

Creating a Schedule

by Ken Golden

I have been scheduling and budgeting films for many years and have found, at least in terms of my own experience, that if I have a director on board at the time I do a board and budget for the project, I suggest to him/her doing two things.

I suggest going through the script scene by scene with the director for what I tell the director is a "Production Shooting Script." This is a non-threatening pass in which we will not touch any of the director's creative decisions, but merely create more accurate slug lines and become more specific in terms of production requirements. My experience has been that no one, much less the producer, has examined the script with as much detail, energy and focus as we do the session. I try to be the one typing the script into Movie Magic Screenwriter (so that I have some control over the process and the final output).

The session inherently leads to a common vocabulary in terms of slug lines. By that I mean if there are three shots that are all described as "Ext. New York Street - Day," we then put something in the slug line that will identify the shot. For example, "Ext. Mugging Street - Day," or "Ext. Shoot Out Street - Night" or "Ext. Breaking Up Street - Day" (it was a romance). Immediately everyone knows what scene were talking about without reference to the scene number.

We also deal with the dreaded "M" word, MONTAGE. By the time we get to a montage sequence it has become obvious to the director that he/she will have to specify how many scenes are in the montage, where they take place and what characters are in them. We give each of the scenes a discrete scene number so that the Montage becomes a reality that can be budgeted.

Any logical inconsistencies can be worked out at this stage also. "How can he walk into the room holding the suitcase, when in the previous shot he put it in a safe?" More often than not the writer/director will have to admit that some shots are from a previous version and were simply missed.

Creative use of language can also be honed down to the reality of requirements for a shot. "She walked down the street and the buses belched black smoke." Usually when I ask a director/writer how many buses they want, at \$1200 a bus, and how many SAG extras they want in each bus (40 times 125 = \$5,000 plus fringes, plus taxes per bus), they usually say "I meant it looks like a crowded street. They don't really have to be buses there." And then we agree on the number of passersby and the number of ND cars that might go through the shot. We take the creative similes and turn them into budget-able realities.

At the end of the process, we have a script without typos, without logical or plot inconsistencies, with a common vocabulary of description and with all elements that are going to cost money well defined.

I then walked the director through every scene asking him or her approximately how many setups they will need in order to accomplish the work for the specific scene. We both know that the number of setups is not engraved in stone, but on the other hand it does give us a way of knowing which scenes can be done in one setup and which scenes will require 17 or 18. I actually create a space on the top of the strips where the number of setups can be entered for each scene.

Consequently, when I start to create reasonable shooting days in which an appropriate amount of physical labor can actually be accomplished, I have a guide, independent of page count or master screen time. Here, is where the hard choices have to be made about the pace of shooting. If you should only one page a day, but that page is going to require 23 setups, you have at least two days worth of work. If you have a four-page scene that is going to be shot in two setups, it can easily be accomplished in one day. Of course, these questions are shaped by the content of the scenes. The quality of the shoot will be about how much work you are asking the crew to do in each 12-hour shooting day.

If you are lucky enough to have the luxury of being able to stick with eight to 10 setups a day, a lot of attention can be paid to each set up. If, for economic reasons, you find yourself in a situation in which 18 to 20 setups, or more, will have to be accomplished each day, the rush of production will preclude giving either the actors or the crew time to do their best work.

I think we have to keep in mind how very physically demanding (much less psychologically) it is to make a movie. I think the key to understanding the scene means having an idea of how many setups it will take to accomplish the scene, and then constructing a realistic schedule for the budget constraints that are externally imposed on the process.

One of the greatest sins a production manager or line producer can foist on a production company, or director, is to tell them they can accomplish a specific script knowing full well that the number of days available is either inadequate to complete the work, or insufficient to do justice to the material.

In the end, the production manager's goal is to find a balance between the work that has to be done in the time we have to do it. But we must always tell our clients the truth about the specific script they are trying to make into a movie.

Very often they do not want to hear the truth and will, from time to time, shoot the messenger. But I think it is better to be wounded honorably in the heat of battle, than to sell your integrity down the river to get a job that will go over

budget and over schedule. And there are forceful, compelling, rational, and politic ways to explain the reality of production to relatively inexperienced filmmakers.

Although it may not seem like it at times, they are hiring us, as the experienced ones, to guide them through the process and to protect them from the chaos of an under-budgeted or inadequately scheduled production experience.

Even in a situation in which you do not have a director on board yet, you can still go through the processes that I have described above on your own, with the producer or producer/writer of the project, who is looking for board and budget in order to raise money and pass muster with a completion bond company.

So, I really feel that the key to scheduling is a total projection into seeing the scenes on their feet in your head and having a handle on how much actual work there is in order to accomplish any given scene through the number of setups they will require.

An elegantly scheduled film project and its attendant realistically constructed budget are things of beauty that can create the groundwork, the ground plan, for a great shoot for all concerned, and hopefully generate a quality project.

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