. The reasons have varied from needing the money to being involved with every particle of my being, as I was

with Q & A. The whole process of moviemaking is magical, so magical, in fact, that it often serves as sufficient justification for one to go to work. Just making the movie is enough.

One last word, however, on why I say yes to movie A and no to movie B. Over the years critics and others have remarked that I'm interested in the judicial system. Of course I am. Some have said my theater roots show because of the number of plays I've done as movies. Of course they do. There have been a bunch of movies involving parents and children. There have been comedies, some done badly, some better, as well as melodramas and a musical. I've also been accused of being all over the place, of lacking an overwhelming theme that applies to all my work. I don't know if that's true or not. The reason I don't know is that when I open to the first page of a script, I'm a willing captive. I have no preconceived notion that I want the body of my work to be about one particular idea. No script has to fit into an overall theme of my life. I don't have one. Sometimes I'll look back on the work over some years and say to myself, "Oh, *that's* what I was interested in then."

Whatever I am, whatever the work will amount to, has to come out of my subconscious. I can't approach it cerebrally. Obviously, this is right and correct for me. Each person must approach the problem in whatever way works best for him.

I don't know how to choose work that illuminates what my life is about. I don't *know* what my life is about and don't examine it. My life will define itself as I live it. The movies will define themselves as I make them. As long as the theme is something I care about at the moment, it's enough for me to start work. Maybe work itself is what my life is about.

Having decided, for whatever reason, to do a movie, I return to that all-encompassing critical discussion: What is the movie about? Work can't begin until its limits are defined, and this is the first step in that process. It becomes the riverbed into which all subsequent decisions will be channeled.

*The Pawnbroker:* How and why we create our own prisons.

*Dog Day Afternoon:* Freaks are not the freaks we think they are. We are much more connected to the most outrageous behavior than we know or admit.

*Prince of the City:* When we try to control everything, everything winds up controlling us. Nothing is what it seems.

*Daniel:* Who pays for the passions and commitments of the parents? They do, but so do the children, who never chose those passions and commitments.

*The Fugitive Kind:* The struggle to preserve what is sensitive and vulnerable both in ourselves and in the world.

*The Anderson Tapes:* The machines are winning.

*Fail-Safe:* The machines are winning.

*12 Angry Men:* Listen.

*Network:* The machines are winning. Or, to borrow from the NRA: TV doesn't corrupt people; people corrupt people.

*Serpico:* A portrait of a real rebel with a cause.

*The Wiz:* Home, in the sense of self-knowledge, is inside you. (This was true of the brilliant Garland movie *and* of L. Frank Baum's book.)

Running on Empty: Who pays for the passions and commitments of the parents?

*The Seagull*: Why is everyone in love with the wrong person? (It's no accident that in the last scene the principals play cards around a table, as if everyone got a bad deal and now needs a little luck.)

*Long Day's Journey Into Night*: I must stop here. I don't know what the theme is, other than whatever idea is inherent in the title. Sometimes a subject comes along and, as in this case, expressed in such great writing, is so enormous, so all-encompassing, that no single theme can define it. Trying to pin it down limits something that should have no limits. I am very lucky to have had a text of that magnitude in my career. I found that the best way to approach it was to ask, to investigate, to let the play tell me.

A certain amount of this goes on in every good piece of work, of course. With *Prince of the City*, I had no idea how I felt about the leading character, Danny Ciello, until I saw the completed picture. With *Serpico*, I was constantly ambivalent about his character. He was such a pain in the ass sometimes. Always kvetching. Al Pacino made me love *him*, not the scripted character. *The Seagull* is totally ambivalent about behavior. Everyone is in love with the wrong person. The teacher Medvedenko loves Masha who loves Konstantin who loves Nina who loves Trigorin who belongs to Arkadina who is really loved by Dr. Dorn who is loved by Paulina. But none of this prevents them each from having their own dignity and pathos, despite their seeming foolishness. The ambivalence is a source of exploring each character in greater and greater depth. Each person is like all of us.

But in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, no one is like any of us. The characters are on a downward spiral of epic, tragic proportions. To me, *Long Day's Journey* defies definition. One of the nicest things that ever happened to me happened on that picture: the last shot. The last shot of the movie is of Katharine Hepburn, Ralph Richardson, Jason Robards, and Debra Stockwell sitting around a table. Each is lost in his or her own addictive fantasy, the men from booze, Mary Tyrone from morphine. A distant lighthouse sweeps its beam across the room every forty-five seconds. The camera pulls back slowly, and the walls of the room gradually disappear. Soon the characters are sitting in a black limbo, getting tinier and tinier as the light sweeps across them. Fade out. After he saw the movie, Jason told me that he had read a letter of Eugene O'Neill's in which he describes his image of his family "sitting in blackness, around the table-top of the world." I hadn't read that letter. My heart leapt with happiness. That's what happens when you let the material tell you what it's about. But the material had better be great.

You and I may disagree about the meaning of a particular piece. That's not important. Whoever is making the movie has the right to his or her own interpretation. I've loved and admired any number of movies that I felt were about something other than what I was looking at. In *A Place in the Sun*, George Stevens made a wonderful, highly romantic love story. But the resonance of the Dreiser book on which it was based became the heart of the picture for me, though I hadn't read it at the time. It was really "An American Tragedy": the dreadful price that a man pays for his belief in the American myth. The important thing is that the interpretation by the director be committed enough so that his intention, his point of view, is clear. Each person is then free to agree, reject, or be awakened to his or her own feelings about the piece. We're not out for consensus here. We're out for communication. And

sometimes we even get consensus. And that's thrilling.

Rightly or wrongly, I've chosen a theme for the movie. How do I pick the people who can help me translate it to the screen? We'll get into the specifics later, as each aspect of moviemaking is analyzed. But there is a general approach as well. For example, in the late fifties, walking down the Champs Élysées, I saw in neon a sign over a theater: *Douze Hommes en Colère—un Film de Sidney Lumet*. *12 Angry Men* was now in its second year. Fortunately for my psyche and my career, I've never believed it was *un Film de Sidney Lumet*. Don't get me wrong. This isn't false modesty. I'm the guy who says "Print," and that's what determines what goes up on that screen. For those that have not been on a set: once a scene has been rehearsed on set, we begin to shoot it. Each time we shoot, it's called a take. We may shoot one take or thirty of the same moment. Whenever a take seems satisfactory in whole or in part, we call out, "Print." That means that the take will go to the lab to be developed and printed for us to look at the next day. The printed takes are what constitute the final film.

But how much in charge am I? *Is the movie un Film de Sidney Lumet?* I'm dependent on weather, budget, what the leading lady had for breakfast, who the leading man is in love with. I'm dependent on the talents and idiosyncrasies, the moods and egos, the politics and personalities, of more than a hundred different people. And that's just in the making of the movie. At this point I won't even begin to discuss the studio, financing, distribution, marketing, and so on.

So how independent am I? Like all bosses—and on set, I'm the boss—I'm the boss only up to a point. And to me that's what's so exciting. I'm in charge of a community that I need desperately and that needs me just as badly. That's where the joy lies, in the shared experience. Anyone in that community can help me or hurt me. For this reason, it's vital to have the best creative people in each department. People who can challenge you to work at your best, not in hostility but in a search for the truth. Sure, I can pull rank if a disagreement becomes unresolvable, but that's only as a last resort. It's also a great relief. But the joy is in the give-and-take. The joy is in talking to Tony Walton, the production designer on *Prince of the City*, about the theme of the movie and then seeing him come up with his expression of that theme. Hiring sycophants and servants is selling the picture and myself short. Yes, Al Pacino challenges you. But only to make you more honest, to make you probe deeper. You'd be a better director for having worked with him. Henry Fonda didn't know how to fake anything, so he became a barometer of truth against which to measure yourself and others. Boris Kaufman, the great black-and-white cinematographer, with whom I did eight movies would writhe in agony and argue if he felt a camera movement was arbitrary and unmotivated.

God knows, I'm not arguing for a contentious set. There are directors who think they have to provoke people to get the best work out of them. I think this is madness. Tension never helps anything. Any athlete will tell you that tension is a sure way of hurting yourself. I feel the same way about emotions. I try to create a very loose set, filled with jokes and concentration. It sounds surprising, but the two things go together nicely. It's obvious that good talents have wills of their own, and these must be respected and encouraged. Part of my job is to get everybody functioning at his best. And if I've hired the best, think how much better *their* best is than that of the not-so-best.

The heart of *my* job—the decisive moment—comes when I say “Print,” for it is then that everything we’ve been working for is permanently recorded. How do I know when to say it? I’m not really sure. Sometimes I’ll feel tentative about a take, but I’ll print it anyway. I don’t have to use it. Sometimes I feel so sure that I’ll print only that one take and move on to the next setup. (The setup is the preparation for the next take. Moving on to the next setup is a tremendous commitment. We have to tear down everything from the last setup, which may have taken hours of work, perhaps a day or even days, to prepare. If it’s the last setup on a particular location, the decision is even more final, since we will be moving on and may not be allowed to return.) So saying “Print” is my biggest responsibility.

There have been times when I have printed the first take and moved on. This is dangerous because accidents happen. The laboratory can ruin the film. Once, a work stoppage occurred at a lab in New York. The bastards just left the film in the tank. A whole day’s work of not just my movie, but all the movies shot in New York that day was ruined. Once, the film was being delivered to the lab in a station wagon, which got into an accident. Cans of exposed negative rolled all over the street, and some cans had the tape ripped from them and those takes were ruined. Another time, on *The Anderson Tapes*, we had set up what was clearly a funeral for a mobster outside the original St. Patrick’s Cathedral at Mulberry and Houston streets in Little Italy. I could sense tension developing. A number of goombahs were suddenly getting sensitive about the way their relatives were being portrayed. (I don’t have to tell you that it was a shakedown.) Alan King was playing a gangster in the movie. He plunged right into the middle of a particularly hefty group of six guys. Their voices grew louder. Finally, I heard one of them: “Why do we gotta be a buncha hoods alla time! We got artists too!”

Alan: “Who?”

Goombah: “Michelangelo!”

Alan: “They already did that movie.”

Goombah: “Yeah? Wit’ who?”

Alan: “Chuckles Heston. It fell on its ass.”

But the situation was serious. The assistant director came to tell me that he’d heard one of the local gentry muttering about “gettin’ the fuckin’ negative!” Our mob guys are very sophisticated in New York. So after each shot, we broke off the negative and gave it to a terrified production assistant, who quietly slipped away and brought the negative up to the Technicolor labs on the subway.

But what leads me to say “Print” is completely instinctive. Sometimes I say it because I feel inside me that it was a perfect take, which we’ll never improve on. Sometimes because it’s getting worse with each take. Sometimes there’s no choice. You’ve run out of light, and you’re due to shoot in Paris tomorrow. Tough luck. Print it and hope that nobody sees the compromise.

The greatest pressure in moviemaking is when you know that you’ve got only one take to get the shot. This happened on *Murder on the Orient Express*. Picture the following: We are in this enormous shed in a railway yard just outside Paris. Inside the shed stands a panting, snorting six-car train. A whole train! All mine! Not a toy train! A real train! It has been assembled from Brussels, where the Wagon-Lits Company keeps its old cars, and from



Pontarlier in the French Alps, where French National Railways keeps its old engines. We have built a set of the Istanbul railroad station in London, transported it to Paris, and erected it in the shed, so that the shed has become the Istanbul terminal of the Orient Express. Three hundred extras are assembled on the “train platform” and in the “waiting room.” The shot goes as follows: The camera is on the Nike, a sixteen-foot motor-driven camera dolly. It is in a low position. As the train starts toward us, the camera “dollies” forward to meet it and at the same time being raised to about the middle of the train’s height, about six feet. The train picks up speed coming toward us as we pick up speed coming toward the train. By the time the center of the fourth car has reached us, we have a full close-up of the Wagon-Lit symbol. It’s very beautiful, gold on a blue background. It fills the screen. As it passes us, we pan the camera to follow the Wagon-Lit symbol until we’ve turned one hundred eighty degrees and are facing in the opposite direction. We have now risen to the full height of the crane, sixteen feet, and we are shooting the train going away from us, getting smaller as it goes. Finally, we see only the two red lights of the last car as the train disappears into the blackness of the night.

Geoffrey Unsworth, the brilliant British cinematographer, had taken six hours to light this enormous area. Four of our stars—Ingrid Bergman, Vanessa Redgrave, Albert Finney, and John Gielgud—were appearing in plays in London. They finished their Saturday night performances, were flown over to Paris Sunday morning, and had to be back in London for their shows on Monday. The shot had to be done at night, since there’s not much mystery and not nearly so much glamour in a train leaving a station in daylight. Besides, we had to vacate the shed for the French National Railways at 8:00 a.m. Monday. We couldn’t rehearse the shot even once, because Geoff needed the train in place on the platform to light the whole scene. The end of the shed through which the train exited would be open to the exterior of the railway yards, with all modern Paris behind it, which was another reason we could have no daylight.

Peter McDonald is the finest camera operator I have ever worked with. The camera operator actually turns the wheels that point the camera in any direction. There is also a focus puller; his job, obviously, is to keep focus. But that’s not so easy when the camera is moving one way, the train is moving the other, and you’re going to pan the camera around the letters (“Wagon-Lit”), where it is very easy to see if the focus is not perfect. He’s working at a lens stop of 2.8, which makes the focus even more difficult. In addition, there is the man driving the dolly toward an object (the train) whose speed he will never have seen, and the grip (stagehand) on the tongue (the counterweighted jib arm on which the camera, the camera operator, Geoff Unsworth, and I will be sitting). The tongue allows the camera to be raised or lowered in height. The coordination among these four men has to be perfect. Peter rehearses them over and over, but he’s only guessing, because the train cannot be moving while Geoff is lighting it.

Finally, it’s 4:00 a.m., and I’m getting nervous. Geoff is working his tail off, the electricians are running, everyone’s trying his hardest. At 4:30, Geoff is ready. My heart skips a beat. I know now that we will have only one crack at it, because the sky will start to lighten at 5:15. There is no way we can get the train back into the shed, stop it on an exact mark, and be ready to try it a second time in forty minutes. Besides, too much regular train traffic will have begun, so the necessary track switching won’t be available to us. There’s nothing to do but go

for it. Extras in place, engine breathing, hearts pounding, we roll the camera. I call out: "Cut the train." The bilingual French assistant cues the engineer. The train starts toward us. We start toward the train. The tongue starts up, raising the camera with it. The focus puller is already starting to shift focus toward the onrushing Wagon-Lit logo on the fourth car. It comes upon us so fast that it's hard to follow by eye, much less through a camera. Peter whips the camera around with a speed that makes me glad he insisted I lock my seat belt. The train bursts out of the shed and disappears into the night. Peter looks at me, smiles, gives a thumbs up. Geoff smiles, looks at me. I look down to the script girl and very quietly say: "Print."

Another element that impinges on how much in charge I am is the budget. I'm not one of those directors who says, "Screw the company; I'll spend what I have to." I'm very grateful to anyone who's given me untold millions to make a movie. I could never raise that kind of money myself. I work on the budget with the production manager and on the schedule with the assistant director. Then I do everything humanly possible to stay within those limits.

This is particularly important on pictures not funded by a major studio. Some of the pictures I've done have been combinations of private financing and the selling off of "territories." It works as follows: Let's say the picture is budgeted at \$10 million. Of this, \$3 million is in what we call "above-the-line" costs: property, director, producer, writer, actor. The other \$7 million is for "below-the-line" costs—that is, everything else: sets, location trucks, studio rental, location and studio crews, catering, legal fees (which are enormous), music, editing, mixing, equipment rental, living expenses, set dressing (furniture, curtains, plants, etc.). "Below-the-line," in other words, is the cost of the physical production of the movie. You don't have major studio backing, so the producer goes to any or all of the yearly meetings in Milan, Cannes, or Los Angeles and tries to sell the distribution rights for the movie to individual distributors in France, Italy, Brazil, Japan—every country in the world. If he can hold on to the television rights, he can then sell those off country by country: Videocassette rights. Cable television rights. In this way, he slowly accumulates the \$10 million needed to make the movie: \$2 million from Japan, \$1 million from France, \$75,000 from Brazil, \$15,000 from Israel. No offer is too small.

For this to work, however, two things are necessary. First, the producer must have a firm American distribution deal, a guarantee that the movie will be released in the United States. The second necessity is a completion bond, which is exactly what it says. Given by a company with ample financial resources, the completion bond guarantees that the picture will be completed. If the leading actor dies, if a hurricane destroys the set, if a fire burns the studio down, they, the completion bond company, having extracted what moneys they can from the insurance company, will finance the completion of the movie. But part of their contract—and this is standard—reads that if the production is falling behind schedule and/or running over budget *while shooting*, the bonding company can take over the movie! They have the right to then save money any way they like. If the original scene took place at the opera with several hundred extras, they can demand that you shoot it in the men's room of the opera house. If you refuse, they can fire you. If you were going to mix the sound track in surround stereo, they can make you do a monaural mix, because it costs much, much less. They own the movie at that point. Their fee, by the way, is anywhere from 3 to 5 percent of the budget of the movie.

I ask again, how free am I? Interestingly enough, I don't mind limitations. Sometimes the even stimulate you to better, more imaginative work. A spirit may develop among the crew and cast that adds to the passion of the movie, and this can show up on-screen. On certain pictures, I've worked for union minimum, and so have the actors. We did *Long Day's Journey Into Night* that way. We did it because we loved the material and wanted to see the picture made no matter what. We formed a cooperative, Hepburn, Richardson, Robards, Stockwell, and myself, each of us working for the same minimal salary. We divided the profits (there actually were some profits) in equal shares among ourselves. Total cost of the picture: \$490,000. *The Pawnbroker* was done this way. Total cost: \$930,000. *Daniel, Q & A*, *The Offense* were all done this way. These are among the most artistically satisfying pictures I've done. At other times, because I felt the picture had little commercial potential and have been grateful that a studio put up the money, I've done the unthinkable. I've taken less money than market "established price," as I did on *Running on Empty*. I've never regretted it.

I've found also that actors are very willing to go along with these arrangements if they love the material, feel it's risky, and know that everyone else will be going along on the same basis. In addition to the *Long Day's Journey* cast, Sean Connery has gone for a minimum level on this kind of adventure. Nick Nolte has, as have Timothy Hutton, Ed Asner, the brilliant production designer Tony Walton, the superb cinematographer Andrzej Bartkowiak. Sometimes I've even asked crew members to do it; some have, some haven't. But guess who have never gone along. The teamsters.

Many of the money-saving techniques I've learned on low-budget movies can and should be used on normally budgeted movies. Lots of economies can be made, with no sacrifice of quality. For example, I shoot a scene, whether in the studio or on location, by finishing off each wall. Envision the following: A room has four walls—let's call them wall A, wall B, wall C, wall D. Starting with my widest shot against wall A, I keep shooting every shot in which wall A is the background. I keep moving in against wall A until the last close-up against the wall has been shot. Then we shift to wall B and go through the same process. Then wall C, then wall D. The reason for this is that whenever the camera has to change its angle more than 15 degrees, it's necessary to relight. Lighting is the most time consuming (and therefore most expensive) part of moviemaking. Most relighting takes minimally two hours. For complex relightings take an entire day! Just moving to shoot against wall A, then turning around 180 degrees to shoot against wall C is usually a four-hour job, a half day's work!

Of course, the actors are shooting completely out of sequence. But that's one of the benefits of rehearsal. I rehearse for a minimum of two weeks, sometimes three, depending on the complexity of the characters. We had no money to make *12 Angry Men*. The budget was \$350,000. That's right: \$350,000. Once a chair was lit, everything that took place in the chair was shot. Well, not quite. We went around the room three times: once for normal light, a second time for the rain clouds gathering, which changed the quality of the light coming from the outside, and the third time when the overhead lights were turned on. Lee Cobb arguing with Henry Fonda would obviously have shots of Fonda (against wall C) and shots of Cobb (against wall A). They were shot seven or eight days apart. It meant, of course, that Cobb had to have a perfect emotional memory of the intensity reached by Lee Cobb seven days earlier. But that's where rehearsals were invaluable. After two weeks of rehearsal, I had a complete graph in my head of where I wanted each level of emotion in the movie to be. W

finished in nineteen days (a day under schedule) and were \$1,000 under budget.

Tom Landry said it: It's all in the preparation. I hate the Dallas Cowboys, and I'm not too crazy about him and his short-brimmed hat. But he hit the nail on the head. It is in the preparation. Do mountains of preparation kill spontaneity? Absolutely not. I've found that it's just the opposite. When you know what you're doing, you feel much freer to improvise.

On my second picture, *Stage Struck*, a scene between Henry Fonda and Christopher Plummer took place in Central Park. I had shot most of the scene by lunchtime. We broke for an hour, knowing that we had just a few shots to do after lunch to finish the sequence. During lunch, snow started to fall. When we came back, the park was already covered in white. The snow was so beautiful, I wanted to redo the whole scene. Franz Planner, the cameraman, said it was impossible because we'd be out of light by four o'clock. I quickly restaged the scene, giving Plummer a new entrance so that I could see the snow-covered park; then I placed the camera on a bench, shot a master and two close-ups. The lens was wide open by the last take, but we got it all. Because the actors were prepared, because the crew knew what it was doing, we just swung with the weather and wound up with a better scene. Preparation allows the "lucky accident" that we're always hoping for to happen. It has happened many times since: in a scene between Sean Connery and Vanessa Redgrave in the real Istanbul for *Murder on the Orient Express*; in a scene between Paul Newman and Charlotte Rampling in *The Verdict*; and in many scenes with Al Pacino and various bank employees in *Dog Day Afternoon*. Because everyone knew what he or she was doing, practically all of the improvisation wound up in the finished movie.

So—on to specifics. Shall we talk about writers?

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## The Script:

### Are Writers Necessary?

I've detailed the reasons why I said yes or no to a script. That meant, obviously, that a script existed.

Now, everyone in movies has what in trade jargon is called a "hot" period. That's when everybody wants you because your last movie was a hit. If you've had two hits in a row, you're sizzling. Three hits and it's "What do you want, baby? Just name it." Before you say "Hollywood—what do you expect?" I think you should check your own profession. From my observations, the same pattern is true of publishing, the theater, music, law, surgery, sports, television—anything.

During some of my hot periods, and even some cooler ones, a script arriving from a studio usually has an accompanying letter that almost always includes the same phrase: "Of course we know the script needs work. And if you feel that the present writer can't do it, we're prepared to put on anyone you want." I've always been amazed at that. It's always a bad sign. To me, it indicates that they have no conviction about what they bought in the first place.

The contempt that writers have endured from studios through the years is too well known to discuss again here. Most of the horror stories were true, as when Sam Spiegel had two writers working on the same picture on two different floors of the Plaza Athénée in Paris. Or when Herb Gardner and Paddy Chayefsky, who had adjoining offices at 850 Seventh Avenue in New York, one day received identical offers for a rewrite on the same script. The producer was too dumb or too preoccupied to notice that scripts were being sent to the same address, one to Room 625 and the other to Room 627. The writers typed identical letters, turning down the offer.

I come from the theater. There, the writer's work is sacred. Carrying out the writer's intention is the primary objective of the entire production. The word "intention" is used in the sense of expressing the writer's reason for having written the play. In fact, as defined in the Dramatists Guild contract, the writer has final say over everything—casting, set, costumes, director—including the right to close the play *before it opens* if he is dissatisfied with what he sees onstage. I know of one instance when this happened. I was brought up with the concept that the one who had the initial idea, who suffered through the agony of getting it down on paper, was the one who had to be satisfied.

When I first meet with the scriptwriter, I never *tell* him anything, even if I feel there's a lot to be done. Instead I ask him the same questions I've asked myself: What is this story about? What did you see? What was your *intention*? Ideally, if we do this well, what do you hope the audience will feel, think, sense? In what mood do you want them to leave the theater?

We are two different people trying to combine our talents, so it's critical that we agree on the intention of the screenplay. Under the best of circumstances, what will emerge is a *thing*

intention, which neither of us saw at the beginning. Under the worst of circumstances, a agonizing process of cross-purposes can occur, which will result in something aimless, muddled, or just plain bad winding up on the screen. I once knew a director who always prided himself on having a secret agenda that he thought he could “sneak into” the movie. He probably envied the writer’s talent.

Arthur Miller’s first and, I think, only novel, *Focus*, was, in my opinion, every bit as good as his first produced play, *All My Sons*. I once asked him why, if he was equally talented in both forms, he chose to write plays. Why would he give up the total control of the creative process that a novel provides to write instead for communal control, where a play would first go into the hands of a director and then pass into the hands of a cast, set designer, producer, and so forth? His answer was touching. He said that he loved seeing what his work evoked in others. The result could contain revelations, feelings, and ideas that he never knew existed when he wrote the play. It’s what we all hope for.

Once we’ve agreed on the all-important question “What’s this picture about?” we can start in on the details. First comes an examination of each scene—in sequence, of course. Does this scene contribute to the overall theme? How? Does it contribute to the story line? To the character? Is the story line moving in an ever increasing arc of tension or drama? In the case of a comedy, is it getting funnier? Is the story being moved forward by the characters? In a good drama, the line where characters and story blend should be indiscernible. I once read a very well-written script with first-rate dialogue. But the characters had nothing specific to do with the story line. That particular story could’ve happened to many different kinds of people. In drama, the characters should determine the story. In melodrama, the story determines the characters. Melodrama makes story line its highest priority, and everything is subservient to story. For me, farce is the comic equivalent of melodrama and comedy the comic equivalent of drama. Now, in drama, the story must reveal and elucidate the characters. In *Prince of the City*, Danny Ciello had a fatal flaw that made the ending of the movie inevitable. As a man, as a character, he was a manipulator. He felt he could handle anything and turn it to his advantage. The movie tells the story of a man like that getting into a situation he *couldn’t* handle. No one could have. It was too big, too complex, with too many unpredictable elements, including other people, for anyone to control. Inevitably, it would come crashing down around him. He created the situation, and the situation stripped him down to his essence. Character and story were one and the same.

I think inevitability is the key. In a well-made drama, I want to feel: “Of course—that’s where it was heading all along.” And yet the inevitability mustn’t eliminate surprise. There’s not much point in spending two hours on something that became clear in the first five minutes. Inevitability doesn’t mean predictability. The script must still keep you off balance, keep you surprised, entertained, involved, and yet, when the denouement is reached, still give you the sense that the story *had* to turn out that way.

From a scene-by-scene breakdown, we move on to a line-by-line examination. Is the line of dialogue necessary? Revelatory? Is it saying it in the best possible way? In case of disagreement, I usually go along with the writer’s decision. After all, he *wrote* it. It’s also important that as director I understand each and every line. There’s nothing more embarrassing than an actor asking the meaning of a line and the director not knowing the

answer. It happened to me once, on a picture called *Garbo Talks*. I suddenly realized that I didn't know the answer to the question the actor asked. The writer had gone back to California. I twisted and turned, bullshitting my way into an aspect of the character that the actor was thrilled to play. Later, looking at an earlier draft of the screenplay, I realized that a typo had crept in between drafts. The line meant the exact opposite of what I had explained to the actor. Not that I owned up to it.

On *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, I used the text of the play. The only adaptation made for the screen was to cut seven pages of a 177-page text during rehearsals. And we cut those because I knew I was going to shoot those sections in close-ups. The use of close-ups would make those moments clearer sooner.

*Dog Day Afternoon* was a completely different experience. The script was based on an actual incident. The producer, Marty Bregman, Pacino, and I had accepted a very good screenplay by Frank Pierson. Structurally perfect, with fine, biting dialogue, it was funny, compassionate, and very, very spare. By the third day of rehearsal, I had become nervous about an area that had nothing to do with the quality of the script or the actors. Here was a story that, in plot, was about a man robbing a bank so his boyfriend could have the money for a sex-change operation. Pretty exotic stuff for 1975. Even *The Boys in the Band* had gotten nowhere near that aspect of gay life.

I come from a working-class background. I remember going as a child to the Loew's Pitkin on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn. It wasn't the most sophisticated crowd that piled in on Saturday night. I remember rude remarks being yelled down from the balcony at Lesli Howard in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

As I said earlier, *Dog Day Afternoon* was a movie about what we have in common with the most outrageous behavior, with "freaks." This was a movie in which I wanted the most emotionally moving moment to occur when Pacino is dictating his will before venturing outside the bank, where he's almost certain he'll be killed. The will contained a beautiful and actual line: "And to Ernie, who I love as no man has ever loved another man, I leave..." This was going to be played to the same kind of audience that filled Loew's Pitkin on Saturday night. God knows what might come down from that balcony. The goal of the whole picture was toward making that line work. But could we do it?

With Frank's agreement, on the third day of rehearsal I told the actors that we were dealing with material that was sensationalist by its nature. Normally, I'm not concerned about audience reaction. But when you touch on sex and death, two aspects of life that hit deep core, there's no way of knowing what an audience will do. They could laugh at the wrong places, catcall, start trying to talk back to the screen—any of a hundred defenses that people throw up when they're embarrassed, when what's on the screen is getting too close, or when they're looking at something they've never confronted before. I told the actors that the only way we could preclude this was to portray the characters they played as close to themselves as possible, to take as little as possible from the outside, to spare nothing of themselves from the inside. No costumes. They would wear their own clothes. "I want to see Shelly and Carol and Al and John and Chris up there," I said. "You're just temporarily borrowing the names of the people in the script. No characterizations. Only you." One of the actors asked if they could use their own words when they wanted to. For the first time in my

career, I said, "Yes."

It was a remarkable group. Pacino led them with a mad courage I've seen only two other times. Katharine Hepburn, in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and Sean Connery, in a little-known film we did called *The Offense*, took equally wild risks in their performances. Al Pacino's ego was healthy enough that he could see what we were reaching for. No one was throwing the movie open to anarchy. I had recording equipment brought into the rehearsal hall. We improvised. Each night after rehearsal, the improvisations were typed up and eventually the dialogue was created out of those improvisations. The wonderful scene of the telephone between Pacino and his male lover, played by Chris Sarandon, was improvised in rehearsal, sitting around a table. His following phone call to his wife was made up of Al's improvisations and Susan Peretz's (playing his wife) using the original lines from the script. It's one of the most remarkable fourteen minutes of film I've ever seen. On three occasions, I left the improvisations for the day of actual shooting: two of the scenes between Al and Charles Durning as the cop in charge; and the extraordinary scene of Pacino throwing money to the crowd and feeling his power for the first time after a lifetime of failure, the scene that wound up with him shouting "Attica—Attica." I'd estimate that 60 percent of the screenplay was improvised. But we faithfully followed Pierson's construction scene by scene. He won an Academy Award for the screenplay. And he deserved it. He was selfless and devoted to the subject matter. The actors may not have said exactly what he wrote, but they spoke with his intention.

The real bank robbery had taken place over a nine-hour time period. Needless to say, live television coverage was extensive. One of the robber's friends sold a local television station a videotape of a mock wedding between John and Ernie—the real-life characters—on a street in Greenwich Village. I saw the tape: John wore his army uniform, Ernie a wedding dress. Behind them were twenty guys in drag. Bridesmaids. They were married by a gay priest, who had come out and was subsequently defrocked. John's mother sat in the front row. The ring John put on Ernie's finger was made from a camera flashbulb. The original script had a scene in which that tape was played on television. The hostages in the bank are watching, and they see Sonny's male lover for the first time.

Given my apprehensions about how this would play at the Loew's Pitkin, I felt that if we reenacted the tape in the movie, we were dead. We'd never recover. That balcony crowd would never allow themselves to take Pacino or the movie seriously again. They'd go out of control—perhaps howl with laughter. So I cut the scene. I didn't even shoot it. Instead I had a still picture of Ernie shown on TV, which preserved the content of the scene without taking an unacceptable risk.

In every director's contract there is a clause that says he will "substantially" shoot the approved script. Because most scripts go through many changes, the last draft submitted before filming begins is the "shooting script." If the studio has any objections, they have time to voice them before principal photography starts.

Two weeks into shooting, the production manager came up to me and said that one of the high studio execs in California wanted to talk to me. I said that I was shooting and I'd call back at the lunch break. A minute later the production manager was back at my side. "I said to stop shooting. He has to talk to you." Uh-oh.



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