



COMIC CON INTERNATIONAL FILM SCHOOL 2012 SYLLABUS

For the eighth year running, Comic-Con presents a 4-day, nuts and bolts class on how to make a movie for very little money using available video technology and desktop software. Whether you're shooting your first zombie short or that story about the leather-clad girl who pilots a steampunk dirigible, this course will take you from script to DVD, so that you too can enter your own movie into the CCI-IFF.

DAY 1

PRE-PRODUCTION – WRITING AND PRODUCING

PANELISTS

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Paula Peril – Midnight Whistle

Jack Conway: Writer/Producer: Fear News

Nick Murphy: Writer/Director: Pizza and Bullets

Sean Rourke: Writer: Ballistica (**Moderator**)

WRITING

- Write what you know you can shoot.
- Begin short-form and work your way up to more complexity.
- Don't let fear stop you.
- Screenwriting Software:
 - Final Draft: is the industry standard.
 - Scripted.com: online screenwriting software.
 - Scrivener: writing, storyboarding, outlining, creative management software.
 - Celtx.com: free pre-production software for screenwriting, storyboarding, scheduling, and project management.

PRODUCING & SCHEDULING

- Always get permission from your locations in advance.
- Visit the locations ahead of time. Figure out what the sound and lighting situation will be (windows/no windows, low ceilings, etc.,) locate power outlets, figure-out parking, restrooms, and a green-room, (an area where actors and crew can sit and wait that is away from the set, but close enough to where they can be easily grabbed.)
- Limit Company Moves. A Company Move is when you break in the middle of a shoot day to move the production to a new location.



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These always take longer than you expect, and there's a higher probability of people getting lost, being late, or leaving valuables behind.

- Borrow Equipment when you can.
- Schedule the shoot (how long does it take to shoot a page of dialogue? A fight scene?) Your first time out, schedule everything as though it were going to take twice as long as you think to shoot, because it probably will. It's better to wrap people out early than it is to run late.
- Schedule based on complexity of material, availability of location, and necessity of actors. i.e.: It sucks for an actor to show up at 9am, do two lines of dialogue, and then sit for 8 hours waiting for their next scene to come up. Book them so that they do all their material at once if at all possible.
- Try to do formal agreements with crew & cast. Even simple ones are better than nothing.
- Pre production meetings – can't have enough of those.
- Script read-through with actors. Rehearsal time is important.
- Do a Budget...food is the biggest expense, but also the most important!
- Store all your information in one place! It doesn't matter if it is in a spiral notebook or on your computer, organizing the following will be key to managing budgeting, scheduling, locations, crew, and promotion:

STORY / PRODUCTION

Treatment, plot points, ideas, story boards, shot lists

CONTACT INFO

Crew, equipment, locations, wardrobe

CALENDAR

Shooting days, rehearsals, other meetings

SCHEDULING

Cast members, extras, stunts, set dressing, props, vehicles, fx

LOCATIONS

Contact info, directions, photos, maps, scenes for locations

BUDGETING

Production: camera, set constructions, props, gas for vehicles



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Post Production: software, stock footage, services
Other: publicity, websites, etc.

FILM FESTS

Festival, where, when, submission deadlines

FIND A CREW

- Crewing up - make sure you can trust your crew. People WILL flake-out on you. That's why you shouldn't have a whole lot riding on your first movie. After doing a few, you will find out who is dependable and who isn't. You don't need a big budget to make a movie. However you do need a good support team.
- Treat your cast & crew like Gods, especially if they work for free, because you may want to shoot another low budget film & you'll need people who enjoy working with you.
- Don't be afraid to handle more than one position. For example: "I'm the director, and I'm not gonna move lights & sand bags" – don't be a pre-madonna.

PRODUCTION DESIGN, COSTUMING & PROPS

- Find the locations of the nearest Thrift Stores, Halloween stores, Army Surplus stores, Garment District, Hardware Stores, 99 Cent Store, etc. You can find great deals at any one of these places.
- Learn to sew (or find someone who can), or else get a hot-glue gun.
- Take lots of pictures for continuity.
- Organize costumes and props with "paper bag" filing system.
- Make friends with spray paint.

EQUIPMENT TESTS

- Test your equipment before you shoot– very important! There's nothing worse than showing up to set and finding out that your camera won't record.



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PREP

- *Shot List:* Always write down every angle you plan to shoot during the day. It is easy to forget things when you're in the thick of it.
- *Storyboards:* Not necessary, but there is no better way to communicate to your crew what each shot is supposed to look like.
- *Pre-Vis:* Computer generated pre-visualization is almost unnecessary in the world of no-budget filmmaking, but if you want to do one, it can only help.
- *Video Pre-Vis:* Shoot the scene in the location using no lights, no crew, and one or two friends as actors, just so that you can get your angles and shot composition down before you get everybody to the location for real. Refer to Robert Rodriguez's behind-the-scenes on "Desperado."

GENERAL NOTES

- Make new mistakes from project to project.
- DO NOT shoot anything too aggressive your first time out---AKA: Animals, Kids, huge SPFX, lots of characters/extras, giant fight scenes
- Spend money wisely - work within your means - DO NOT spend a lot of money on your first project
- Don't be afraid to experiment on your first movie, this is how you learn.
- Shoot – long for short form. Get this experience.
- Watch movies. Listen to the audio commentaries on DVD. In particular, the DVDs of directors like Robert Rodriguez, Kevin Smith, Steven Soderberg, John Carpenter, etc. who talk about the film-making process and not just about their vision.
- Keep it fun! If people have fun working on your movie, they will come back and do it again. A movie set, if not planned-out and managed properly can quickly turn into a hellish experience for everyone.

DAY 2

PRODUCTION

PANELISTS

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Paula Peril – Midnight Whistle

Jack Conway: Writer/Producer: Fear News

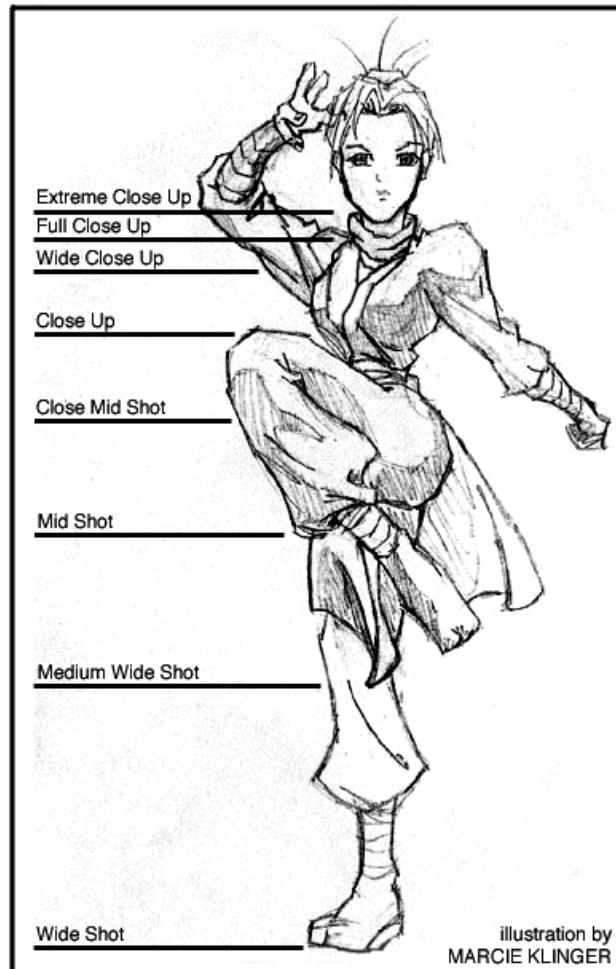
Nick Murphy: Writer/Director: Pizza and Bullets

Sean Rourke: Writer: Ballistica (**Moderator**)

PRODUCTION

CINEMATOGRAPHY

- *Shot composition* - what you want in your frame. If the audience can't see it, it doesn't exist. You do have to know some of the traditional film language to get good composition (i.e. low angle vs. high angle) and what they both can mean. Watch movies with the audio off so that you can SEE what you are watching. For deep composition check out Citizen Kane and Ikuru, both have much more going on in frame than just the actors
- *Max Headroom* - the moving image has a language. The eyes of actors should line up at about where the top third of the screen cuts thru - this is the same for TV size or HD





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- *Doing it with one camera* - shoot a master or wide shot, then shoot a two shot, then Close-ups, and extras that you know you will need, (a hand picking-up a phone, gun cocking, etc.)
- Try to light the master shot with the intent to only have to tweak the lights as you go in for the closer shots. Every time you re-light, you lose valuable time.
- *Don't do a 180* - the 180 rule - the camera never moves beyond 180 degrees during any one scene. If you do this, you will disorient your audience.
- Know what you are doing before you show up. Again, use your set-ups wisely.

LIGHTING, CAMERA, & SOUND

- White balancing; What is it & why is it important? Always do it!
- Lighting for no money – simple lights can work out great.
- What camera to use – Standard Definition (SD) or High Definition (HD.)
- When do you shoot 24p, 30p, or 60i, and what's the difference?
- HD formats: 1920x1080 vs 1280x720
- Tape vs. Data Card vs. Internal Hard Drive
- Always a good idea to have a laptop on set with enough room to dump your footage onto. It's also good for checking to see if the footage you're shooting looks the way you want it to.
- Sound: Do not rely on the onboard Mic. Get the Microphone AWAY from the camera if you need to record dialogue!
- Try to have someone dedicated only to sound. They should be in charge of the microphones, (shotgun, lavalier, or other,) should wear headphones on every take and listen for microphone bumps, cars going by, and make sure that everyone can be heard and understood. If you have a camera with VU (Volume Unit) meters on it, the sound person should watch them during recording to make sure that the levels are in a safe audio range. (i.e., not too soft and not too hot.)
- Types of microphones:
 - ◆ Shotgun - narrow pick up range over longer distances; good for targeting subjects and recording a wider frequency range but requires precise positioning.



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- ◆ Lavalieres - wider pick up range for much shorter distances; good for recording actor's dialog but with smaller frequency range and more likely to get rubbed against.
- Good sound is very important in post, and bad sound will kill a movie very quickly.

ON SET PRODUCTION

- Always have someone taking stills. You never know when you may need them later.
- Have someone try & do makeup; Most actors don't mind doing their own. For particular makeup looks & effects find tutorials on YouTube.
- Slate your shots, even with a notebook.
- Always have someone on set who is designated as a PA (Production Assistant.) This is someone who is there to do that sudden job that nobody else is available to do. It may be to run to the store and get something you suddenly need, it could be to hold a bounce-card on set, or it could be to run out and pick-up the actor who's car just broke down. Obviously, this PA should have their own car.

GENERAL NOTES

- Don't waste money shooting your first movie on film or an expensive camera. Make your mistakes and discover your style on the cheap.
- Learn your lessons on a lower budget.
- Good movie making takes trial and error. Your movies will get better the more times you do it.
- The most important rule of all is to keep the set FUN! A set that is not fun is a set people won't come back to the following day.



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DAY 3

WORKING WITH ACTORS and A CREW

PANELISTS

Valerie Perez: Producer/Star: Paula Peril Series

Jack Conway: Writer/Producer: Fear News

Nick Murphy: Writer/Director: Pizza and Bullets

Sean Rourke: Writer: Ballistica (**Moderator**)

ACTORS

Susan Smythe

Kat Steel

Brian Stevenson

Brad Upton

WORKING WITH ACTORS

- Acting is IMPORTANT, not an afterthought.
- Bad actors can ruin a good script

HOW TO FIND ACTORS

- How to post a casting call (LA vs. Anywhere else)
 - ◆ Backstage and Backstage West for NY and LA
 - ◆ Backstage.com
 - ◆ Breakdownexpress.com
 - ◆ Local Newspaper anywhere else in the country
 - ◆ Post notices at school drama departments or local theaters
- The 3 things you CAN'T do at a casting Session:
 - ◆ Never hold a Casting Session at a private residence
 - ◆ Never charge people to audition
 - ◆ Never require nudity at an audition
- How to hold a casting session
 - ◆ Schedule times for people to show up
 - ◆ Email them the Sides (Script Pages) before they come to the audition.



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- ◆ Have a waiting room separate from the audition room. Actors will be nervous enough auditioning in front of you without having all the other hopefuls watching them at the same time.
- ◆ Always ask an actor to perform the scene for you in a different way to see if they can absorb direction.
- ◆ Full disclosure at casting session: what the part will entail (working in the cold, wearing very little clothing, etc...)
- Being hot DOES NOT equal good actor.
- Never cast someone because you want to sleep with them.
- Never date your actors during a project.
- Additionally, finding a Casting Director is both a good idea and not that difficult. Many Casting Assistants or Associates want a Director credit and are willing to work on low/no budget films. Besides, many times it's the Assistants and Associates who do the actual interviews, pull sides, set up auditions etc., so they will be well versed. This can free up time for the director to focus on the other things.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE ACTORS and THE CREW

- Feed them.
- Schedule them, and get them a script well in advance.
- Shoot them within the schedule.
- Pre-plan the day with them.
- Be prepared for flaking. Someone always will.
- Safety first in all things.
- Don't forget about them when the shoot is over; keep them informed of the progress of the movie.
- Get them a copy of the movie afterward.

THE ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE.

- What do actors want to know when they work on a low budget film?
- What do they look for on set?
- Why would they come back to work with the same crew?



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DAY 4

POST PRODUCTION and the INTERNET

PANELISTS

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Sean Rourke: Writer: Ballistica (**Moderator**)

POST PRODUCTION

PRINCIPLES OF EDITING

- For each scene, find a way to quickly show the audience where they are. Never underestimate the power of an Establishing Shot.
- Move in for close-ups. If you can, overlap your cuts over people's dialogue. In other words, mix it up. Try cutting to a person AFTER they've started their line. Cut to a person while they're just listening to the other one talk. Seeing facial reactions are just as important as seeing line delivery.
- Edit dialogue so that it's snappy without long pauses between lines. At the same time, don't be afraid to let the audience linger on a quiet moment from time to time.
- Watch movies that are similar to yours to see how they're edited. There is a science to it, but it's really more about feel. Watch how the pros have cut your favorite movies, and you'll start to pick-up on how their rhythm "feels."
- The main concern is that you don't bore your audience. If your scene is 3 minutes long, try cutting it down to 1:30. You'll be surprised at how much footage you DON'T need in there.
- Transitions:
 - ◆ The simple cut should never be underestimated.
 - ◆ The dissolve is used to show the passage of time.
 - ◆ Stay away from the pre-packaged wipes in your editing software. Nothing says "amateur" like the goofy wipes you see in wedding videos.

**Sean's Note: There's nothing amateur about editing wedding videos. It is*



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a respectable avenue of video post-production, and I did it for several months before moving to Hollywood. Still, the cheesy wipes belong in people's weddings, not in narrative movie making.

EDITING LOGISTICS

- Ingesting media from data cards
- Digitizing a clip from tape
- Cutting the clips into a sequence
- Doing a transition
- Doing a title
- Exporting a final movie

DVD AUTHORING

- Add your chapter markers while still in your editing software. They will be more accurate when you import your movie into the DVD software.
- Make the menus graphically interesting, but easy to navigate as well.

**Valerie's Note: When pressed for time or if you just don't have any other content but your film to put on a DVD, there's nothing wrong with setting your film to play immediately instead of first going to a menu.*

- Don't use text that is too small. Sometimes text is readable on your computer monitor but will be blurry on a TV, (because the letters are falling between the pixels.)
- What is Title Safe? When making DVD menus, always place your pictures, buttons, text, etc. with a sizeable margin on all four sides. The average television cuts-off the edges of a video signal, so you don't want your titles to be lost off screen.
- TEST every aspect of your DVD before handing it to anyone
 - ◆ Make sure all the movies play
 - ◆ Make sure all the menu buttons work
 - ◆ Make sure people can easily get back to the main menu
 - ◆ Play your DVD on a computer and a stand-alone DVD player. You may notice that one looks fine but the other doesn't.



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SELF PROMOTION

- Make a website, and post a Trailer.

**Valerie's Note: There are enough resources online to help anyone create a website but creating beautiful graphics is harder to improvise. Try hosting a 'Movie Poster Design Contest'. Advertise it on a PhotoShop or other creative forum. You'll be surprised how much awesome custom art will be submitted.*

Ex: <http://www.steeldolphin-forums.com/showthread.php?t=3130>

- Start your social media presence: facebook, twitter, etc.
- Show your movie to as many people as you can, (both people you know and don't know) and LISTEN to what they think works and doesn't work. A lot of their opinions will be useless, but when you start hearing the same thing from multiple people, then you need to pay attention.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

- What computer to use/get (buy/borrow)
- PC vs. MAC

Suggestions for software:

- EDITING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ FINAL CUT PRO
 - ◆ AVID Express
 - ◆ Premiere Pro
 - ◆ IMovie/Windows Movie Maker for very simple cutting
- DVD MASTERING SOFTWARE
 - ◆ iDVD: for simple DVD Mastering
 - ◆ DVD Studio Pro: for Serious DVD design (i.e., Commentary Tracks, Web Links, Optimized compression, etc.)

**Sean's Note: Final Cut Pro and other desktop editing software have legitimate tools for making Titles, doing VisualFX, Compositing, and Sound Editing. However, those who want to do something more flashy or advanced may want to dive into more specialized software.*

- Photoshop for stills and graphics



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- COMPOSITING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ AfterEffects
- COLOR CORRECTION:
 - ◆ Magic Bullet
- TITLING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Motion
- SOUND MIXING SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Pro Tools
 - ◆ Soundtrack Pro (Comes with Final Cut Pro)
- MUSIC SOFTWARE:
 - ◆ Logic
 - ◆ Garage Band (Comes with iLife)

GENERAL NOTES

- Post Production can be technically daunting. If you open-up Final Cut Pro and it looks too complicated, try starting on a more consumer level program like "iMovie." It is exceptionally easy to use and will teach you all the basics before delving into the more advanced programs.
- Software can be expensive. The important thing to remember is that you don't need the latest version of Final Cut just to edit. You can always find far cheaper copies of earlier releases on ebay, and they'll allow you to do MOST of what you need to. (Be sure to check for compatibility issues first.)
- There are all kinds of books and tutorials on the web that are great for learning software, (Youtube software tutorials,) but another option is simply this...if you don't know how to do it, find someone who does. There are plenty of discussion forums and job posting sites, not to mention Craig's List. Somewhere out there is somebody who'd love to do a little work from home on an exciting movie about Vampires. All you need to do is find them!

YOUR MOVIE ON THE INTERNET

THE BIG WEBSITES

- Youtube – Obviously THE most trafficked video hosting site on the web. Everyone visits it, videos can play on mobile phones without a problem, but they are restricted to 15 minutes or less.



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- Vimeo – Lesser known, but higher quality. Vimeo is more tailored to filmmakers, it only hosts original content (no unlicensed material allowed,) has great picture quality, and unlimited run-time.
- Facebook – It's good to post your video on your own social networking profile, but the people most likely to see it are your friends.

UPLOADING

- Before uploading to any site, be sure to check the FAQ to find out their optimum upload specs...file format, codec, pixel dimensions, etc., and export your finished project as close to that as possible.
- Try to make your final output as large as you can. If you have an upload limit of a gig, try to make your movie file as close to a gig as possible. The larger the file size, the better it will look once it's compressed by the website's conversion script.

PROMOTIONAL STRATEGY

- If your goal is to get as many people to see your project as possible, then post it everywhere you can. There are hundreds of Youtube knock-offs that you can upload to, and every one of them may give you a few more viewers.
- Promotion on the internet is most successful when approached as a conversation. Instead of just shot-gunning your movie into the world and asking people to go look at it, become a part of the internet dialogue. Find the sites where your audience goes, and then get involved with what that site is about. The more you interact with the web as a whole, the more people will come and see what you've made.
- Please, please, please, **MAKE A WEBSITE FOR YOUR MOVIE!** Your movie by itself will be cool, but people will want to see more. They'll also want to learn about **YOU!** Have production stills, character write-ups, cast-bios, anecdotes about shooting, news about how things are going, and especially a way for people to email you. Then, if you upload your movie to youtube or vimeo, include the URL to your website somewhere in the video...in the title, the credits, the letterbox, etc., so people can find your site if they see the movie elsewhere.
- If your goal is to closely tally the number of hits to your movie, then only upload it to one spot: either Youtube or Vimeo. You can always embed your video on other sites by copying and pasting the embed code. Then, even if your video is viewed on someone's blog, those views get registered back at the site you're hosting it on, adding to your master viewing tally.
- Choose keywords that will get your desired audience to your movie.



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Words like "Ninja," "Vampire," "sci-fi," "Tekken," etc.

- The one reason NOT to post your movie on the web is if you plan on submitting it to film festivals. Most festivals will not accept movies that are already available to be downloaded for free. You can always post your movie on the web once you've finished touring it on the festival circuit.

APPENDIX

Panelists Websites:

ghostdivemovie.com
seanrourke.com
midnightwhistle.com
valerieperez.com
atlantisstudios.net/paulaperil
www.bsvoices.com

Websites we Recommend:

dependentfilms.net/files.html
dvshop.ca/dvcafe.html
filmmaker.com
fanfilmpodcast.mypodcast.com/

Books we Recommend:

The DV Rebel's Guide: An All Digital Approach for making Killer
ACTION MOVIES on the Cheap

by Stu Maschwitz

Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen

by Steven Katz

Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker With \$7,000
Became a Hollywood Player

by Robert Rodriguez

Contracts for the Film & Television Industry

by Mark Litwak