

Making the Four Dollar Movie

by Ela Thier

This summer, I'd like you to quit waiting for permission, and go make a short film. All you need is four dollars and the following ingredients:

A PRODUCING PARTNER

Don't leave home without it. Your first step in getting a film made is getting a friend who will do it with you. Perhaps this can be a friend who is interested in doing something that you don't want to do: a writer, an actor, a director. If you want to do all those things, you can still find a co-producer who will just want to co-produce. We're everywhere. Get on craigslist, on shootingpeople.org, on mandys.com, on whatever. Your first job is to find the partner. Don't do anything else until you found that person.

If you have a partner, you won't get stuck. You'll keep going despite all obstacles. If you don't have a partner, even the stupidest little thing will feel insurmountable and you'll be throwing in the towel before you finish reading this article.

A SHORT SCRIPT

10 pages or less. If you prefer, just write the essence of the story: "When... then... until...". Then let your actors improvise it. Do it "Curb Your Enthusiasm" style.

Don't wait for the best short script ever. Don't be brilliant. Don't be original. Don't be a trailblazer. Don't be heart-wrenching. Don't be anything spectacular. Seriously. The effort to be brilliant is the fastest road to nowhere.

Be yourself. Have fun. This is a \$4 short. You'll make more of them. The brilliance will come of its own. Right now you need practice and experience.

Remember that flowers grow from poop. Go make poop. Just don't spend more than \$4 on it.

ACTORS (or sock puppets)

Call on your actor friends, or turn your friends into actors – the ones you think could pull it off. If you never made a film before, I strongly recommend starting with one that has only two actors in it. You could put a posting in Backstage, but that costs like \$60 and you'd be \$56 dollars over budget, so let's not get crazy here. The advantage to actor friends is that you don't need to hold auditions. But those can be a fun part of the process.

Another alternative: call an acting school, like the Barrow Group Theater Company (I keep hearing great things about them). Something small, local and unpretentious. Let them know you're making a short film and ask if you could hold auditions in their school. In exchange for the audition space, you're offering to only cast actors who go to their school.

I just thought that idea up as I wrote it... When it comes to filmmaking, favors and barter are your best friends. Start practicing getting as creative making these types of exchanges as you are with your art work.

Ah... I have enough experience to know that making that call to a local acting group is going to be a major bottle neck that will keep you from pursuing this idea for months on end.

Go back to step one. Your co-producer, in your presence, will make that call for you. Or sit there with you while you make the call. You need one person in on this that you can be a baby around; everyone else will get to see the hot-shot side of you.

A SHOOTING DATE

Your \$4 short is a one-day shoot. Pick a Saturday or Sunday. Decide who in your team is indispensable to you. This would be your co-producer (or lead actor, if your co-producer is both). Set a date that would work for both of you and etch it in stone. If anyone else can't make that date, they get replaced. Stick to your date.

A CAMERA

Your \$4 short will be shot on a consumer-type camcorder unless you or someone you know has an even nicer camera and wants to get to use it. If you don't have a camcorder and don't know anyone who does, then your \$4 shoot will become an \$84 shoot because you'll need to buy an \$80 digital camcorder (no tapes!) at B&H. Here's their selection:

http://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/shop/1871/Shoot_and_Share/sortDrop/Brand:+A+to+Z/at/Camcorder+Type+Shoot+%26+Share

(I don't know how to pick one either. Go for the cheapest...? Then pick a color...?)

The eighty bucks is a long-term investment in your production company because now that you have a camera, you'll make several more \$4 shoots and will already have a camera

LIGHTING

Forget about it. Use whatever light is already there. The sun? The shade? The lampshade?

Shoot with natural lighting and tell people that you're a true believer in Dogme 95, a tradition of filmmaking that began in Denmark that insists on using only natural lighting so that the director can focus on the actors and the story rather than gear and shiny equipment. Some Dogme films are quite famous and winners of the Cannes film festival and stuff like that. It's all very fancy. So go ahead, explain that using only natural lighting is a stylistic choice.

LOCATION

You don't have to shoot in just one location on a \$4 budget. You can film in your mom's apartment, the park, the subway, whatever. Since your crew is teeny-tiny, you are mobile. And as long as you don't set down a tripod or gear (remember, you're a high caliber dogme filmmaker), you don't need a permit. If you insist on putting down a tripod, just don't get caught, that's all. Pick a remote neighborhood in the Bronx rather than midtown Manhattan.

SETS, PROPS, COSTUMES

Another aspect of Dogme films is the principle that you only use props and sets that already exist in the location you're filming in. Favors. Barter. Whatever. Your film should be contemporary and your actors should be grabbing stuff from their own closets, or their friends' closets, and come to the set wearing what the character would wear. If you wanna get into it, tell your actors to bring a few different choices so you can pick and choose.

SOUND

If you know a sound mixer who has his own gear and will record sound for you, for free, for a day, then you're well within your budget. A paid sound-guy is not in your budget. If you can't get a free sound guy, you have two very good choices:

1) make a silent movie (I've done that. It was fun. Charlie Chaplin did that too, and he's way famous).

2) Use the microphone on the camera. I just called B&H to verify: all the camcorders have built-in mics. Avoid filming in noisy places like a highway.

CREW

You or your co-producer will operate the camera. That's all you need.

FOOD AND TRANSPORTATION

...are not within your budget. The crew and cast transport and feed themselves. You all benefit by contributing just a little, and getting the experience and the film credit.

EDITING

You need to find a friend with a final cut program who is eager to practice and will cut your film.

Alternatively: here's a link to the top five free video editing softwares out there:

<http://www.desktop-video-guide.com/top-5-free-video-editing-software-review.html>

It's good practice to cut your own first several shorts. Or better yet, cut it with your producing partner.

DISTRIBUTION

When the film is done, upload it online, post it on youtube, and share it with everyone you know. Or burn it on a dvd and send it to a bunch of festivals. Unless you have some experience and know what you're doing, don't waste your money sending a \$4 short to big name festivals where submissions are expensive. Remember: small, local, unpretentious.

A DEADLINE

Take ONE WEEK to make your \$4 short from beginning to end. If it's your very very very first time making a film, I give you four weeks – MAX. If you don't finish it in four weeks then you have the wrong producing partner (or you took my advice too lightly and proceeded to do this without a partner. Ouchies!)

Oh yeah: FOUR DOLLARS

What do you need four dollars for? I have no idea. I got this number from Daniel Johnson who made several shorts for roughly that amount. If I'm not mistaken, he spent \$4 in his short *Crazy Love*, on two coffees which he used as props: <http://www.danieljohnsonfilms.co.uk/index.php>

My confession: I've never made a four-dollar movie. I'm feeling the need to say that you might end up going over-budget by, like, two hundred bucks...? That's still pretty good, no...? And maybe you're as cool as Daniel and will stick to your budget.

YOU'RE GOOD TO GO!

Filmmaking is like cooking or carpentry: the more you do it, the better you get at it. Remember that having fun and doing your best go hand-in-hand. There's just nothing more fun than doing your absolute best.

You can, and should, take your work seriously, even if you *are* making a \$4 short. Fun stuff is serious business. Anything important that was ever made, was made joyfully.

Developing your techniques, as a writer, as a director learning to work with actors, and even in working with a camera, can be mastered with four-dollar films. You don't need to lay down a fancy dolly track to see what kinds of possibilities open up as you move a camera across the set rather than keeping it stationary. The beauty of \$4 shorts is that the stakes are low and you can experiment and learn, learn, learn. There is SO much to learn!

Make several \$4 short films until you feel ready to turn to relatives and friends, raise \$1500, and indulge in a more extravagant production.

After making your \$1,500 short, you may be ready for your professional calling card. A professional short will be shot on HD, and cost roughly \$1,000 per minute of film, assuming that most of your crew is working for free or for peanuts. Before you make your calling card, you will have made lots of friendships with very talented and experienced filmmakers that you love and respect, and who are excited about your work, so that your \$10K film will look like a \$50K film. What you want to avoid is spending a lot of money before you have a chance to experiment and learn learn learn learn learn.

If you want to make movies, you don't need to be a slave to money. Your greatest asset, your only real asset, are the friendships you build with other people who want to make movies.

Marc Price got the help of the same make-up artist (and his make-up kit) that worked on X-Men3. The same latex used on Wolverine was used in Marc's feature film, *Colin*, which he made with SEVENTY DOLLARS. The film is currently under a bidding war at Cannes. Don't believe me? Check it out:

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/05/21/Colin/index.html?imw=Y&iref=mpstoryemail>

See you at the Oscars!

Ela



Daniel Johnson (left) on the set of *Crazy Love*, made with \$4