

BY ROBERT PILUSO

Make it Yourself

# WRITING AND DIRECTING YOUR FIRST FEATURE: FROM YOUR STORY TO YOUR “*FILM BY*”

If the Aztecs and Roland Emmerich are correct, we only have one more year until the end of the world ...  
so why not make 2011 the year to write, produce and direct your first feature film?

If you've got the story and the drive, we can direct you to the hardware and software resources  
you'll need to make your first film happen.



**Step One: Planning**

"One of these days I'm going to get organized." — Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), *Taxi Driver*, screenplay by Paul Schrader.

Well, you've got to get your indie opus on the page first. The script is that unavoidable, ultimately vital first step in the filmmaking process. However, now is not the time to dream up multi-million-dollar set-pieces nor to write sentences like "And then the gas station EXPLODES in the largest, most freaking awesome explosion ever filmed ... viewed from outer space ... in 3-D!" Odds are, if you're going to direct your first feature, you're going to be doing it on a more personal scale.

But before we even get started on story, it's important to consider your end game. Graduate film student in production at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, Jordan Ledy weighs in: "One of the biggest things that will kill you later is not knowing how to exhibit. Where the film ends up affects how you make it, which, in turn, affects how you write it."

If you're going to spend hundreds (probably thousands) of hours over the year to create a feature-length film, you're going to want that film to be seen by people, right? "You probably don't want to just toss the thing up on YouTube or on the Internet," counsels Ledy. "If it's a feature, then you're going to want to sell it, and in order to sell it, you need people to see it, and if you want people to see it, it's got to play the festivals."

This decision means you will need to shoot in digital, with the final goal to burn the film onto a Blu-ray disc, which you would then submit to festivals. (We'll get back to this in Steps Three and Four, the article's post-production section.)

But first—to write the story. "If you want to make a feature for little money, make sure the script is immaculately awesome," cautions Ledy. "[The script is] the place where the changes are easiest to make. Every step forward in the production process, things get more expensive as more experts are called in, and you have to pay for their expertise. So, fix problems at the script stage."

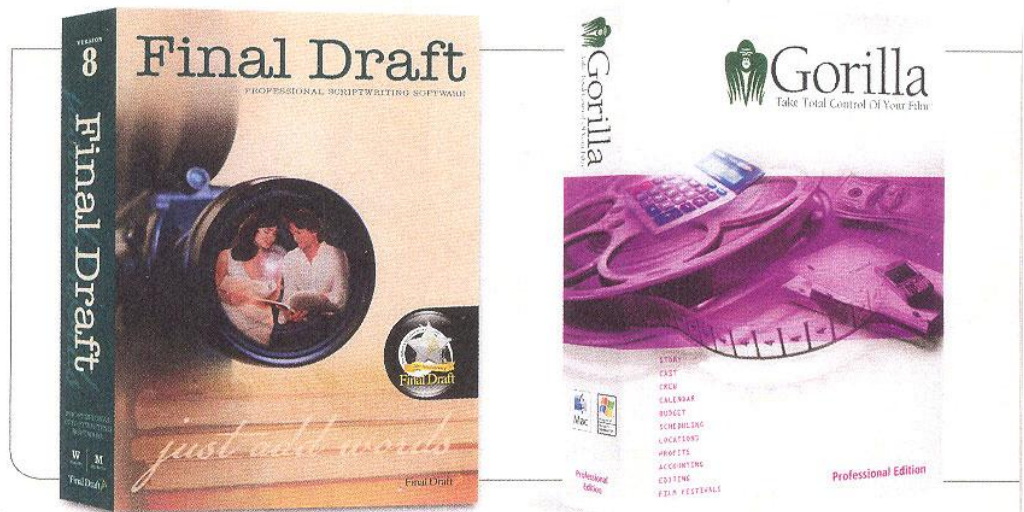
Moreover, Ledy points out a rare screenwriting secret: "Over 100 scene headings

is absolutely ridiculous. You want your scene headings under 100." For example, as writer-director, you want to avoid too much entering or exiting of buildings as scenes unto themselves—basically, avoid any scene that does not actively move the story forward and have a dynamic, indispensable reason to be filmed. So, cut the dead air on the page before wasting time shooting footage that would only (or should only) hit the cutting-room floor.

In writing the script, Final Draft screenwriting software is the industry standard but other options, like Movie Magic Screenwriter, are also prevalent. The proper screenwriting format is built into these word-processing programs, equating one typed page to about one minute of screen time. You need a script

Instead, one of Final Draft's most useful features is the Index Card feature, which allows you to compose a virtual "notecard" for each scene, which floats next to the script as you write, providing a space for significant notations set apart from the actual script where every bit of space counts and translates to money.

A Summary Card might read "First Appearance of JOHN DOE, First Planting of Red Envelope." Moreover, above this floating notecard, you'll find the Scene Navigator, a sort of "table of contents" which auto-populates itself with new scene headings as you write along in the script. No matter what page you're on, simply click on the scene heading for 3, and the script itself will zoom



around 90 to 100 pages to get a film with a run time of at least 88 minutes, which is the industry's theatrical minimum for a feature. Both Final Draft and Movie Magic are easy to learn even with a beginning understanding of screenwriting "grammar."

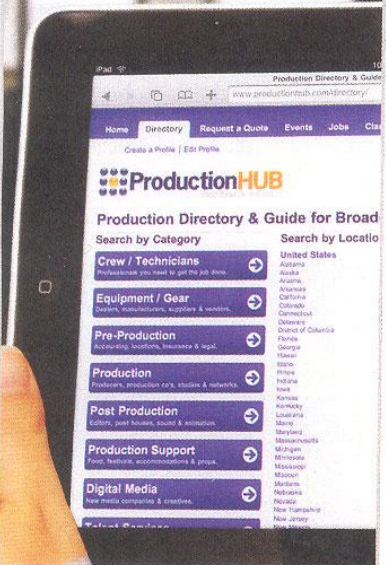
From a story-planning standpoint, Final Draft version 8 reaches a high point in screenwriting technology. Gone are those cumbersome days of dozens and dozens of index cards precariously pinned to a hulking corkboard. (Dangerous décor especially for those residing in all-too-earthquake-prone Southern California!)

you back to Scene 3, instantly popping up the corresponding Scene Properties notecard for Scene 3. What happens there, without reading the whole scene? Well, the notecard shows there's the first appearance of John Doe and the first plant of the Red Envelope (which will eventually pay off in Scene 45, of course!).

Need to write on the run? This spring, Final Draft, Inc. is releasing a mobile screenwriting software designed for the iPad and iPhone. The Final Draft version 8 mobile app for iOS will work with Final Draft version 8 FDX files, allowing you to make edits and notes on the



Sometimes we just  
need to be held.



Each month, over 300,000  
users rely on ProductionHUB  
to find and be found.  
Do you?



**ProductionHUB.com**  
Your Search is Our

877.629.4122

www.productionhub.com  
app@productionhub.com

## Make it Yourself

go. Plus, you can easily move the same script from iPad or iPhone to the desktop and back.

Another important fact to know about Final Draft is its direct compatibility with scheduling software programs, such as Gorilla. This program enables you to arrange your flagship production's time and resources accordingly, day by day, scene by scene, page by page. In effect, Gorilla takes up where Final Draft ends. With Gorilla, the filmmaker can create schedules, rehearsals, and even shot lists and storyboards.

For those writer-directors tempted to figure out these Gorilla-domain logistics on the fly, two words: Alfred Hitchcock. "The Master of Suspense" spent decades refining a creative process that directly resulted, time and time again, in film classics such as *Rear Window*, *Verrigo* and, of course, *Psycho*. For Hitchcock, the old maxim most certainly applied—"Failing to plan is planning to fail."

Much of a Hitchcock film's hard work was completed far before Hitchcock had even captured the film's first frame—so essential is the pre-production and script-development process in order to hone one's vision for what the film shall be, how the film shall look, and what is "the best shot" for every scenic moment. Hitchcock held there was only ever one "best" shot, and a whole lot of wrong shots to avoid (each of which means time and money tragically spiraling down the drain).

Another reputable, widely used industry-standard scheduling software is Movie Magic

Scheduling version 5 and Budgeting version 7. Created by Entertainment Partners, Movie Magic Scheduling version 5 declares on its website, [Entertainmentpartners.com](http://Entertainmentpartners.com), "Workflows are designed to incorporate the time-tested concepts of the stripboard while offering a variety of scenarios to consider: schedules reflecting different shoot lengths, reordered scenes, comparisons in location, and more are just a click away."

"Movie Magic has phenomenal tools to help you produce," Ledy shares, "but the most thrifty producer can do all this on Excel spreadsheets. It takes a lot of time, but you can do it."

### Step Two: Hardware

"Where does he get those wonderful toys?" — The Joker (Jack Nicholson), *Batman*, screenplay by Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren.

So, now you've got your script together, your storyboards, your schedules. What next?

You need to choose your hardware—your "artist's artillery," if you will. A good camera, microphones, and a three-part lighting system are the minimum "toys" required to shoot your film.

To gain some guidance navigating the multitudinous hardware options, multi-department "floating" specialist at Samy's Camera in Pasadena, California, Alyssa Pfaff offers us her 13 years of expertise to illuminate the inside track ...



# TAKE YOUR SCRIPT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Whether you're:

- working on your first draft
- reviewing producer's notes for a rewrite
- or preparing to direct your own material

**Marilyn can help.**



**Study with Marilyn Horowitz**  
Script coach, Screenwriter, Producer.

As a private writing coach, Marilyn uses her proven system to enable you to write a **highly marketable script**.

Her book *How To Write A Screenplay In 10 weeks* is studied at New York University and is available from her website.

[www.marilynhorowitz.com](http://www.marilynhorowitz.com)  
212-496-9631

## Make it Yourself

shutter control, as well as one mic jack with built-in input.

The higher-end camera, such as the new HDR-AX2000 by Sony or the XF300 by Canon, Pfaff counsels, "features dual XR input, built-in filters, variable frame rates (at 60, 30, 24)—a lot more manual override to it, so you can control it, and not have it control you." With these professional-level considerations, and the cinematographic know-how required to make them work to your film's advantage, either you or your cinematographer is really going to want to know your stuff before playing around with so pricey a piece of equipment. In the same way you probably wouldn't want to learn to drive on a Maserati, it would be best to stick to the prosumer or mid-range models. Still not convinced? These higher-end cameras range from \$3,000 to \$7,000.

### Rocking the Mic

"You'll need at least one shotgun mic, depending on the area you need to cover," advises Pfaff. "Generally, shotgun mics have 90 degrees of coverage." Called a fish-pole, boom-arm, or boom-pole, this tool is what you'll need to hold your shotgun mic over the actors, over the scene, and out of camera view—held by a trusty grip.

"Rodes are really popular: excellent quality at a good price," Pfaff says.

To own the Rode boom mic itself, the AA battery-powered model costs around \$300, while the fish-pole/boom-arm ranges around \$200. Yes, you have to buy the arm separately.

If you go with the Sennheiser boom mic and fish-pole, though wonderful pieces of equipment, they will end up costing you around double the price. Ledy recommends Lavalier microphones, which conveniently clip to and hide on actors' lapels and cost around \$150 each. Meanwhile, "Audio-Technica also offers a good bang-for-your-buck," Pfaff adds. "The Audio-Technica is omnidirectional or stereo and will cover 120 degrees."

If you find yourself only hearing the sound you've recorded out of one side of your headphones, don't freak out! "Mics only pull left or right, unless it's a stereo mic, so you're only going to get left or right channel recorded sound."

Also, seriously consider investing in an

external recorder for syncing up sound later on. According to Pfaff, the Zoom H4n Handy Recorder is "extremely popular" because it records at "double the standard of camera recording." In post-production, this little tool will plug and feed into Final Cut, Vegas, or Pinnacle, but not into iMovie software. PluralEyes by Singular Software will auto-sync your visual with audio, which is important if you want actors' lines to match with their mouths—you could also go through and manually sync the audio track, but this process necessitates considerably more time.

### Let There Be Light!

You're going to need three lights, and these three need to be the same type: Do not mix an LED light with a halogen. Doing a bit of research into "three-point lighting" will certainly benefit your film's look. In fact, one of the single-largest caution points for beginning filmmakers (and a telltale sign of amateurism) is lighting: If your production is well-lit, your production will look professional. If it's not, it won't.

Different strength kilowatts of light offer different effects, Pfaff says: 2800k offers a tungsten glow; 4000k is good for closer action; 5600k is good for daylight; while 6500k looks a little blue.

Typical practice for light manufacturers is to sell lights in sets of two, when you actually need three. (This trick is the filmmaker's version of the old "hot dog/hot dog bun" packaging paradox.) However, Westcott sells a 3-set: the 3 Light Window Light Kit Plus which retails for around \$2,500.

Also, meet the Kino Flo Divas: "These little guys are popular on a lot of smaller productions because the sizing's good," Pfaff conveys. "They're the most robust, the most used. These are heavy but small, stay at a constant temperature, and are dimmable."

### Tripod

Not just any tripod will do ... a camera's weight and the tripod's weight are interdependent, and if they are not a good match for each other, your camera will jerk and shake as you pan, or the tripod could even fall over! "Your tripod needs to have a good, fluid head and match up with the weight of your camera," advises Pfaff. "Your tripod

in a color correction before bringing it to that exhibition, which can run from \$1,500 to \$2,000 for a legitimate session. It's sort of the equivalent to taking a long, hot shower before an important date.

**Step Four: Festival Exhibition**

The single-largest and most reputable means of finding festivals to which to submit your finished film is Withoutabox.com, a free-to-use site through which you can find essentially every single film festival worth its grit, both local and international.

To send to these, and show your film *at* these, you'll want to have a Blu-ray DVD of your film made. "Find a friend with a Blu-ray burner," counsels Ledy. Not only will Blu-ray show all your hard work in the best light possible, but this is the standard expectation for modern festival exhibition.

Don't make it difficult for the festival organizer, the festival projectionist, nor for yourself: Go easy, go Blu-ray.

**"Lights, Camera, Action!"**

All in all, with the right software and hardware, you can write, produce and direct a feature-length film for around \$10,000—but this is a very rough variable, increasing or decreasing according to your time, skill levels, investment, renting or buying choices, and outside talent brought in.

Ledy recommends Robert Rodriguez's classic "5-Minute Film School"—find it and other "10 Minute" installments on YouTube. He summarizes, "The more money you want to save, the more things you want to learn to do yourself. With the money faucet, it's easy to fix things. But at the beginner level, when a problem arises, you want to ask yourself, 'How can I fix this without spending a dime?' Like the old saying goes, 'You can make it cheap; you can make it fast; or you can make it good: Pick two.'" 🗨️



ROBERT PILUSO is a produced playwright for *The Point of You* (2001), optioned screenwriter of various horror films, published poet, founder of Goodbye Lago Productions, and writer-director of the forthcoming *Cutting In*. He can be contacted at robertpiluso@aol.com.



should be able to carry three times the weight of the camera."

**Wheeling and Dealing**

Ledy returns to opine on the logistics of shooting location. You've got two routes: permits or no permits. And permits are expensive.

"There are ways to wheel and deal to get what you need," encourages Ledy. "Don't forget the glamour of moviemaking. If you live in an isolated city, go to a weird area, find a setting, and they will probably want to work with you, give you access to stuff for free. Shoot locations you know—like that local park where you had your first kiss on the swings. Figure out ways to make your story as uniquely *your* film story as possible."

However, please do not shoot in public without the proper permits ... ESPECIALLY if your scene involves fake weapons or violence between characters. All it takes is one phone call from a well-meaning passerby to the local authorities to then find yourself involved with the police. And they carry *real* weapons.

**Step Three: Post-Production Hardware, Software and Strategies**

A prosumer production is not sustainable on iMovie, Pfaff reveals: "It handles the files, but not the details." You've got to go higher-end.

Already, you have invested considerable time and money into your production, and you do not want to cheap out when it comes to fashioning the finished product for exhibition.

A Dell laptop won't handle all you need it to handle, so Pfaff recommends a computer with "an I7 quad-core, minimum, 4G processor, 512 video graphics processor. Also, seriously consider an external memory drive. And back up, back up, back up!" After all, since film has gone digital, one cannot simply refer back to the "tapes" or canisters of old. You need to protect your footage—precious as it certainly is.

For post-production software, Avid LE or Final Cut Pro can suit your needs. Ledy ventures, "I recommend Final Cut over Avid LE—it's easier to figure out." With Final Cut, you'll edit your footage together, sync up sound, and digitally conjure your film together into estimable shape for exhibition.

When it comes to figuring out how to use different software programs or pieces of hardware, Ledy passes along the wonderful resource of Creativecow.net, which provides a wide spectrum of online tutorials and discussion forums to "un-riddle" software programs and procedures.

Additionally, when your film gets accepted to a festival, Ledy highly recommends investing