

ZEN
AND THE
ART OF
CREATING A
CAREER IN FILM

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Zen and the Art of Creating a Career in Film

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Author's Note

AFTER GRADUATING FROM college I made good use of my Psychology degree by working at a liquor store for a couple years, and between that and having fun I often thought about what I really wanted to do with my life. Like a lot of people I had always loved the movies, so when I decided to focus in on the film business I wondered if there might be a guide or possibly a blueprint I could follow that would lead me directly to an awesome career in Moviemaking-Shangri-La!

Yes! Me! In Shangri-La!

I smiled at the thought of working on a real movie with real moviemakers; however, as those imaginings expanded the real in reality began to leak all over the place. I lived in Madison, Wisconsin, far from the moviemaking capital of the world, and although I had taken a handful of film classes in high school and college I hadn't attended let alone graduated from film school. What I knew about filmmaking came either from my own ventures into 8mm moviemaking or the fact that I watched a boatload of films, old, new, and everything in-between. But those minor accomplishments are hardly important enough to put on a resume. Or could it make a

difference if I did? And if I did, who in the world would I give it to anyway?

With this book I want to assist you in three ways; 1: How to find work in the movie business. 2: How to stay working, and 3: To offer a fun and insightful glimpse into the inner workings of Hollywood filmmaking. However, just so you know, this book does not attempt to understand or clarify Zen, as Zen defies all explanation. And even though Zen has masters and students, in the strictest sense there is truly nothing to teach and absolutely nothing to learn. In other words, books are filled with words, and just as words can be used to describe a chilled bottle of water they cannot quench your thirst. So with that in mind my biggest hope is that you'll go beyond the words into the empty spaces of every page, and in doing so find some degree of enlightenment as to what the film experience can be.

It should be noted that the facts, theories and opinions expressed in this book were discovered through my own personal experiences, and over the years came to light while working on countless productions. At times some of the materials presented herein may feel somewhat dated, but film is history and everyone's career is a history of the time they spend there. Yet what remains current is; these are ways to get into the movies. This is how it has always been and unless something miraculous happens this is how it will always be.

Also, at this point I think it's important to say that I'm nobody in particular, but if I was anyone? I'd be you. Because if you want to explore the possibility of working in the motion picture industry, in any professional capacity, my main objective here is to let you in on the secrets I wish I knew when I started out in the business three decades ago.

A Career in Film

“The film business is like riding a trolley car; someone is always getting on, and someone is always getting off. Some ride across town, others go only a few blocks.” *Cary Grant*

IT'S IMPORTANT TO know that no matter how sophisticated, how computerized, how high-tech or far reaching the film business becomes, the industry is about people. People make movies and, as Cary Grant so aptly analogized, some people enter the business and ride it all the way to retirement, while others are there for a very short time; fondly know heretofore as Lifers and Short-timers. Very briefly, Lifers have chosen a career and will stick with it no matter what, or sometimes as long as it will have them. They have mortgages to pay, families to feed, kids in college, etc., while Short-timers are people that found themselves on the trolley for any number of reasons, and because they caught the ride they now have a chance to try out the business to see how it fits. If it does they may ride along for a while, some may even become Lifers, and if it doesn't they will hop off, occasionally before the next stop.

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In the past you may have heard that the film business is impossible to get into but I'm here to tell you it's not because every single day new people, many having no experience at all, begin working their very first jobs.

The truth is the film business can be very transient, meaning that working in the business, as great as it sounds, is not for everyone. Just as some people are not cut out to be sales persons or deep sea divers there are people jumping in and out of the film business all the time, which is good news for any fresh body wanting in.

Without the big red bow, you have to be a certain kind of person to work in the film business because it takes a level of determination and dedication that not everyone can muster. It's about mental and physical endurance. It's about living in an extended family and playing well with others. It's about what's inside of you, and can you or rather will you rise above yourself during even the darkest hours. Of course the most interesting part is; you won't know if you're a film business person until you are actually there, working on a production, experiencing the merry-go-round and every moment that goes with: And, if at day's end the sum of those moments add up to something magical? You may be there for a very long time.

Quick note: Nothing explains the phrase "during even the darkest hours" better than the documentary *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmakers Apocalypse*, a raw behind the scenes look at the making of the classic war film *Apocalypse Now*. The documentary demonstrates what transpires when a major motion picture slowly melts down until there is nothing left but chaos. *Apocalypse Now* Director, Francis Ford Coppola, with everything on the line, tiptoes so close to the edge of failure that he's seemingly nanometers away from a nervous breakdown. "*We were in the jungle, there were too many of*

us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane," which is eerily similar to the predicament the characters in *Apocalypse Now* found themselves in as everyone, bit by bit, loses their mind. So instead of art imitating life, it could be argued that this was a case of life imitating art, and throughout that utterly dysfunctional mess a brilliant film about the insanity of war called *Apocalypse Now* was created. If you haven't seen *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmakers Apocalypse* you might want to check it out, if for nothing else it's a vivid reminder that production meltdowns are a fact of life, albeit most on a lesser scale than this.

So if the film business is about people, then creating relationships with people is a close second. As you know, without relationships the world would stand still. Nothing would get done. I could be holding the *secret of life* in my hand (screenplay writers take note) but if there's no one to show it to, it would matter to me alone. And even if I had just one relationship, and that person knew only me, whatever fantastic knowledge we shared would end right there.

Under a black star-filled sky two polar bears are standing on a small slab of floating ice in the middle of the ocean. Surrounded by cold dark waves for as far as the eyes can see, one polar bear says to the other, "Well, eventually I'd like to Direct."

Getting off that chunk of ice and into the business is one thing, which I'll talk about in upcoming chapters, but at this point it's imperative for all polar bears to understand that if they want a career in film the key to maintaining regular work is the ongoing development of relationships. Bottom line: You know who you know and that's why you're there.

It may also help to know that most relationships in the film

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business come and go, work and personal, and many times it's because they have either run their course, or because you can't help but meet new people. Depending on what film department you are in, you may work with the same group over and over or with a different group every time. Or one day you could be working with a company of people that you just spent seventy hours a week with for the last six months, that have become your family and friends, and the very next day that production ends and everyone scatters; some taking time off from work, others moving on to new projects. You may miss them greatly, and then again you may not, but because of the inherent freelance nature of the business, relationships are always starting, ending or evolving. Some last for decades and others a minute.

A Cameraman/Lighting Director I know who had worked in film for forty years called me one day and announced he was leaving the business. I hadn't talked to him in a while so I asked why, and he told me that all of his connections had finally moved on, retired, or passed away. That he had gotten comfortable with his nonunion/independent work circle so he didn't try to build new relationships and by the time he realized it, it was too late. I'm sure he would have liked to keep working but as fate would have it because he gave up making new connections years before the work-well dried up and he was done. The good news is he has money and will survive; the bad news is scenarios like this happen to less fortunate people every day.

"So how do I make a connection?" you ask. "Because I'm kind of shy," or "I'm not much for small talk."

To start off that's okay, because right now I'm going to offer up this suggestion on how to present yourself on your very first day. Granted, we are all different but these are things

almost anyone can do. Initially you should show up to the job, fifteen minutes early, and while there quietly and tirelessly work your tail off from beginning to end. That way you won't have to make small talk, just work talk. Also, if you can, throughout the day keep a sense of humor about yourself. A good rule of thumb is; always take your job seriously but try not to take yourself too seriously. Display that demeanor as much as possible and I guarantee people will appreciate and remember you in a positive light. Plus, if you are more outgoing and the opportunity presents itself, make small talk, be approachable, and no matter what? Just be your wonderful self and by the end of your very first job you'll have made at least one contact to get more work.

Quick note: The secret to making small talk is to *start out asking questions*; for example, if you see bored strangers milling around on the set, smile really big and say something like, "This is fun, isn't it?" and because that question is basically the opposite of what they're thinking you will get a response one way or another. They may chat or banter with you for a minute or they may offer only a smile, but no matter how minor the exchange the ice has been broken. You have now made initial contact and, if you wish, are more or less free to interact with them the next time your paths cross. They may even smile when they see you coming.

Another quick note: If the word "networking" scares you because it sounds so mechanical, just remember that all it means is "meeting people" and making friends. In an office or on a film set all kinds of people are everywhere and eventually people talk with one another. Since you most likely will be there for a limited amount of time you may have to make "fast friends" by speeding up the process a bit. A good start would be, smile. Smiling is contagious and it draws people

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toward you. Others may see you as a happy person and want that for themselves whether they are capable of achieving it or not. Or they may just wonder what you are thinking and need to know. When we smile at someone they will often inately smile back.

Physiologically speaking, studies show that smiling causes a chemical reaction inside of us that perks up our overall health. Smiling releases serotonin, endorphins and other natural pain killers. The mere act of smiling raises our emotional states and lowers our blood pressure, so if you want to transform a stressed out mind-set into a happier condition force yourself to smile for five minutes straight, and I guarantee you will not only feel better but you will laugh out loud. Also, if you can, smile at people that others do not smile at as you may make their day, which in turn may make yours, either right then or somewhere down the road. Bottom line: People that smile on a regular basis are some of the happiest and healthiest people in the world.

There are times in a Production Assistant's life when they forget to smile. Unexpected events and idiotic situations can be overwhelming for beginners, and because I know that I've always tried to be friendly and helpful to PA's. First of all, many are looking to network so meeting them is relatively easy. And second, knowing PA's can sometimes be very useful because, among other things, they often go between the set and the office, meaning that they may have the "inside story" about what's going on behind closed doors. What the folks are saying and doing in the office can, at times, be more important than what's happening on the set.

In my opinion it's good to make friends with PA's but there are some people out there that just love to give them a hard time. Those people either don't know or don't care

that today's Production Assistants are tomorrow's Production Managers and Producers.

One day after lunch I told that theory to a co-worker who had just finished picking on a PA, and he said, "That kid? He's a moron! He'll never be a Producer."

"But didn't you tell me the Producer on your last show was a moron?"

He thought for a second, and glared at me.

I laughed. "C'mon. Let's get a cup of coffee."

Once again, just to keep it in the forefront of your mind, making relationships with people is vital for career development. Some connections may help your career but it's just as valuable to know that most will not. The majority of people you meet will only be casual friends or acquaintances. And yes, there will be a few jerks that you can't stand, however, if you continue to meet people not only will you get work on a regular basis, but there's a very good chance that a handful of them will become your life long friends. Bottom line: Don't go overboard, just let it flow, and if you can, make some friends and have some fun because you never know who or what may be happening in the future.

As you might know there's a saying on the set "hurry up and wait" that describes what goes on when there are technical holdups or artist delays, etc., and during that time waiting individuals often make idle chitchat. The film business is very social and filled with interesting people from all over the world. So if the occasion ever arose one question I often asked my co-workers was how they got started in the business and over the years I heard all kinds of stories that, for one thing, people enjoyed telling, and for another always fascinated me.

A while back I was hired to write an article on a DreamWorks movie called *House of Sand and Fog*. The

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article would be just one of many items in an EPK (Electronic Press Kit) that would be handed out to film journalists to be used as background information on the new release and its major players. For me the assignment was to write a thousand words about the movie and it's Director.

The next day I was emailed a stack of notes and after reading them I thought this man's story was so incredible that it needs to be included here. The point being, if he could somehow find his way into the business, no one else should have anything to fear.

If it's true that some of us take the road less traveled to get where we're going, then first time feature film director Vadim Perelman would surely be the poster boy for uncharted pathways.

Born in the Ukraine, in the former Soviet Union, Vadim grew up in a small one room apartment with ten other family members and although he had never seen a movie, by the time he was four he was already reading the classics.

"I'd lay there in a little corner on my cot reading books," says Vadim. "It was warm, and wonderful. You really don't know any different."

Life was tough and not getting any easier for the impoverished family but as far as Vadim knew he was happy, at least up until a devastating two year period when his father was killed in an auto accident, followed by the passing of all four grandparents. Those tragic events turned the youngster's world upside down, and before he knew it he was standing at the first of many forks in the road. "My mother and I left to go to Israel. But midway to Israel, she decided she didn't want me to go into the army, and we ended up moving to Italy."

With very little money and speaking only Russian, the two

moved into a barrio-type neighborhood near Rome, and not long afterward Vadim was supporting both of them by doing odd jobs and hustling tourists.

"I would go into Rome every day barely knowing a word of Italian, and I would literally live in the streets. Sometimes I'd end up sleeping on park benches or at train stations. It was such a great adventure."

Half way across the world his aunt lived in Canada and because her husband was out of work they invited Vadim's mother and him to come to Edmonton. They could live in their basement and help out with expenses. So they went.

"It was just this total hardship," remembers Vadim. "Two families crammed into a small space. I delivered newspapers in freezing weather, and my mother got a job as a sales clerk in a clothing store."

His mother was trying her best to start a new life for them, and eventually she met a man and remarried. Unfortunately Vadim and his new stepfather didn't get along.

"Here was this feral street child," says Vadim, "who didn't need a daddy, even though he wanted one badly. But I wasn't good for him, and he wasn't good for me. So it created a lot of tension, a lot of conflict."

And when that tension got to a point where the two could no longer coexist, the sixteen year old packed his bags.

"After four years of hand to mouth crazy living in Edmonton, I dropped out of high school and moved. Later I ended up going to night school. But the thing to know is that I always read books. It didn't matter where I was, or how I was, books were my escape from everything. "

Vadim picked up English quickly, and it was at night school while viewing a documentary that the film bug first bit him. "In the film," says Vadim, "Norman Jewison (Director/

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Producer, *Moonstruck*, *Other People's Money*) is in his trailer tearing out his hair while rewriting scenes, and I thought, you know what? This is what I want to do!"

Excited at the possibility, the young man went to Toronto and after a year and a half of film school opened a small production company where he shot and edited music videos. During that time he met a musician, an American woman, and in 1990 the two decided to move to Los Angeles to try and further their careers.

In LA Vadim got a job editing videos. Later he worked on commercials and before long became somewhat well known as a commercial director. Then one day on a location shoot the voracious reader purchased a book while waiting at an airport. The novel was titled "House of Sand and Fog" and Vadim, attracted to its universal themes, grabbed the nearest phone hoping to acquire the rights.

The bestseller, written by Andre Dubus III, had been sought after by over a hundred film production companies, all of which Dubus had turned down because of their takes on the story. It seemed many wanted to turn the drama into a thriller, and others were just not interested in remaining true to the story, that is, until Vadim called to check out the book's availability.

"When Vadim called," says Dubus, "I really felt that he understood the deeper resonance of the story. I mean, in some ways he understood it better than I did. He actually said things about the book that I said, well, that's a good point. You're right about that." The writer smiles, "Who knew?"

Now, following the film's completion, Vadim Perelman and DreamWorks SKG brings you *House of Sand and Fog* starring Academy Award® winners Sir Ben Kingsley (*Gandhi*) and Jennifer Connelly (*A Beautiful Mind*).

“Vadim is very different from other first-time directors,” says Kingsley, “because he’s born of a huge wealth of experience, of journeying, of suffering, of dreams being squashed and thrown away. One wonders if you would go into battle with this man by your side. And the answer is, absolutely.”

“Vadim has quite a dramatic background himself,” says Connelly. “Things that he’s told me I wouldn’t want to repeat, yet he was quite confident and comfortable on the set. He really handled himself well. He had good ideas, and I think he did a really good job directing it.”

“It’s a universal theme,” says Vadim. “It’s the themes in that book and ultimately in the film that are so primal and so universal. They are about loneliness. They are about being cast out. They are about being an outsider.”

And if there’s anyone who knows what it’s like to be an outsider it is Vadim Perelman, whose unlikely course led him across the globe to a spot *not* on the outside, but on the inside of a place where dreams come true.

Pop Quiz: What job, at the end of the day, hands out maps so you know how to get to work the following day? Or what occupation has a precise starting time every day but usually doesn’t ever guarantee an ending time? Or what profession has you working at a dirty tire factory in the morning, and that afternoon you’re setting up shop at the prestigious Riviera Country Club? And finally what trade keeps you flying by the seat of your pants because no matter how prepared you think you are the unexpected happens.

Our company rolled in early that morning, in complete darkness, and the Transportation Department began strategically parking the production vehicles. Parking can be

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a big deal as the cast and crew will be moving back and forth from the trucks and trailers to the set, etc., so the closer and easier truck access is the quicker things can go. A good Transportation Coordinator and/or Captain can save a production a lot of time and money over the course of a feature film, and our Captain was very good. He was good because when you work the set you really come to appreciate someone who cares enough to get those vehicles parked as close as possible, as the trips made between the two can be many.

On any shooting day Transportation is generally the first to arrive and the last to leave, and this morning was no different as they were setting up base camp an hour before anyone else got there; parking a couple semis, a honey wagon, and then arranging make-believe spaces in a grassy field for a couple five and ten ton trucks, a wardrobe trailer and caterer.

An hour later, after all the vehicles were neatly parked and the first signs of light were upon them, the happy drivers stood around the catering truck reliving the parking job while munching breakfast and sipping coffee.

A hundred yards away, in the purple dawn, the film's Director, followed by a few department heads, walked over and talked quietly with the Director of Photography about the first shot of the day.

The long-haired Director then pulled out his viewer, looked through it, and began sizing up the area, which on that early morning was a dilapidated farmhouse on a wide open prairie in rural Wyoming.

He lowered his viewer, thought for a second, and turned to the show's Set Decorator. "Is everything ready at the house?"

She nodded.

His eyes went back to the vast expanse, and he squinted. “Is anyone here from Transportation?”

Nearby, eating a breakfast burrito, the proud Captain smiled and stepped forward. “Yes, sir, what do you need?”

The Director turned to him and with a confused look on his face said, “Why are all those trucks parked in my shot?”