

Chapter 15

WHAT I REALLY WANT TO DO IS TRAIN FOR THE DGA!

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what the heck is a DGA Trainee?

For many years the only way a person could hope to be an Assistant Director in Hollywood was to either work his way up through the ranks after starting as a PA (Production Assistant) or by having relatives in the business.

Because of what was seen as a lack of diversity in the Production Department with respect to ability, race, and gender, the **DIRECTOR'S GUILD OF AMERICA (DGA)**, in conjunction with the **ALLIANCE OF MOTION PICTURE AND TELEVISION PRODUCERS**, created the DGA Trainee Program, specifically designed to give people from outside the Hollywood system the opportunity to join the industry.

Once accepted into the program, the DGA Trainee is placed onto a variety of actual working sets over the course of about two years as an assistant to the Assistant Directors (ADs) in the Production Department. You leave the program with a wealth of hands-on experience and a list of potential employers with whom you've now already worked.

Sounds great! Who do I have to know to get in?

Nobody. That's the point. No connections are required, no recommendations necessary, and there is no prerequisite for industry experience. However, admission into the program is highly competitive.

Applicants must be college graduates or have proof of professional film industry experience. And only around twenty to twenty-five people are chosen each year out of approximately one thousand who apply.

How do I compete against those odds? Why bother?

The alternative (and the reality for most applicants) is to make very little money while starting as a PA or by working as a Second AD on low-budget projects. While the odds seem to be against you, there is very little to lose by applying and a lot to gain, as long as you're very sure that this is the department (and the industry) in which you'd like to work.

The goal of the program isn't just to train people how to be Assistant Directors but to train them to be *excellent* Assistant Directors. The incentive for the DGA is that they cultivate a better qualified group of people to do the job rather than only relying on chance that the nonunion environment will produce quality ADs. The strength that any guild trades on is that they can do things better than anyone else.

Through training, a person can almost be guaranteed to come away with the breadth of experience that will prepare her to do the job well. This quality ultimately reflects back upon the DGA itself and encourages Producers to continue using its services.

What do I get to do?

In short, you'll be learning how to fulfill the duties of a Second Assistant Director. Or more to the point, you'll be doing the stuff that he'd have to do if you weren't around.

That, and what else?

You'll be spending a *lot* of time at work. The tradeoff is that in addition to learning more about your own department and what will be required of you, you'll get to interact with just about every other department and find out what they do as well. Ultimately, this knowledge will make you a more qualified *Producer* if you make it that far up the ladder.

wait a sec. You just said “*Producer.*” I want to be an **Assistant Director** because I want to eventually *direct*. Duh!

Right. The job titles are somewhat misleading. While it is true that Directors can come from anywhere inside the industry or out, the specifics of what you will learn in the AD Department are geared more toward logistics and management. If you happen to work your way through the department to become a Unit Production Manager (UPM), you will more likely find opportunities as a Producer after that. Anything is possible, but becoming an Assistant Director does not specifically train you to become a Director.

I’ve produced short films in school. why can’t I just move to Hollywood and get a job as a Producer there?

Unfortunately it doesn’t work that way for the vast majority of aspiring filmmakers. There are a million things that a professional Producer should know before entering the major leagues of Hollywood big budgets. Unless you have significant family or industry contacts who can gift-wrap a producing career for you, learning the ropes through the Production Department is one way to go and being a DGA Trainee provides an excellent start.

okay, okay. what do I need to do to get into the program?

Just like applying for college, you need to fill out an application form and pay a nominal registration fee. Paperwork (application, essays, payment) must be sent in by the November date as stated on the official website (www.dga.org) or by contacting the Guild office. Be sure to check the website for the latest information.

If your paperwork is in order, you’re then invited to take an aptitude test the following January. If your test results put you into the top 120 (out of the approximately one thousand who apply and take the test in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago), then you get to move to the next phase.

That May in Los Angeles, those 120 applicants meet for an “assessment.” The essays that you wrote and included with your application now come into play, as well as any previous work, life, and/or military experience. Group activities take place, which measure your ability to work with others. Of those 120 applicants, only around fifty will move on to the next phase, which takes place the next week.

If you were one of the fifty chosen to advance, you’ll get fifteen minutes in front of an industry panel that will bombard you with a variety of questions and scenarios to test your intelligence, ability to reason, and temperament. Based

on those interviews, approximately twenty-five of those fifty people are chosen to become DGA Trainees. This number may vary slightly based on the amount of film and television production that is projected for the coming year.

After that, Trainees attend an orientation. Here, you will learn about the potential for ridiculously long hours and other pitfalls of the industry. For some, that reality doesn't sink in until they actually get on a real set and experience it for themselves. This occasionally results in applicants dropping out of the program, which is why several alternates are chosen as well. If you are not immediately chosen to be a Trainee, there is still a chance if you manage to become an alternate.

So, what? They just send me out on jobs?

Pretty much, yeah. You will be sent out for a total of four hundred days to work on a variety of different projects. It generally takes about two years to complete the program because the work is nonconsecutive. Random feature and television productions will put in requests to the Guild for DGA Trainees to be placed on their projects. When your number comes up, the program will send you to one of the shows for no more than a total of fifty days, after which time you will be sent to another show which desires the services of a Trainee. One variation is if you are working on a feature film. Often they prefer the consistency of having the same crew, so you will remain at that project for its entire run (which may be eighty days or so).

The point of all this moving around is to help you meet as many people and experience as many different kinds of production as possible. Some shows have a lot of stunts, others have a lot of child Actors, some are doctor shows, some have insanely high budgets, while some have budgets that are too small. As a career freelancer in this business, you mostly won't have the luxury of picking and choosing the specific shows you want to work on, so your longevity will depend on your ability to operate within every situation thrown at you.

Because of the nature of the business, there will be periods of days or weeks in which you will not be working on anything. As mentioned, it takes on average about two years to complete the four hundred days, which means that you will not be working for around 330 days in that time. Your mere survival is dependent on your ability to save the small amount of money that you do earn because you need to remain available at all times. A second job is out of the question. Unless you have some money saved before you enter the program, you'll likely have to share an inexpensive apartment to keep your overhead costs low and affordable.

In their first year of the program, Trainees are required to attend seminars the Guild presents every other weekend, whether you are working or not. Here, Trainees learn about the myriad rules and regulations that deal with the various contracts for the unions (DGA, SAG, IATSE, Teamsters), as well as specifics regarding working with animals and children, stunts, and safety. If you are on a show that doesn't wrap until Saturday morning (after starting late on Friday), you still have to make it to the 10 A.M. meeting. Several seminars are held each Saturday so you may be there until 6 A.M. that evening. If your production works on Saturdays, they are required to release you for that time. After the seminar is completed, you usually are asked to return to work to finish out the day.

How much money will I make as a DGA Trainee?

You will make a flat rate of \$600 a week. The good news is that you receive overtime after ten hours, so on average, after taxes, expect to bring home about \$650 a week (\$2,600 a month).

You have to keep in mind that the program is four hundred days total, which are never consecutive. You won't be working on holidays like Christmas and New Year's Day. Plus, production usually slows down during the summer months, except for television pilots. If there are no shows or films requesting a Trainee then you will be unemployed for that time. However, you are expected to be "on-call." When a film comes up and the DGA wants you to go, you have to go. So save your money for the inevitable downtime.

What do I really need to know?

What else is there to know?

To apply for the program, you have to have a college degree or some industry experience. But the idea behind the program is that you don't have to know anything about the film industry or know anyone in it before applying. However, your overall experience can be enhanced if you have some idea of what you're getting into beforehand. Aside from reading as much as you can about every aspect of the business, find some local production company around you and ask them, at the very least, if you could observe a shoot and perhaps even intern for a short time. Nothing beats hands-on experience, and you can find out right away if this is really the kind of work you want to be doing.

Long hours and low pay? Why would anyone want to do this?

That's a good question to ask, particularly before applying for the Trainee

program. You must enjoy working with people and dealing with their problems all day. The AD Department spends hours upon hours creating schedules and call sheets knowing that things often do not turn out the way they planned. As things start to change, the appeal of the job is the ability to change with it...to move the puzzle pieces around and create the best fix so that the company does not have to stop shooting. You not only must embrace the chaos, but you also have to love it. The real challenge is when the plan falls apart and it is worthless. Now what do you do? People who hate that kind of scenario can't do the job. Those who love solving problems are perfect for this career.

what do I really need to have?

I know nothing. what do I have to bring with me?

You'll need to buy a container-like tin, which the AD Department traditionally uses. It is essentially a lightweight yet durable metal folder where you will keep the daily paperwork. This will cost you around \$20. Also bring along a pen and a couple of Sharpies. That's it.

what should I wear?

You are a walking office, so at the very least you'll need some kind of fanny pack to hold your supplies. A better idea is cargo pants or something with a lot of pockets. During the day you'll be hauling around receipts, petty cash, a cellular phone, walkie-talkie, pens, a stapler, paperclips, sunscreen, at least one call sheet, and **SIDES** (miniature version of the script pages to be shot that day). You don't want to dress like a slab, but you are also running around all day, so a certain casualness is expected. And invest in a pair of really comfortable shoes.

what's the best way for someone to reach me?

Because you're being "placed" on projects by the DGA, you won't be competing for jobs or **DAY CALLS** like other members of the crew. Regardless, there must be some way for you to be contacted at a moment's notice. You'll need at least one phone number that the Guild and each production can use to reach you, be it a home phone, cellular, pager, or an answering service. If you're relying on something other than a cell phone that you would have with you at all times, be sure to check for messages frequently, as production schedules can change without warning.

where do I really need to go?

Production can happen anywhere. Do I really have to move?

Yes. While filming can and does occur all over the United States and the world, because of the nature of the program, you will have to move to Los Angeles. While some Trainees are placed onto feature films, the majority of the work will be on television shows, which film primarily on stages in Southern California. You must also attend the seminars as well.

If you really have no desire to live in Los Angeles, an alternative is to move to New York City. The DGA does have an East Coast training program, but even fewer applicants are accepted than in L.A.. Because of the unique nature of filming there, more PAs are required for traffic lockups and other tasks. For this reason, they don't rely as much on DGA Trainees to help with the work.

How do I start getting work?

Each Fall, when television programs start filming again, production companies will put in requests to have a DGA Trainee join them. You will get a call with your assignment around that time.

what am I getting myself into?

what will my life really be like?

5:30 A.M.—GET TO WORK

In most cases, you'll be working with the Second AD or the Second Second AD in the wee hours of the morning to greet people as they arrive. Because (in this example) an Actress needs one hour to get **"THROUGH THE WORKS,"** her call time will be 6 A.M. Makeup, Hair, and Wardrobe departments will arrive eighteen minutes prior to setup. You want to beat them there to make sure Transportation or Security has unlocked all the trailer doors. As crew and cast arrive, you check them in on your **PRODUCTION REPORT** for that day, listing the exact times they showed up.

6:00 A.M.—"THROUGH THE WORKS"

All of the Actors have to get through Hair, Makeup, and Wardrobe before filming begins. It is your job to make sure they do all of this in the allotted amount of time. Accomplish this by establishing a friendly rapport and "inviting" them from place to place.

7:00 A.M.—GETTING TO SET

Actually, just prior to 7:00 A.M., the First AD on set will call you on the radio (walkie-talkie) and ask for “First Team.” If you’ve done your job well and the Actors have been cooperative that morning, everyone should be ready to go. Knock on the appropriate trailer doors and invite them to go inside for a blocking rehearsal.

7:05 A.M.—REHEARSAL

As the DGA Trainee, your primary responsibilities will usually be at **BASE CAMP**. While rehearsal takes place inside on stage or outside on a set away from the trailers, your next duty is to finish off the production report from the previous day.

7:15 A.M.—CAMERA SETUP

After rehearsal, the Actors will head back outside the stage and either go to their own trailers or return to finish up their hair and makeup. You need to keep track of their whereabouts at every turn.

7:35 A.M.—FIRST TEAM

A scant few minutes before the Director of Photography finishes lighting the set, the First AD will call on his radio for First Team. Just like before, it’s your job to drop whatever paperwork you’re doing and invite the principal Actors, Extras, and/or Stuntpeople to stage. Your number one priority of the day is to feed the set with whoever is needed.

7:45 A.M.—ROLL CAMERA

The First AD is on set next to the Director. The Second AD is most likely on or near set working on the call sheet for tomorrow. This leaves you and hopefully a small number of PAs to spread out in and around the set or soundstage to “lock up.” This simply means that you are letting everyone in base camp and the vicinity of set know that sound and cameras are rolling.

7:48 A.M.—CUT, LET’S GO AGAIN

When the Director says, “Cut!” the First AD will repeat that on his radio. You then repeat it **LOUDLY** to all who are near you. It’s important that everyone outside is aware of when the camera rolls and cuts because a significant amount of work has to take place on other stages or nearby locations to prepare for later filming. Once everyone hears from you that the camera has cut, they will continue their work until the next time they hear you say “Rolling!”

8:10 A.M.—CUT, MOVIN' ON

A setup may require just one take or twenty. You never really know until it's done. But when the First AD hears from the Director that he has what he wants, the next thing you'll hear over the radio is "Movin' on." If the next setup is just a **TURNAROUND** on the previous action, the actors will probably exit the stage and head back to their trailers. If the next setup is a whole new scene, the Actors will most likely stay on set for the next rehearsal. If any additional Actors are needed who are still in base camp, the Second AD will have informed you earlier so that you can get them through the works. Again, the idea is that when the First AD calls for something or someone to come to the set, it or he/she will be ready. Invite them in and let the ADs inside know that the Actors are on their way.

8:15 A.M.—VISIT THE PRODUCTION OFFICE

Now's your chance to make a break for it. By this time, you should have gathered any final out-times from the night before and recorded them on the Production Report. You now need to get this piece of paper to the Production Office as soon as possible. With a slight break in the action at basecamp, you can hopefully get over there (wherever "there" happens to be) and back before any Actors leave stage. Let the Key 2nd AD know what you need to do and go. Hand the Report to the Production Secretary or Production Coordinator and then check for any paperwork that needs to be distributed back on set. Return to set as soon as possible. While the Actors are on stage or in their trailers, you have to continue working on the Report for the current day as well as tending to a myriad of other duties. Throughout the day, you will be dealing with a barrage of constant paperwork, including but not limited to filling out **BACKGROUND VOUCHERS**, distributing updated schedules, **DAY OUT OF DAYS**, and updated script pages. The Production office won't call to tell you that they have paperwork to be distributed. It is your responsibility to check to see if they have anything during the day. If your responsibilities on set keep you particularly busy, you might then get a call telling you that there is a huge stack of paperwork to pick up. Then your life gets interesting as you have to juggle the needs of the set with having to leave it to go fetch a pile of stuff.

1:00 P.M.—LUNCH

If the company is on location or is providing lunch (via a caterer), then everyone working has to be back and ready to work thirty minutes after the last person passes through the line. The actual lunch break may in fact be closer to an hour long. But someone has to stand near the catering truck to watch for that last person through. The person watching is most likely going to be you. After writing down the time that the First AD called lunch, the next bit of info for

PRODUCTION REPORT

During the course of every shooting day, someone in the Production Department has to fill out a Production Report. This responsibility generally falls to the DGA Trainee for a couple of reasons. The first being that no one else has time to do it or more to the point, no one else really *wants* to do it. The First AD is concentrating very heavily on "*today*," making sure everything on set is running smoothly. The Second AD is concentrating on "*tomorrow*" as he is drawing up the call sheet for the next day as well as helping you to feed the set with Actors. This leaves the business of "*yesterday*" to you.

The Production Report is a legal document that essentially gets the ball rolling on the financial aspects of the production. Cast, crew, equipment vendors, and anyone else providing goods or services to the production will be paid based upon the information contained on each and every Production Report that gets filled out and turned in.

You have to find out and write down every in, out, and lunch time for each individual working on the project each day. You also write down any specific special equipment that may have been rented and used for a short period of time.

By looking at the Production Report, the executives back at the studio can quickly figure out how much each day of production costs and determine if the project is on budget or not.

your report is when this last person gets her lunch. Then you'll write down the time when the company was actually called back in.

2:00 P.M.—BACK TO WORK

Record the in-time and continue the second half of the day just like the first. Because you're representing the Production Department in base camp, anyone who isn't on set will be coming to you with his problems. When someone asks you for something or gives you some bit of information, your job is to be like a "sponge." Gather all the information that you can and then "squeeze it" (disseminate it) out as quickly and efficiently as possible to everyone else who needs to know.

9:00 P.M.—WRAP

Actors, Extras, and Stuntpeople will pour from set and into base camp. The principal Actors will most likely know where to go and what to do in order to expedite their escape from work. Your bigger mission will be to shepherd the Extras to Wardrobe, where they will shed their costumes and then deal with their paperwork.

Finish as much of the production report as possible before the crew vanishes to their cars. The Script Supervisor will give you a sheet of paper, which tallies the progress through the script that the company made that day. The Second Camera Assistant or the loader will have paperwork, which breaks down the film totals for that day (how much stock was shot, what stocks were shot, current inventories, etc.)

In a lot of cases, as the DGA Trainee, you'll get a lot more out of the experience by being around for as much of the shooting day as possible. For that reason, the Second AD will most likely want you to report for work no later than thirty minutes before crew call and then stay until the bitter end. Most shooting days aim for at least twelve hours (plus thirty minutes lunch), so you can expect to work at least a fourteen-hour day at minimum. On average, your day away from home will likely be around fifteen or sixteen hours because you'll be called in early (for makeup and hair) and leave late (because of location moves), plus drive time to and from work.

what i really want to do is move up?

Well, you kind of have to. At the end of your four hundred days, the program says goodbye to you and you're on your own. Theoretically, you're now qualified to work as a Second AD. After all this time on all the different sets, the hope is that you've worked with enough people who will remember you as a hard worker who was easy to get along with. If not, then work can come from fellow Trainees who have gotten on shows that need additional help. Because there is just one DGA Trainee per project at a time, you are on your own during the process. The only time you'll see your fellow Trainees is after the seminars. Take that time to socialize with them and build your network. You never know where your next job will come from.