David J. Nance - Thoughts on Writing/Producing/Directing my own Project

Having complete creative control I found to be both liberating and stressful at the same time. When I participated in a recent 48 Hour film challenge, I got to experience everything that a filmmaker has to do, but in a much shorter time frame with little preparation. The idea, of course, is to think outside the box with whatever resources are available, which definitely tests one’s creative ability, while trying to focus on story and characters rather than window dressing of special effects and exotic scenery. It requires to make tough decisions on the fly, and requires having a director who remains calm to keep the cast and crew calm through the process. I thought it was a good exercise to know what areas where I can improve as a filmmaker, and lowed me to see what area I like to focus more – the writing, the directing, or the producing. In the end, I found out that directing (in this case) was the easiest of the three even though I always felt that has been my weakest point.

When I had to write a script the night before, after I found out what the requirements were, I was glad that I only had to get to about 10 pages or less (because the maximum length was 10 minutes). Writing a feature length film was terrifying and overwhelming for me, but I have experience writing sketch comedy so this was not too bad. Plus, I knew it had to be “Holiday themed” which usually means a comedy, drama, or rom-com; no special effects to worry about. The only requirement was to have a superhero, so I just made a rom-com with a superhero in it. So I made a story based on Superman/Clark Kent and Lois Lane as a romantic comedy, which made things easier because at least I had a starting point and a basic outline for a plot.

The casting part also came rather easily because I knew people off the top of my head of actors I’ve worked with before. I was lucky enough that the people I had in mind were also available since it was only one day of shooting. If it was a feature, I know it would be more difficult to find someone who not only fit the part, and had the right chemistry with the other characters, but also be available for the entire time of production.

As a producer, it was really just assembling all the pieces and made sure we had a location secured. Again, I lucked out as my leading man had an apartment in a large complex that allowed us to shoot in the lobby, conference rooms, and hallways. For most 48 hour films, this is usually the largest hurdle because who wants to shoot the inside of someone’s apartment… again?

What really surprised me was how easy it was to put my director hat on. Again, I lucked out having a cast/crew of people that I know and they know me. I also know what their strengths were, except these were stage actors for the most part. Most of the challenge was trying to get the actors to be more introspective about their objectives. I also am fortunate that I know how I had to adapt as an actor from stage to film, so I gave them some pointers about thinking about their objects than actually going through the motions. We rehearsed a few times before we started shooting which I think is not done enough in the film world. In the end, the precious time we spent at the beginning before we shot anything helped them to become comfortable with the characters and allowed for a more efficient shooting day.

Given the chance, I would direct again and definitely will use the lessons learned as I go out to make my own feature film.