

TIPS TO MAKING A MICROBUDGET FEATURE FILM



SHAWN WHITNEY

Tips To Making A Microbudget Feature Film

This e-book is dedicated to all those dreamers who are hungry to turn the stories in their heads into films. I hope this little book gives them the tools to take the first steps on their journeys.

Shawn Whitney

Table of Contents

Section 1: Film Midwife To Film Mama	5
Section 2: Going To Market & Other Lies	8
Section 3: Make Free Valuable.....	11
Section 4: Enthusiasm Rodeo.....	14
Section 5: These Boots Were Made For Walking.....	19
Section 6: It Ain't Over Yet, Baby	21
Section 7: The Diy Film Career	23

SECTION 1

Film Midwife To Film Mama

FILM MIDWIFE TO FILM MAMA

My wife, myself and our two producing partners have now shot two microbudget films. The first went on to win three awards, go to 8 festivals internationally and got picked up by a sales agent. The second is in the final stages of post-production and we're in development on our third film, which we plan to shoot in 2017. Not bad considering that we are doing it outside of all the usual channels and reliant on no one's initiative or permission but our own.

Midwife

Giving birth really is a good metaphor for making a film. There is a lengthy gestation period, involving impatience and discomfort as the project develops. Then there is an incredibly intense birthing process through the production, followed by a lengthy period of "education"; shaping your film to be the best it can possibly be through editing, music, color, etc.

For several years my role in this process was one of midwife – or rather, a small part of a team of midwives. I have worked for the past 8 years professionally as an "executive story consultant". Amongst other things that has involved story editing other people's scripts to help them be the best that they can be before going to camera. I say small part because, it might surprise you to know, the creative quality of a script is only one component – and not nearly the most important – in getting a film project off the ground.

Same Old, Same Old

Film, even so-called indies, are an expensive operation, costing in the range of millions to tens of millions of dollars. Investors, whether individual or institutional, want to make their money back and make a profit. That's why you see the same actors in movies that follow the same basic plot lines and have the same story elements so often. It's about using brand recognition to sell more product and make more profit.

It's also why it's so hard to break in. Investors don't like to take chances with their money. They aren't interested in new voices and new faces or new directors. That's a risk that's hard to overcome if you don't have personal connections. And it's one of the reasons why the traditional path is for people to work their way up through either lower level jobs or through other less creative parts of the industry, like making commercials – to prove their mettle and skill. But that process, as I've found out from personal experience, can take years and years, even decades. And you may well spend all that time and *still* not be seen as a credible risk to helm a feature film.

And, so, after years of playing the role of midwife, I finally decided to stop waiting, forget about Hollywood, and just start making movies. And what I discovered was that it was possible without selling your house or incurring a 30-year debt. And I discovered that we weren't the first – others had done it and made great films. That means that you can do it too!

SECTION 2

**Going To
Market &
Other Lies**

GOING TO MARKET & OTHER LIES

If you read many screenwriting books or talk to producers or go to film school, you will often hear that you should know what sells in the market and write for the market. Film is an industry and industries make products to sell at a profit. If your film doesn't have the potential to make X millions of dollars, nobody will make your film.

I have taught screenwriting at university and have many screenwriter friends and colleagues. Almost everyone tries to write films that will sell: action movies, romantic comedies, horror, thriller. I've done this – I wrote six “woman in peril” thrillers for an output deal that was “guaranteed” and which never panned out. Now I have five (one got made) crappy, boilerplate scripts that took up the better part of a year of my life and led nowhere.

And that's the thing: there's 250,000 spec screenplays floating around Hollywood at any time, waiting to get read. Most of them are “saleable” genre scripts, written for the market. They almost never get read, let alone produced.

So forget about writing for the market in the hopes that your script will be the one that somehow gets read. At the very least, don't make that your only film career plan. Life's too short to spend it sitting around waiting. Or, perhaps worse, writing material you aren't passionate about because “that's what sells.”

No Contest

I feel the same way about submitting for contests. You can spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in entry fees. Most contests don't even give you feedback or they charge you extra for feedback. Or the feedback is written by interns who have less experience than you and are putting their own frustration at not being able to get their films made into their critique of your script. One contest I entered didn't even send out a notice about who had won and I had to write them to find out.

You could easily spend \$5000 on contests over a period of five or ten years if you submit to between 5-10 contests per year. For a little bit more money you could turn your screenplay into an actual feature film. Which is more effective? Which is more rewarding?

Freebird

One of the freeing things about writing a microbudget film is that the stakes are lower. If your film doesn't sell in China or Germany and make millions, nobody is going to lose their shirt. Instead of trying to write a script for a film that will star Matt Damon and make \$50 million, you can write a story that you're passionate about and only needs to make a few thousand dollars to break even.

Mark Duplass shot his first film for \$65,000 and it was, as he described it, "dog diarrhea". He and his brother didn't give up. They went on to make movies for about a fifth of that amount. They were distinctly unmarketable in style. Yet they got play at prestigious festivals, including SXSW. They now make million dollar movies and have a TV series, *Togetherness*, on HBO.

Write for yourself, write your passion. Forget the market.

SECTION 3

**Make Free
Valuable**

MAKE FREE VALUABLE

When you make a movie, even a microbudget, everything costs money – whether it’s salaries, gear, materials or food for cast and crew. There’s only one thing that’s free – writing the script. But just because it’s free and just because you’re not writing for market doesn’t mean you shouldn’t apply the same amount of discipline to this part of the process.

The greatest number of person hours you should spend on making a movie should go into script development. Writing is rewriting. And once you’ve rewritten it as much as you can, get people to read it, lots of people – people who know scripts, people who don’t. Don’t get them to all read the same draft: get some to read your second draft – then make changes. Then get others to read your third draft and so on. Make your passion story the best it possibly can be.

Travel light

Beyond the process of creating a screenplay, what you really want to know is what kind of stories work best for microbudget films. With advances in technology and depending on your access to the skills and gear, you can really do almost anything now. But I want to suggest that for your first film you should keep it pretty simple and not break your teeth trying to make a Star Wars fan film for \$10,000. Here’s a few key principles to keep in mind:

- 1) Few locations. There’s a reason why so many low budget horror films take place in a house and it’s not just because ghosts like to haunt them. All you need is one location, five disposable teens, and a monster/serial killer/demon/walking shark.

- 2) Few characters. Less people to pay, less people to feed, less people to make up and costume and keep track of.
- 3) No stunts/special effects. You can fake a punch here and there. You can even throw in some gunplay and find free muzzle flash effects, bullet strikes, etc. that don't look too cheesy. But you don't want to put in car chases and explosions and space ships, etc. that are going to complicate your life and cost a boatload of cash.
- 4) Centering a story inside one location is a great way to keep it simple and cheap but unless it's key to the story, take it outside a few times over the course of the script. Exterior shots can help your film breathe a bit and not feel claustrophobic or like a cheap sitcom. Shoot a scene walking down a street or in a park.

Fade Out

There's lots more to say about writing screenplays and storytelling but this gives you a starting point. Consider reading one or two good books on screenwriting so that you can learn to develop a framework. Syd Field's Screenplay is good. I'm a big fan of Save The Cat by Blake Snyder, though he is very conventional in his idea of what stories to tell. In the future I intend to create a course for writing microbudget screenplays to help people with this most key part of the process.

SECTION 4

Enthusiasm Rodeo

ENTHUSIASM RODEO

Now you've got an amazing, bulletproof script that tells your passion story without plot holes and missing emotional beats. Hopefully it's contained, not more than 90 pages and can be shot in three weeks or less. You're ready for Pre-production! The first thing you need to think about when you've reached this stage is the team. Because the success or failure of any shoot comes down to the team. You're going to be asking everyone or almost everyone to work for free. And that means sustaining enthusiasm. To sustain enthusiasm you must be organized and calm. There are, I would say, three parts to your team:

- 1) Your production team
- 2) Your crew
- 3) Your cast

First Things First

Before we go any further there's something that has to be said about working with crew on a microbudget. Chances are you won't be paying them anything, other than the opportunity to gain experience and get a credit.

Be kind to your crew. It's very hard to keep a stable crew for an entire shoot. You're going to lose people and have to fill holes at the last minute when people drop out for paying gigs. Increase your chances of keeping people by giving them the most awesome experience you possibly can.

- 1) Don't ever yell at them, no matter how stressed you get. If they make a mistake, you take the blame.

- 2) Take time during set-ups, down times, after getting a shot, whenever you can to tell people individually and collectively what a great job they're doing.
- 3) Feed them awesome food every single day. When people get hungry they get grumpy and the fights start.
- 4) Throw a great wrap party at the end with free booze and food.

If you don't know actors or crew or people who want to be producers then you can still find people.

- 1) Are there local film clubs, like Raindance, where you can socialize and meet people?
- 2) Is there a local film school where you can put up signs? Recent film grads are a staple of indie film production.
- 3) Is there a locally focused Facebook film page, like in Toronto where there is a page called "I need a producer/fixer/crew..." which you can request to join.
- 4) You can advertise for key cast and crew on Craigslist and make it clear that part of this opportunity is that they must be willing to be involved with the producing team. You can also advertise for producers and production managers this way.

Crew

You want to keep your crew as small as possible on a microbudget shoot. Remember, every person on set is somebody else you have to feed – and food will probably be your single largest budget item. You need to be agile and simple. Your focus is story, not on being fancy.

Cast

If at all possible, use professional actors. I know Mike Leigh uses non-actors and makes great movies. You're not Mike Leigh. And you only have two or three weeks to shoot your 70-90 page feature film, you want people who know what they're doing.

There are programs through the actors' union SAG and ACTRA (in Canada) for ultra-low budget films that allow you to pay a much-reduced fee. On our last film we used ACTRA's Co-Op Film program, which meant actors got a percentage of any future profits in lieu of pay, based upon the hours worked. It was an extra hassle to work out everyone's percentage but it saved us thousands of dollars.

Prior Planning Prevents Permanent Panic

Any film requires solid planning because even the simplest, microbudget is going to have a lot of moving parts. There's a lot of improvising that has to happen on a microbudget. It will often feel like you're running on sand against a windstorm. Nothing feels secure. But the better your pre-production planning, the more you will be able to improvise when the inevitable crises hit.

- 1) Have a solid and realistic budget.
- 2) Make sure you schedule all your days so that you know what you're shooting and how many pages you're shooting every day, so that it balances out.
- 3) Figure out beforehand what gear you will need and for which days. You can get a lot of gear really cheap and this shouldn't be a barrier. We bought gear and then re-sold it on eBay and Craigslist to bring down costs even further.

- 4) Shot list every scene. There will be changes on set but you want to make sure you aren't just trying to improvise or remember what you intended for that scene.
- 5) Scout your locations with department heads to help with planning. DP's will want to walk through blocking on location and get a sense of lighting needs. Your Production Designer will want to make notes on set design and dressing. Wardrobe will want to see the colors in the room to help them make wardrobe decisions, etc.
- 6) Plan your meals and who will make them and cook them in advance. Freeze stuff.
- 7) Plan marketing. People often overlook having an on-set photographer. You will need stills and behind the scenes shots for festivals, poster art and distribution.
- 8) Organize childcare – Feeding people is a necessity. So is making sure that people get help covering childcare. Don't exclude (primarily) women. Not just to be fair but because having women on set will contribute to your film.

SECTION 5

**These Boots
Were Made
For Walking**

THESE BOOTS WERE MADE FOR WALKING

I had an annoying teacher when I was a kid who would always say: Keep it simple, stupid. It's a good motto on a microbudget where there's no room to get complicated. If there's an overall rule, besides being very organized I would say it is this. What's better, a beautifully rendered film in which only half the script was shot, or something grittier and more functional in which you tell the whole story?

- 1) Keep lighting set-ups simple to save time. Standard 3-point lighting goes a long way for most indoor scenes. We shot a lot of our second feature in a car using a pair of Polaroid LED lights that cost us \$150 each.
- 2) Don't overload your production with fancy shots that take hours of set-up. Focus on meat and potatoes and sprinkle a few more complicated shots in to add production value. There's a reason why so many ultra-low budget indies shoot primarily handheld – the camera movement adds dynamism without the complexity of, for instance, a panning dolly shot.
- 3) Don't try to cheat these things by making your days 16 hours long with no breaks. Crew (and cast) will walk out. If anything, keep your days shorter than a typical shoot. We tried for 10 hour days when we could and never went over 12 hours.

SECTION 6

**It Ain't Over
Yet, Baby**

IT AIN'T OVER YET, BABY

Wow, that shoot was exhilarating wasn't it? You shot everything you needed to and you have a film. Uh, no. You still have the even longer process of post-production to go through now. And that can take you more time and money than your production. There's four ways you can handle post-production:

- 1) Do it yourself.
- 2) Get volunteers
- 3) Go to a post house
- 4) Hire freelancers

Probably you're going to do a mix of several of these. I helped cut the assembly on both of our films. I didn't want to edit because film's strength is that it is a collective effort. Just like it's important for you to get an outside set of eyes to look over your script, I think it's important to have someone impartial who has distance from your material as an editor. Ultimately, that's a creative choice you will have to make.

You can also go to a post house and see if they will give you a deal. They might, they might not. We got a deal but it was still expensive. You can get people – colorists, audio mixers, etc. – much cheaper through online freelance services like Upwork. The drawback is that it may mean working remotely with someone on the other side of the world. You can also get people to do it for free who are looking for experience and credits though often that means doing it more slowly during their free time.

SECTION 7

The DIY Film Career

THE DIY FILM CAREER

I won't promise that making a microbudget will be easy or lead to an Academy Award and a million dollars. Because then I would be lying. But that's not why you should bring your story to life as a film. You should do it because you *need* to do it and because the other avenues have been cut off to you.

It's also important that you don't see this as a one-off thing. You need to see this as building a DIY Film Career, outside of the usual channels. It would probably be more fruitful to think of your film career like a band thinks of theirs: you need to build an audience over time by creating engaging work and doing the self-marketing necessary. Meantime, enjoy the pleasure of making exactly the kinds of movies you want to make in the way that you want to make them.

And I want to help you in this.

I love film and I love the stories that can be told through film. I particularly love films that push the boundaries and challenge our taboos and our assumptions. I'm hoping that armed with these tips and with some materials to help filmmakers organize their production that the number of these kinds of films will increase. That is, in fact, the next step for me – to pull together some of the key documents and templates to help you get your film off the ground. Because I know that with a little support and mentoring and your own bravery and determination, you will enrich our cinematic culture. It excites me to do my little part in making that happen. The next step for you is to start writing the script for the story you just have to tell. You can do it.

If you have any questions related to the process described in this case study, feel free to visit microbudgetfilmlab.com and send them my way. I'll do my best to respond to them as soon as possible.