February 2009

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Interview with Director Ken Kwapis

he's just not that into you

Filming a Key Shot for Spielberg's *Hook*

Backpack Journalism: Get Roadworthy

Non-Dialogue Film, *Begotten*: Merhige Talks Ghetto Tech

Dynamic Shots with the Use of Perspective

Audio Recording in the Great Outdoors



Publisher's Desk

I am looking forward to attending the 2009 NAB show this year in Las Vegas, Nevada. It will be the third anniversary of *StudentFilmmakers* magazine. For those who don't know, our first issue was launched and distributed at the NAB show in April of 2006. If you are attending this year, please stop by our booth at C10206 and say hello. For the latest information about the tradeshows we are attending and updates, visit our website at www.studentfilmmakers.com for online resources, contest information, forums, and industry news.

And while you are online, be sure to join the global networking section, which is very much like a MySpace for film and video makers. You can go directly to the URL by typing into your browser http://networking.studentfilmmakers.com. Each month, we select networking members and feature them in the magazine. See our featured networking members in this issue on pages 48 and 49.

I think you will find this issue worth the waiting for. I am sure you are going to find the articles informative and inspiring as I have. For example, be sure you read the article, "Backpack Journalism" on page 8, a fantastic story by Carl Filoreto. The article includes insights and tips from award-winning BP journalist Mara Schiavocampo of NBC News, and Denver journalist Jennie Castor of KMGH-TV. It is about how one person can produce, shoot and write a news story and how this is quickly becoming an integral part of television newsrooms across the country. Our cover story is an interview with award-winning director Ken Kwapis on page 12. And be sure to check out another completely fantastic article on page 22, "Ghetto Tech: Cheap Solutions with Old Gear" by our soon-to-be staff editor David Kaminski.

Please enjoy all the great articles in this issue, and again, be sure to visit the website at www.studentfilmmakers.com to sign up for workshops, networking and meeting filmmakers from around the world looking for people just like you to collaborate with. Also, be sure to use our sponsors' products and services, and drop them a note about the *StudentFilmmakers* magazine and website.

Truly,
Kim E. Welch
Publisher / Editor-in-Chief

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On the Cover

Jennifer Aniston with director Ken Kwapis on the set of New Line Cinema's romantic comedy, "He's Just Not That Into You," distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures. Photo by Darren Michaels.

When They Look to You on the Set

Filming a Key Shot for Spielberg's "Hook"

by Jack Anderson

Back in the early '90s, I had the good luck to be B-Cam operator on Peter Bogdanovich's *Noises Off*. There wasn't a lot of 2nd unit work, but I got to do most of it, working with producer Frank Marshall. After *Noises Off* wrapped, I took a vacation in Ventura, on the California coast a little north of Los Angeles. My wife and I had just settled in when I got a page (remember those days before cell phones?). Frank's office had called, asking if I was interested in some 2nd unit work on *Hook*, which he was also co-producing.

Of course I took off like a scared cat, leaving my wife at the lovely coast without transportation – but that's another story.

When I got back to LA, I got most of the grip and electric crew from *Noises Off*, and I went down to MGM. It seemed as though *Hook* had commandeered every stage on that gigantic lot – at least six or seven. The most impressive was the stage with a full-size pirate ship taking up the entire several thousand square feet of the stage. It was enormously impressive. And intimidating.

Thank goodness I didn't have to deal with that right away. But after a day of fairly routine work – things like inserts of shoes – Frank let me know we'd be doing the shot in which the Captain's hook is fitted to his arm for the first time in the movie. Apparently, it was too much trouble for the first unit crew; they'd worked on it, but they didn't want to spend time on a shot without principals.

Oh good; I'm being informed that Dean Cundey's crew – one of the best in the business – couldn't handle this shot; so I get to do it.

Now I know that Dean Cundey would have no problems with this shot. What happened is strictly a matter of conserving time; the producers want the director and the main production unit to spend their time with the actors. Shots without them can be done by pickup crews, like mine.

Nonetheless, I'm feeling the pressure that I'm supposed to do a shot that's been tried without success. I'm supposed to "save the picture" with this shot. A good friend of mine had given me the best advice ever before I started the *Hook* job: "Don't be a hero." He was telling me just to do the work and not to impress anybody with my brilliance and innovative techniques. There's a great temptation in this kind of situation – Spielberg, Frank Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy, not to mention Dustin Hoffman and Robin Williams – to think, "Hey, it's my big chance! This is the one that's going to put me on top. This is when I get to show them what they've been missing all this time."

Of course, when you do that, you're liable to screw up royally just by tripping over your feet. It's enough to do the job, do what they want, do it professionally, and get out.

So I kept that in mind while I'm thinking, "Oh Lord, this is the signature shot to the movie. If I screw this up, I'll never work in this town again."

We check out the set-up on stage. It's the disembodied hook, surrounded by a motley assortment of flashbulbs, some wearing little cones of color gels. I talk to the effects people; they've planned to have these flash bulbs – old-fashioned, large, slow burning bulbs – and various bits of primer cord as the effect lighting. They've got about ten flashbulbs set up. It looks good, and it should make a nice effect. I ask to see what it looks like with all the effects going off. Well, see, we can't really do a rehearsal 'cause we only have 3 dozen bulbs left. Apparently, they used most of their flashbulbs for some other shots. Could we order more? Well, see, the bulbs are a special order. Only one company makes them any more. And since most photographers don't use these flashbulbs any more, the company makes only a certain small number, once a year.

At this point any normal cameraman would think, hey, these guys are blowing smoke up my ass – just get on the

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But I'd done a lot of special effects work with John Dykstra at Apogee, including work with these old-style flashbulbs. And I knew that these guys were telling me the truth.

Time for a little advanced math calculation. I could see that I had enough bulbs for three takes. And I'd better get it right.

Then Frank tells me "Steven" wants this shot to begin in total darkness. Of course, I'd planned it to be dark and shadowy before the effects lighting went off, but I mentioned that I'd like to put a low-level, soft, overall light to simulate a kind of dawn, so we could see the hook inside its box.

"Jack," says Frank.

"Yes, Frank?"

"Listen carefully: this shot begins in absolute black."

Ah, fine. I have to illuminate this shot with only the flashbulbs and primer cord. The shot has to be absolute black to start – not sort of dark, but a black like the pit of hell. Well, that's fine, except I have no idea how much light the flashbulbs put out – the primer cord will be instant flashes, I know, like lightning, but the flashbulbs will last long enough to illuminate the scene and give an exposure. And I'd planned to use Duveteen – a black, fireproof material used to make flags – as my background. Well, I know that Duveteen is not pure black; with any light at all it tends to photograph gray, and "Steven" was not going to like that.

But I catch my first piece of luck. I'm at MGM! This used to be the biggest studio in the world, and there's still a lot of stuff in the storerooms. I ask for a giant, seamless piece of velvet – it had to be about 10' by 15' – and they have it! It's there in a half-hour, freshly vacuumed and as black as night.

But let's calm down. I still have to figure out an exposure and get a usable shot in three tries. I took one of our precious flashbulbs, had effects set it up, darkened the area, pulled out my meter, and set off the bulb. The meter read nothing. Apparently, the flash went too fast for the meter, which is designed to read only continuous light. While I try to look as though I know what to do next, one of the crew says "Hey, doesn't the still man have a flash meter?" Well, of course there's a still photographer – on a big show like this, he's on every day. This sounds like the answer to my prayers. I go over to the main stage and meet the still photographer, and he kindly lets me borrow his flash meter. Back to our stage, set up a flashbulb – we're down to 35 – set it off and read the meter. Nothing.

I don't see any humor in the situation, but my assistant laughs and says "That meter's just for strobes." Oh. It would have been nice to think about that before we used another flashbulb. And he's right: the meter is set to read a strobe light, which is usually around 1/10,000th of a second. Since the duration of the strobe is so short, it has to be extremely bright to make an exposure. Therefore, the meter is set to be very "insensitive." It's set to respond only to a very, *very* bright light – maybe 500 times brighter than our flashbulbs.

So I've got a light source I can't measure: one meter is too slow, and the other is too insensitive.

Now, nobody is pressuring me – Frank's a pro and a gentleman – but I'm thinking that I'd better come up with something fast. Remember, I said I'd worked with these flashbulbs before? The last time was about six years previously on *Invaders from Mars*. And I'd talked with John Dykstra then about how to expose them. He'd worked with the bulb's guide number, a number used in the bad old days before strobe, to calculate the exposure for one of these bulbs. And, most importantly, I remembered that the bulb burned for about 1/20th of a second. For judging exposure, I vaguely remembered (and I could read on the flashbulb's wrapper) that the guide number for a given film speed could be divided by the distance from the lamp to the subject; that gives you the f/stop to use.

I was using 500 speed film, something unheard of in the days when flashbulbs were normally used, so I had to do some paperwork and hope that the guide number tables would extrapolate more or less linearly. I was sure that whatever number I got would be the correct stop; since the bulb burns for 1/20th of a second, it would burn for the entire frame exposure (1/50th second) and not overlap too much from frame to frame. Guide numbers are given for different exposure times as well. But without going into too much detail, I got f /4.5 for a reasonable stop for my shot. Or so I prayed (no atheists on the set). I figured that with 34 flashbulbs left, I could get three takes. I decided to bracket my shots: shoot one at f/4.5, one at f/6.3, and one at f/3.2. At least one of those ought to give a decent exposure. Now, it's a little embarrassing for a cinematographer to think of bracketing shots. Still photographers often do (or did in the old film days), but we're supposed to be too cool for that. Actually, the difference is that we're dealing with an actor's performance. When the actor gets it right, he's ready to move on. No one wants to repeat a scene because the cameraman is uncertain of his exposure. There's no money and no time for that nonsense, and anyone who tried it would soon be out of a job. But in this case, it seemed wise to cover my butt any way I could.

Now I was ready to shoot. I called Frank in from wherever he'd been telephoning (he's a producer, and that's what they do). I said I was ready, and would he like to call action and cut? I hear him say, "Oh no, this shot's too important for me to supervise. I'm getting Steven."

Well, thanks, Frank. I'd just about gotten over my nervousness about no ambient light, and not enough flashbulbs, and my guestimation of exposure time. So now I get to deal with Steven Spielberg on the set. Only the biggest gorilla in Hollywood.

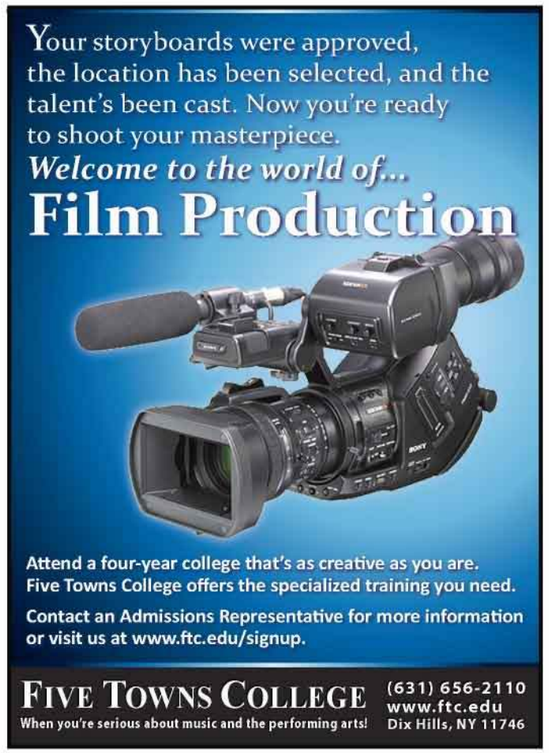
After a short wait, the man showed up and said, "Let's go!" No messing around for him. Everything was ready, we rolled camera, he called, "Action," and exactly six flashbulbs went off. The effects guys checked and found one of their wires was not connected. "Heh, heh." Now I'm down to two takes, and I've lost the insurance of bracketing over- and under-exposure. While we're waiting for effects, my gaffer (who's from Arizona, like Steven) chats up the biggest director in Hollywood. They're having a fine time, and I'm figuring that my one safety take – if I even get it – will be overexposure. That's generally safer (in terms of the film's sensitivity) so I ought to get a good take if I'm in the ballpark.

Effects is ready, and here we go again. Everything fires this time. Steven's looking at a monitor of course, and of course the exposure looks fine – the video's compensating for whatever lighting is used. "Great!" he says. "That's it!" Omigod. He's going to walk away without my safety take. I turn and start to say, "Uh, Steven, I'd like to– " and Frank, over Steven's shoulder, gives me a panic look that stops me in my tracks, if I know what's good for me – and I say " –thank you for the chance to work here." Frank relaxes, Steven takes off, and we've got one take in the can.

Needless to say, sleep and I are strangers that night. For the whole next morning, I barely manage to put one foot in front of another. Lunchtime comes, and with it dailies. We're in the big beautiful Cary Grant Theatre at MGM – there's nothing like film dailies – and I find a seat. Lights down. Pretty soon my shot is up. And holy cow, it's perfect. There's no sound, so I can hear Steven say, "That's the one, Dusty, how do you like it?" and Mr. Hoffman, somewhere in the dark, makes a sound of approval.

I'm a puddle of spent emotion, but a happy one. And I'll always thank John Dykstra for taking the time to explain things to me. And thank God I paid attention.

Jack Anderson is a thirty-year Hollywood veteran. He was DP for "Always Say Goodbye," first-prize winner at the First Hollywood Film Festival. He did second-unit DP on "Hook," "Noises Off," and "Mad About You." Short films he shot won prizes at the Los Angeles Short Film Festival, Crested Butte Reel Fest, Instant Films (LA), Waterfront Film Festival (Muskegon), and Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival. He teaches Cinematography at California State University Long Beach.



Backpack Journalism

Get Roadworthy with Award-Winning BP Journalist Mara Schiavocampo of NBC News, and Denver Journalist Jennie Castor of KMGH-TV.

by Carl Filoreto



Mara Schiavocampo, award-winning journalist and Digital Correspondent for *NBC Nightly News With Brian Williams*.

Against a backdrop of newsroom downsizing, budget cuts and rapidly evolving technology, the concept of backpack journalism is being sculpted into a reality. The idea of one person producing, shooting and writing a news story is not new, but it's quickly becoming an integral part of television newsrooms across the country.

The one man band (sorry for the gender bias) is not a new idea or practice. However, it's being reinvented on a daily basis. "I'm not sure it's the future of journalism," relates Poynter Institute faculty member Al Tompkins, "but it's part of it for awhile." The high quality of palm size camcorders and the ability to edit on a laptop computer has created a highly mobile platform for video journalism. The barriers created by the sheer size, weight and bulkiness of video gear have been removed, and new possibilities emerge on the journalistic landscape due to this transformation.

Video journalists. Solo journalists. Digital correspondents. Backpack journalism. There isn't much consensus on what to call the practitioners of the craft, but they're working in greater numbers in more markets. And they emerge from a variety of backgrounds.

"I really wanted to do some international work, so I quit my job, bought some gear and started making reporting trips abroad," explains Mara Schiavocampo, currently the Digital Correspondent at NBC News, the first reporter of her kind in network television. "For me, I thought 'these' are the stories I want to cover, and the only option for getting them done is for me to do everything. The identity of a backpack journalist came much later."

"I didn't look for the job," Jennie Castor, a video journalist/reporter at KMGH-TV in Denver, Colorado told me. "I got the option of trying something different, and thought, okay, I'll try it." Jennie emerged from a solid career behind the camera to try out the new role. And many people in the business are facing the same choice, whether they like it or not. Traditional reporters face learning the skills of shooting and editing, and photojournalists need to ask themselves if they've got the writing chops and flexibility to move up to a larger role in the newsroom.

This wholesale change in the daily routines of newsrooms has sparked a lot of controversy. Just because one person can do the job of two or three or four, is that necessarily a good thing?

Jennie Castor, KMGH-TV, shooting on location in Oahu, Hawaii.







Jennie Castor, Video Journalist/Reporter at KMGH-TV in Denver, Colorado.

"In my experience, there aren't a lot of people out there who can really do it all, and do a good job," claims Steve Sweitzer, news operations manager at WISH-TV in Indianapolis.

"The concerns over quality are legitimate," Poynter Institute's Al Tompkins adds. "I worry about the loss of voices in a story. I can't tell you how many times a photog's thinking saved me from going off the deep end on a story."

While these are legitimate concerns, the role of the video journalist in the newsroom is probably here for the foreseeable future. The cost savings alone will probably insure not only their survival, but their probable growth in the industry. **So what does it take to do a good job in this role, and how do you obtain the skill sets required for success?**

"Everything I learned about journalism I got in graduate school at the University of Maryland, College Park," Schiavocampo explains. "I learned how to shoot and edit, how to write a script, how to tell a story, everything. It was invaluable to what I'm doing now," she adds. For Jennie Castor, some new skills needed to be learned on the job, but she feels she had an advantage. "I think it's easier to go from a photog to an all-in-one journalist, than the other way around," she noted. "To me, it seems it'd be tougher to learn the technical skills. A good photojournalist is a de facto reporter anyway, and knows the elements that make up a good story."

So while a small camera and a laptop editor are nice tools, the vital skills are the same for any good journalist. "Ultimately, no matter what your workflow, what we do is all about stories, so identifying really compelling stories is key," Mara relates. "I always think, would I want to watch this? Writing and editing are integral to the storytelling process. And editing is where you really get to polish your work by accentuating the wonderful and burying the awful." And Mara has traveled the world incorporating these fundamental skills into her work. On the local level, Jennie Castor concurs, "What's most important is being able to recognize a good story, and can you personally tell the story well. Although without the technical skills and the ability to write, you're dead in the water."

Like any cog in a machine, the role of the video journalist has inherent advantages and disadvantages. One of the primary advantages lies on the bottom line: it simply costs less to have one person do the job of several. And potentially, it can provide a way to put more resources into the field. But on the local level, turning a same day story can be fraught with high pressure challenges. "It's stressful to turn a same day story by yourself," Castor relates. "You have to be totally organized and you're constantly playing beat the clock." And even when the challenge is met, and the story successfully airs, the day isn't over. There's a need to write content for the station's website, and possibly a blog as well. "Some days I do well, sometimes it's a bit too much. That's ok, but it can be a long day," Castor concludes.

Jennie's Daily Gear Package

- Panasonic P-2 Digital Camera, AG-HVX200P (2 P-2 cards)
- MacBook Pro Laptop with Final Cut Pro
- Sennheiser EW100 G2 Wireless Lav and Stick Microphone
- Shotgun Microphone with Extra Mic Cable
- Miller Tripod
- Lightkit with Rifa Box Light, Omni Light, Tota Light, 3 Light Stands, etc.
- Skullcandy Pink Headphones
- Travel wheel cart!

Mara's Gear Kit

- Computrekker Rolling Trekker plus Camera Bag
- Sony V1U
- Libec THM20 Tripod
- Lectrosonics UCR-100 Wireless Mics (2)
- Lite Panel Camera Mounted Light
- Power Strip
- Universal Charger
- Firewire & USB Cables
- MacBook Pro Laptop with Final Cut Pro
- 200 GB External Hard Drive

And some stories are better suited to a backpack journalist. “I’m not out there doing legislative stories,” Castor states. “I’m better suited to environmental, entertainment, or tug at your heart stories.” She does work on a number of consumer and investigative reports, though. Globe trekking Mara Schiavocampo has her own set of difficult situations. “Big media events are a real challenge for me and quite frankly, not all that fun. Breaking news has its challenges as well. I don’t think this is necessarily the best model for those situations.” Usually, though, the story creation process and the workflow are comfortable situations for her. “I’ve integrated the workflow so much that it doesn’t feel like multiple tasks. I think that’s the key, mush all your roles together. When I’m researching I’m thinking about shooting, and when I’m shooting I’m thinking about writing, and so on. They’re all links in a long chain,” she says.



Mara Schiavocampo is a member of the National Association of Black Journalists and serves the organization as the Deputy Director for the Northeast.

Both journalists agree the best part of the job is the total creative control they possess over a story. There aren’t any intermediaries to change or alter their vision. But there can be a lot of long days on the road and in the field chasing a story. “It’s lonely,” Castor relates. “I’ve lost so many friends because I don’t work with them anymore. And I don’t have anyone to bounce ideas off. I used to have a human sitting next to me in the car, now it’s just a bunch of stuff.” Mara Schiavocampo agrees. “Day to day, I’m used to it. But on long trips, yes. After eight nights of eating dinner alone I definitely start to wish I had a travel buddy.”

While talking to each journalist, I found it interesting that there wasn’t an emphasis on the “techie” aspect of the job. For Jennie Castor, the camera is now smaller than the cameras she’s used in the past, and for Mara Schiavocampo, the highly portable and mobile gear has always served as a tool, a means to an end. Certainly a separate discussion could be had concerning the overwhelming use of small format cameras in an HD world, but that’s for another day. As new technologies develop though, including the use of Skype for live broadcasts, one must heed the warning of Steve Sweitzer that “I don’t want to watch You Tube quality video on my 52 inch television screen.”







Before joining NBC News, Mara worked as an international contributor and commentator for numerous news outlets and websites, including ABC News, Current TV, Yahoo!, NPR, “Ebony” Magazine, “UPTOWN” Magazine and more.

In 2008, Mara received an astounding seven Telly Awards, including a Silver Telly (highest honor).

For those aspiring to the role of a backpack journalist, there are lessons to learn on the road to becoming adept at a multi-skilled job. “Play to your strengths,” advises Schiavocampo. “Maybe you’re a super shooter but average editor, or an amazing writer and so-so shooter. Accentuate the good and minimize the bad.” And Jennie Castor has a word of caution for new graduates, “My concern about young people coming out of school is can they tackle the big issues, make the contacts, and handle the journalistic side. We as an industry have to be careful in that respect.”

With the television news industry rapidly changing, morphing, and at the moment, contracting, it’s safe to say the backpack journalist will be a fixture for awhile. For those who make it into the business, Schiavocampo offers this advice, “Be forgiving, especially at first. There’s a lot to remember and a lot to do, so don’t beat yourself up over mistakes. Do what you can to fix them, take note of the lesson and move on.” And that’s sage advice in almost any job.

Carl Filoreto is an award-winning DP, and his company is Elk Run Productions, Inc. (www.elkruntv.com), which has a roster of clients that spans corporations, production houses, crewing agencies, and broadcast and cable networks, including Dateline NBC, The Food Network, and The Travel Channel. Prior to starting his business, Carl won seven regional Emmy awards, numerous national and regional National Press Photographers awards, and multiple awards from Colorado Ski Country and the National Snowsports Journalists Association, while working at KMGH-TV in Denver, WTNH in New Haven, and WGGB in Springfield, Massachusetts.

