Chp. 5 – Hierarchy of a Production

Film Connection

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1. What are the responsibilities of an AD? Why are they so vital to a production?

On smaller scale shoots it seems that the role of the AD is a bit superfluous. There’s not much that the director of a small-scale short film can’t do that would warrant a need for an AD. The last short film I worked on the director not only wrote the script but acted and directed in the film. The role of the producer and the AD meld together a bit sometimes – or at least they did when I was on set for “American Carnage” directed by Tamzin Merchant in Shreveport just a few weeks ago.

On a larger scale project, the first AD must be an intermediary between the director and the background actors. SAG-AFTRA policies actually prohibit the director from interacting with extras. The reasoning behind this is mysterious to me.

The first AD is also required to do things such as call “Action” although the director may choose to do that himself. The AD cues people on the set and helps them remember exactly what moment they are trying to recreate. Often times, the AD’s job is to ease everyone’s minds so that the uncertainty and the suspense created on a film set are dissipated. For example, there may be a hold up and the AD is in charge of of saying “Waiting on lighting” or “Waiting on Talent”.

The first AD, unlike the director is more out front and “runs” the set. The AD is the communication. The AD may also have a Second AD who also has duties such as making call sheets. The First AD and the Unit Production Manager are the highest ranking “Below the Line” roles. The AD has no real creative control over the project but his/her task is simply to work towards fostering the vision of the director.

Being an AD used to be a stepping stone to directing work. Hitchcock, for example, was an AD before he became a director.

Finally, an AD is often in charge of making sure that the production is happening at the correct pace so that the production can be true to its budget.

1. Define in as much detail as possible what below the line means.

The budget of a film can be divided into two parts. One is “above the line” expenditures which covers the costs of buying the script, paying the actors, director and producer and the “below the line” costs are those that involve the rest of the crew and the production expenses. Below the line costs include money for lighting, grips, carpentry and craft services. The DP is also a below the line entity although DP’s often belong to a union. “Bellow the line” people will rarely have their names in lights but they make up the majority of the crew. The first AD and the Unit Production Manager are the highest ranking individuals who fall in the “below the line” category.

Most of the above the line costs are pre-negotiated before production starts. The big names are the “above the line” entities. In Louisiana, certain productions are more likely to get tax breaks if a greater percentage of the “above the line” expenditures are paid towards Louisiana citizens. A production with Louisiana writers, producers, actors and a director could qualify for tax credits more easily according to some of the tax laws I’ve read. According to what I’ve found a QLPC (Qualified Louisiana Production Company) is eligible for as much as or more than 30% back if 90% of the above the line expenditures are paid to Louisiana residents.

What are the must-have qualities of a PA? Why are they so important on a film set?

PA’s who work on set as opposed to in an office have to be able to handle stress and unpredictability well. A PA might not always know what the day will bring but he/she has to be flexible and level headed enough to adapt to whatever the task at hand is.

PA’s need to be good drivers so they can haul actors and crew around town if necessary. They need to be good with names. They often help the assistant director. I guess punctuality is a no-brainer. PA’s often have to do the things that no one else on the grip or lighting crews are designated to do such as getting coffee and food for people.