

## Chapter 1

# WHAT I REALLY WANT TO DO

### *In This Chapter:*

What's this book really about?  
How do I really get started in the movie industry?  
How does a movie really get made?  
What kinds of jobs are available?  
What else can I work on besides movies?

### *I want to make movies! What else is there to talk about?*

Okay, let's cut to the chase. If you're reading this, you really want to know how to get a job in the entertainment industry, be it in movies, television, music videos, or commercials. You want to know where to go, what to do, and who to meet. Fair enough. You need answers to these questions if this is the field you believe you want to enter.

But there's one question that most people who want to be in the business fail to ask themselves before jumping in: "Do I *really* want to do this?" Success can bring great prestige at your next class reunion and perhaps even lots of cash. But there's more to a career in the entertainment business than just showing up and making movies. Breaking in takes enthusiasm and perseverance. *Maintaining* a viable career begins by being realistic about what you're really getting yourself into.

Every year, millions of people watch the glamour of Hollywood from the comfort of their own homes and dream of sharing in a piece of that fantasy. And every year, thousands of those people pack their bags and head west, with little more than dreams and enthusiasm, intent on finding a job that will make them rich and famous. Some hit upon the success they are looking for, but many more do not. The expectations are almost always different than the harsh reality of life in the "biz." However, with just a little guidance, you can

increase the odds of building a successful career and finding that fame, fortune, and artistic outlet you crave.

### what is this book really all about?

*What I Really Want To Do on Set in Hollywood™* gives you a taste of the experience of working on a movie **SET** by explaining the nuts and bolts of the industry, the various departments, the jobs within the departments, and how they all interact with one another on a shot-by-shot basis. With this detailed information in your hands, you will then have a very good idea of how the industry really functions, how you can find a way in for yourself, and what your own life will be like while doing it.

Whether you are a college grad in the Midwest, a thirty-something parent of two along one of the coasts, or an already established member of **IATSE, SAG**, the **DGA**, or the **TEAMSTERS** in Los Angeles, knowing more about the minutia of how movies are really made will enable you to embark on a career path in a much wiser fashion.

### So where do I start?

To get your career search going, you first have to figure out what it is you really want to do. It isn't enough for you to say that you just "want to make movies." That kind of general ambition is fine when you're young and just having fun, but creating an actual career that pays your bills and affords you the lifestyle you're looking for requires you to be more specific. All of the jobs done on a small student film are still involved in making a big-budget project—only when more money is available, more people can be brought in to help. Consider Hollywood as the major league of the entertainment business, where art and commerce are merged within the world of high finance. It's the ultimate playground, where big kids get to play make-believe with the best toys at the highest level.

The exact process that occurs to get an idea from script to screen is fairly simple.

## THE IDEA

An idea occurs to someone such as a Writer, Director, Producer, or Actor. In this competitive industry, ideas need to be fresh and marketable. Whether the idea moves forward from this point, and how quickly, depends on who comes up with it.

## DEVELOPMENT

An idea has to be evaluated before any significant money is spent on developing it into a full-fledged screenplay. The idea has to be original yet have an air of familiarity to be marketable to a broad spectrum of people. The budget is taken into account at every point of the process. If the idea manages to jump successfully through all the requisite hoops, a writer is hired under the **WGA** contract and a **TREATMENT** of the story is completed.

The treatment may go through many committees and studio executives before the process is allowed to continue to the actual screenwriting stage. Typically the writer who pitched the idea and worked up the treatment is hired to do at least the first draft. The screenplay usually goes through the same obstacle course that the treatment did. Major rewrites may continue right up to the first day of shooting, and daily rewrites throughout production are a common occurrence.

## PREPRODUCTION

Once all the **ABOVE-THE-LINE** people are reasonably happy, the project moves into official preproduction. It is during this stage that any additional above-the-line personnel are hired. As the production start date becomes imminent, **BELOW-THE-LINE** crew are called. More often than not, the Director and at least one **A-LIST** star are asked to commit during development. Most films, both studio and independent, have a difficult time being financed without the interest of a major corporate or financial entity. As momentum for the project builds, schedules are created and a "realistic" budget is calculated. If not enough time is spent or shoddy work is done during preproduction, all efforts later on, during production and beyond, will undoubtedly suffer.

## PRODUCTION

Assuming that the story and screenplay are strong and that plenty of time and money have been spent on preproduction, then **PRODUCTION** should be the easiest and most enjoyable part of the process. It is during this twelve-week period that the words on the page are turned into pictures and sound by a cast and crew of over one hundred skilled, and typically union (IATSE, DGA, SAG, Teamsters), employees. Every shot featuring the principal cast is filmed by the **FIRST UNIT** crew. If additional photography is needed that doesn't necessarily involve the main cast, such as stunts or elaborate special effects, a **SECOND UNIT** and/or **SPECIAL EFFECTS UNIT** is assembled to shoot simultaneously at a different location.

## POSTPRODUCTION

**Postproduction** is usually considered the period when all of the film is edited. The truth is that during actual production, an Editor has been cutting the **DAILIES**

continually. By the time the shooting schedule ends, the Director will have a nearly complete movie to look at. Some Second Unit and effects work may continue far into the postproduction schedule. The Director and Producers will alter the Editor's work as they please until they are happy. Location sound is fixed with **ADR, SOUND EFFECTS** are added, and a music score is married to the completed picture.

## MARKETING

A publicity campaign is designed for the project during preproduction. Behind-the-scenes footage is coordinated by the Unit Publicist during production, as are any interviews that newspapers, magazines, and television outlets request. Prior to release, a **PRESS JUNKET** is held at a hotel with the principal players and reporters from around the world.

## RELEASE

The red-carpet premiere, a marketing tool in the guise of a party to help sell the movie to the public, is a staple for many films. Journalists from around the world are invited to take pictures and ask questions of the movie stars.

### It all sounds pretty exciting! what kinds of jobs are available?

If you already have a job outside of the movie business, there very well may be a parallel existing position inside the industry or a trade in which you can apply your current skills. The real trick is finding your way in and learning the specific protocols that apply to film production.

The key to building a successful career is to put some careful thought into what part of the process really suits you best. Some people really enjoy building models (fabrication) while others like blowing them up (pyrotechnics). If camera work excites you most, you need to decide whether it is the directing portion (camera placement) that is best or if it is the lighting and operating (which falls under cinematography). Some people aren't necessarily creatively inclined but like to be involved in other ways (executives and agents). What follows is an overview of the most common jobs involved in making a movie. It is important to note that while there are some differences in creating a feature motion picture as opposed to a television show, commercial, or music video, all of the jobs described here are done nearly exactly the same way, regardless of the project.

### JOBS OFF SET

Jobs done primarily away from the set during actual production include the following:

- **Writer**—changes intangible ideas into words, providing a blueprint for every aspect of production
- **Studio Executive**—part of the financing and distribution arm of the industry; oversees production of a project as a whole from the development stage to exhibition
- **Producer**—oversees *all* aspects of production
- **Agent**—secures work for those with creative and technical talent...and takes 10 percent of the earnings
- **Manager**—much like an agent, but gives more personal attention to the client for 1.5 percent of the earnings
- **Unit Production Manager**—in charge of all logistics including, but not limited to, day-to-day planning, production scheduling, terms of employment for cast and crew, supplies, equipment, locations, permits, travel, transportation, and financial considerations for production
- **Studio Accountant**—handles the financial considerations of a studio
- **Production Accountant**—manages the day-to-day financial details of a specific production
- **Production Coordinator**—handles the logistics of scheduling and paperwork
- **Production Designer**—translates the ideas expressed in the script into the elements that will be seen
- **Art Director**—working under the Production Designer, coordinates the Art Department
- **Construction Coordinator**—plans and coordinates the construction schedule and crew requirements
- **Construction Foreman**—supervises construction work
- **Visual Effects Supervisor**—coordinates the various effects requirements
- **Visual Effects (CGI)**—uses computers to create any number of illusions that are impossible to achieve practically on set or are simply less expensive to create digitally
- **Editor**—syncs sound and image and then cuts shots into a logical order to tell the story
- **Assistant Editor**—maintains editing equipment and deals with related paperwork
- **Postproduction Sound**—“sweetens” (improves sound quality) and edits dialogue, sound effects, and music tracks
- **Film Lab**—processes the shot negative then checks it for damage or exposure problems
- **Composer**—creates musical score to accompany images onscreen
- **Musician**—performs instrumentals to help create the musical score

## JOBS ON SET

Jobs done primarily on set during actual production include the following:

- **Director**—generally in charge of the creative decisions made throughout production
- **Script Supervisor**—keeps a detailed log of each shot and tracks continuity
- **Actor**—performs a character as written in the screenplay; generally has lines of dialogue to speak
- **Extra**—an Actor without dialogue; fills in the background to support the principal action
- **Stand-in**—placeholders for principal Actors while the crew lights the set
- **Stunt Coordinator**—coordinates and designs sequences or actions considered dangerous
- **Stunt Performer**—skilled and trained performers capable of executing dangerous actions
- **First Assistant Director**—coordinates each department on a shot-by-shot basis to keep the production on schedule
- **Second Assistant Director**—assists the First Assistant Director and completes necessary paperwork
- **Second Second Assistant Director**—lends assistance to the Second Assistant Director
- **DGA Trainee**—an on-set Assistant Director trainee
- **Production Assistant**—generally runs errands for any number of department personnel
- **Director of Photography**—responsible for technical and creative decisions regarding lighting and camera setup
- **Digital Imaging Technician (DIT)**—video engineer specializing in **HIGH-DEFINITION** cameras
- **Camera Operator**—points the camera and frames the shot using a variety of tools
- **First Assistant Camera/Focus Puller**—responsible for technical upkeep of camera and keeps subjects in focus during each take
- **Second Assistant Camera/Clapper**—assists the First Assistant Camera in camera setup and keeps track of all camera equipment
- **Loader**—loads and keeps track of all film used throughout production
- **Camera PA**—trainee who assists the rest of the camera department
- **Aerial Pilot**—flies a variety of aircraft with camera mounted onboard
- **Stabilized Camera Operator/Technician**—operates a gyroscopically stabilized camera system, usually attached to an aircraft
- **Key Grip**—coordinates all grip personnel in working with the Electric Department to set lighting and with the Camera Department to move and secure camera equipment.
- **Best Boy Grip**—keeps track of all paperwork and equipment used by the Grip Department

- **Company Grips**—provides safe rigging for lighting and camera equipment
- **Dolly Grip**—lays track or flat surface on which to push a dolly-mounted camera
- **Gaffer**—coordinates the actual nuts and bolts of lighting the set
- **Best Boy Electric**—prepares and tracks all lighting equipment
- **Electricians**—run electrical cable and set lights
- **Generator Operator**—maintains correct electrical output for set lighting and power
- **Location Mixer**—maintains proper sound levels during a take
- **Boom Operator**—holds a microphone over the action, out of site from the camera
- **Cable Puller**—assists the Mixer and Boom Operator during setup and each shot
- **Costumer**—assists the Wardrobe Supervisor and dresses Actors
- **Wardrobe Supervisor**—organizes and maintains costumes and also tracks costume continuity
- **Costume Designer**—designs and/or buys clothing that the Actors should be wearing per the script
- **Makeup Artist**—applies cosmetic makeup in accordance with the requirements of the story
- **Hair Stylist**—designs and styles hair in accordance with the requirements of the story
- **Property Master**—acquires, maintains, and tracks all props
- **Set Decorator**—in charge of all furnishings seen on set
- **Leadman**—coordinates physical set decoration with the Set Decorator and the Set Dressers
- **Set Dresser**—works with the Set Decorator to place items on the set
- **Standby Painter**—creates signage and touches up damaged painted surfaces during production
- **Greensman**—creates and maintains any vegetation and/or landscaping on a film set
- **Craft Service**—provides a table of snacks that is close to the set throughout the day
- **Catering**—provides at least one or two hot meals per shooting day at location
- **Special Effects**—constructs on-set rigging of props to perform a variety of real effects (not computer graphics) and is usually a specialist in creating explosions, fire, and bullet hits
- **Transportation Coordinator**—supervises the transportation of personnel, equipment, and vehicles
- **Transportation Captain**—assists the Transportation Coordinator
- **Truck Drivers**—trained and licensed to operate a variety of large vehicles
- **Crew Cab Driver**—primarily assigned to drive crew passenger vans

- **Location Manager/Scout**—finds suitable locations for filming and secures proper permissions and permits
- **Set Medic**—trained Registered Nurse (RN) or Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) who is on set just in case of illness or injury
- **Set Teacher**—on-set schoolteacher when child Actors are present
- **Unit Publicist**—coordinates all elements required for successful marketing of the film
- **Unit Still Photographer**—obtains photos to be used primarily in the marketing of the film
- **Behind-the-Scenes Cameraman/Videographer**—shoots behind-the-scenes footage and interviews for Electronic Press Kit (EPK) or DVD use
- **Security**—maintains a secure work environment for cast and crew and keeps watch over sets and equipment after wrap

### what sorts of productions might I get to work on?

While distinctions are made between the various types of production work, the truth is that the specific functions of your particular job won't really change much from one to another. For example, a Makeup Artist on a feature film will essentially do the same exact job on a sitcom or music video. You will get paid more on a TV commercial, less on an independent film, work more hours on a music video, and be employed longer term on a feature film, but the basics of your own job don't change. A typical movie schedule is around twelve weeks, a series TV show is nine months, and commercials and music videos are a day to a week or two of work.

Here is an overview of the various and most common types of production.

### **Feature films (shot on film or high-definition video)**

A feature film is generally narrative fiction, typically having a running time of between ninety minutes and two hours. A standard shooting schedule for a Hollywood feature is several weeks of preproduction, twelve weeks of production, and ten weeks of postproduction. A feature is usually distributed to movie theaters first, but cable television and home video have provided filmmakers with alternative methods of getting their work out into the marketplace.

Independently financed features (features not financed or distributed by a major Hollywood studio) vie for attention through various means, such as film festivals and, to some extent, the Internet.

### **Documentaries (shot on film and tape)**

A documentary is a nonfiction film whose running time depends on its ultimate distribution outlet. They are usually independently financed or produced with the support of mainstream media, like PBS's *Frontline* series. Production schedules are as varied as the topic matter and can fluctuate wildly as funding comes and goes. Film festivals tend to be primary outlets for documentaries as their creators try to catch the attention of distributors.

### **Movie of the Week (shot on film)**

A Movie of the Week (MOW) is essentially a feature film produced on a smaller scale with less money and in less time. Although the production process is pretty much identical to a feature, as a crewmember you will work at a faster pace, with longer hours, and with a little less pay than you would make on a feature film.

### **Episodic Television (shot on film)**

One-hour episodic television is most like a feature film in production protocol but is done with a smaller budget and in less time. It is narrative fiction typically shot in one-camera "film" style on film stock. Nearly without exception, the exposed film stock is immediately transferred to videotape or digital format for quick editing and broadcast. A typical shooting schedule is five to seven days.

### **Situation Comedies (shot on film and tape)**

Situation comedies (sitcoms) have their roots in the earliest days of television. These thirty-minute comedies are shot typically with three or more film or video cameras on a stage in front of a studio audience. Like most other television, sitcoms are edited digitally or on tape for later broadcast. A crew is hired for one rehearsal day and one shooting day each week.

### **Soap Operas (shot on tape)**

Soap operas were one of the earliest narrative programming TV ventures. They are thirty- or sixty-minute narrative fiction programs that appear five days a week with running storylines. The production style is mix of episodic and sitcom with multiple video cameras shooting on a closed stage. It is important to note that in most cases, technicians working on soap operas must belong to **NABET** as opposed to IATSE, which represents most non-videotape productions.

### **Music Video (shot on film)**

A music video, made primarily to showcase and market music to increase record sales, is typically shot on film with a coherent storyline or is merely a juxtaposition of images. Budgets are generally small and schedules are tight. A typical shooting day can run upward of eighteen hours or more.

### **Commercials (film and tape)**

Commercials are very short stories designed to market a product or service. They run the gamut from really low budget (such as for local car dealerships) to very high budgets (which run nationally to sell a company or specific brand). Physical production can be as short as an afternoon or as long as a week or more.

### **Game Shows (shot on tape)**

Game shows, another one of the earliest forms of television, are generally shot with multiple video cameras on a soundstage in front of a studio audience. These are usually shot **LIVE-TO-TAPE**, meaning that a Director cuts the show live as it's happening so that a minimum of postproduction will be required. It is important to note that in most cases, technicians working on game shows must belong to NABET as opposed to IATSE, which represents most non-videotape productions.

### **Reality (shot on tape)**

A reality TV program is a pseudo-documentary that tells a story or presents a day in the life of real-life participants. It is produced with event-coverage style (non-narrative) but with a touch of narrative drama created out of the footage that is shot.

### **Talk Show (shot on tape)**

The talk show generally has a consistent celebrity host who discusses personal problems or other issues with invited guests. Relatively cheap to produce, it is typically shot with multiple video cameras, live-to-tape, in front of a studio audience.

### **News Shows (broadcast live and shot on tape)**

News programming provides up-to-date reporting of important events that take place locally, nationally, or internationally. Produced mostly by TV networks at the local and national levels, news production takes place in the field as well as in the studio. Most employees are on staff, but freelancers are hired on occasion.

### **Sports (shot on tape)**

Baseball, football, basketball, hockey, tennis, auto racing, etc. are produced by TV networks and independent production companies employing staff workers in the offices and freelancers for actual production work. A notable exception to traditional sports production is NFL Films, whose products are more documentary-like than traditional network sports coverage, which covers games as a live event.

## **Industrials and Miscellaneous (shot on film and tape)**

There is an enormous amount of production work done mostly by freelance Producers, Cinematographers, Videographers, and Sound Mixers that is meant for broadcast TV or is produced for in-house or marketing use by various other industries around the world. An independent Producer, Cameraman, or Soundman may be working on a Hollywood premiere one day and shooting footage for major corporations the next.

### **Film? Tape? what's the difference?**

Film and tape are distinctly different ways of capturing an image for later viewing. Without being overly technical, film, which comes in a small canister, is the stuff you put into your (non-digital) still camera at home. It's generally a long, black, plastic-like strip that you wind every time you want to take another picture. A movie camera uses very long strips of film, usually 1,000-foot rolls, that move through the camera to capture movement instead of still action. Film undergoes a photochemical process that turns light into actual images you can see when you look at the strip itself.

Videotape uses an electronic process to store image information magnetically. Instead of converting light into an actual picture you can see, a video camera converts light into electronic information that is stored on the videotape, also a long strip of black material. If you hold a piece of shot videotape up to a light, you'll never see any pictures.

In both cases, an image is being saved, but there's a pretty big difference between the two. Traditional standard-definition video has a definitive sharpness and looks "real," like you'd see the action as if you were actually standing there. Film has a softer, almost more ethereal look. It does not capture reality per se but a more romantic and hyper-real version of what happened in front of the lens. Generally, fictional narrative and dramatic programs are shot using film stock with film cameras while nonfiction or live events are shot using video cameras.

The advent of high-definition video has allowed filmmakers to take advantage of the immediacy of electronic image acquisition while enjoying a near film-like quality.

This is all very important to you because the working protocols can be very different when choosing a type of project that uses film versus one that is shot on tape. In other words, the way that feature films, one-hour episodics, commercials, and music videos are made is very similar. Someone who works

regularly in one of those could transition very easily to another. On the other hand, news programs, talk shows, sitcoms, soap operas, reality shows, and documentaries have their own distinct ways of being made, so moving from one type of show to another isn't as easy a transition.

When you're just starting out in the business, it's important to learn the fundamental difference between film and video because it will have an impact on the types of work you choose to take and whether your career goes in the direction you desire.

### **This is all a lot more complicated than I thought. Where do I even start?**

Finding the right job isn't as easy as just deciding what you want to do and applying for a staff position at a movie studio. The good news is that there are a lot of career paths, and every single one is open for you to pursue as long as you're willing and able to put in the requisite energy and commitment.

So step one is to sit down and think long and hard about what it is you specifically want to do in the movie business and where you'd like to eventually end up. Then step two: find out what it really takes to get there and what your *life* will really be like as you make that journey toward success.

### **So how can this book help me?**

The primary purpose of this book is to help you know what your life might be like if you choose an *on-set* job as a career. While it takes a great deal of effort and a lot of people to prepare all the elements necessary for a film to be shot (preproduction), shoot it (production), then finish it (postproduction), this book concentrates on those people *on set* who are involved in **PHYSICAL PRODUCTION**—that is, the work of actually turning the words from a script into moving images on film. The jobs you'll find described here are those that are most often found on the **CALL SHEET** every day. These are the people who typically wake up at five in the morning and work upward of fourteen hours a day. These are the people who call a movie set their "office." If that's the world you would like to live in, read on!