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SIDNEY LUMET

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Contents

Preface

ONE

The Director: The Best Job in the World

TWO

The Script: Are Writers Necessary?

THREE

Style: The Most Misused Word Since Love

FOUR

Actors: Can an Actor *Really* Be Shy?

FIVE

The Camera: Your Best Friend

SIX

Art Direction and Clothes: Does Faye Dunaway Really Have the Skirt
Taken in in Sixteen Different Places?

SEVEN

Shooting the Movie: At Last!

EIGHT

Rushes: The Agony and the Ecstasy

NINE

The Cutting Room: Alone at Last

TEN

The Sound of Music: The Sound of Sound

ELEVEN

The Mix: The Only Dull Part of Moviemaking

TWELVE

The Answer Print: Here Comes the Baby

THIRTEEN

The Studio: Was It All for This?

About the Author

Preface

I once asked Akira Kurosawa why he had chosen to frame a shot in *Ran* in a particular way. His answer was that if he'd panned the camera one inch to the left, the Sony factory would be sitting there exposed, and if he'd panned an inch to the right, we would see the airport—neither of which belonged in a period movie. Only the person who's made the movie knows what goes into the decisions that result in any piece of work. They can be anything from budget requirements to divine inspiration.

This is a book about the work involved in making movies. Because Kurosawa's answer stated the simple truth, most of the movies I'll discuss in this book are pictures I directed. With those, at least, I know exactly what went into each creative decision.

There's no right or wrong way to direct a movie. What I'm writing about is how I work. For students, take it all; take what you want and throw the rest away; or throw it all away. For a few readers, perhaps it might make up for the times a movie crew has tied you up in traffic, or shot in your neighborhood all night long. We really *do* know what we're doing: It only looks as if we don't. Serious work is going on even when it seems as if we're just standing around. For everyone else, I'll try to tell you as best I can how movies are made. It's a complex technical and emotional process. It's art. It's commerce. It's heartbreaking and it's fun. It's a great way to live.

A warning about what you *won't* find in the book: There are no personal revelations other than feelings arising from the work itself—no gossip about Sean Connery or Marlon Brando. Mostly I love the people I've worked with in what's necessarily an intimate process. So I respect their foibles and idiosyncrasies, as I'm sure they respect mine.

Finally, I must ask for an indulgence from the reader. When I began making movies, the only crew jobs available to women were as script girls and in the editing department. As a result, I still think of movie crews as male. And in fact, they still predominantly are. I've therefore developed the lifetime habit of using male pronouns. The word "actress" or "authoress" always struck me as condescending. A doctor's a doctor, right? So I've always referred to "actors" and "writers," regardless of their sex. So many movies that I've made involved police before women played any significant role on the force, so even my casts have been heavily dominated by men. After all, my first movie was called *12 Angry Men*. In those days, women could be excused from jury duty simply because they were women. The male pronouns I use almost always refer to both men and women. Most people working in the movies today have been brought up in a far more equally balanced world than I was. Hopefully, such indulgences won't have to be asked for again.

ONE

The Director:

The Best Job in the World

The entrance to the Ukrainian National Home is on Second Avenue between Eighth and Ninth streets in New York City. There's a restaurant on the ground floor. The odor of pierogi, borscht, barley soup, and onions hits me as soon as I walk in. The smell is cloying but pleasant, even welcoming, especially in the winter. The rest rooms are downstairs, always reeking of disinfectant, urine, and beer. I go up a flight of stairs and walk into an enormous room the size of a small basketball court. It has colored lights, the inevitable revolving mirrored ball, and a bar along one wall, behind which are stacked sound amplifiers in their suitcases, empty cartons, boxes of plastic garbage bags. Setups are also sold here. Stacks of folding chairs and tables are piled along the walls.

This is the ballroom of the Ukrainian National Home, where loud, stomping accordion-accompanied dances are held on Friday and Saturday nights. Before the breakup of the USSR, there would be at least two "Free the Ukraine" meetings held here every week. The room is rented out as often as possible. And we have now rented it for two weeks to rehearse a movie. I've rehearsed eight or nine movies here. I don't know why I feel like this, but rehearsal halls should always be a little grungy.

Two production assistants are nervously awaiting me. They've started the coffee machine. In a plastic box, amid ice cubes, are containers of juice (freshly squeezed), milk, and yogurt. On a tray, bagels, Danish, coffee cake, slabs of wonderful rye bread from the restaurant downstairs. Butter (whipped and packaged) and cream

cheese (whipped and packaged) are waiting, plastic knives alongside. Another tray holds packets of sugar, Equal, Sweet 'n Low, honey, tea bags, herb teas (every kind imaginable), lemon, Redoxon (in case anyone has the first signs of a cold). So far so good.

Of course, the PAs have set up the two rehearsal tables the wrong way. They've placed them end to end, so the twelve or so people due here in half an hour will have to sit stretched out as if in a subway car. I have them move the tables side by side, putting everybody as close together as possible. Newly sharpened pencils are lined up in front of each chair. And a fresh script. Even though the actors have had their scripts for weeks, it's amazing how often they forget them on the first day.

I like to have as much of the production team as possible at the first reading. Already present are the production designer, costume designer, second assistant director, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) trainee (an apprentice), the script girl, the editor, and the cameraman, if he's not out doing tests on locations. As soon as the tables are in place, they descend on me—all of them. Floor plans are rolled out. Swatches. Polaroids of a red '86 Thunderbird and a black '86 Thunderbird. Which do I want? We still don't have permission for the bar on Tenth Street and Avenue A. The guy wants too much money. Is there another location that will work as well? No. What should I do? Pay him the money. Truffaut has a moment in *Day for Night* that touches the heart of every director. He's just finished an arduous day's shooting. He's walking off the set. The production team surrounds him, peppering him with questions for tomorrow's work. He stops, looks to the heavens, and shouts, "Questions! Questions! So many questions that I don't have time to think!"

Slowly, the actors come wandering in. A false joviality hides their nervousness. Did you hear the one about—Sidney, I'm so glad we're working together again... hugs, kisses. I'm a big kisser myself, a toucher and a hugger as opposed to a groper. The producer arrives. Usually, he's the groper. His object this morning is to ingratiate himself, particularly with the stars.