

DIGITAL FILMMAKING 101

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO PRODUCING LOW-BUDGET MOVIES

SECOND EDITION

DALE NEWTON & JOHN GASPARD

Introduction

Now you've done it.

You opened this book because you want to make a movie... if only you knew how... if only you had enough money. Well, your life just got complicated because we wrote this book to tell you how to make your feature-length movie a reality and how to do it on an ultra-low budget.

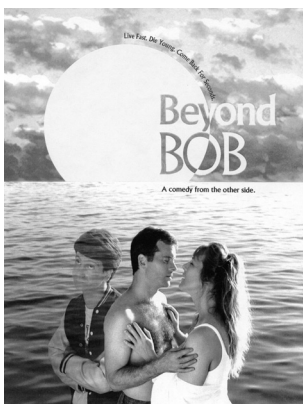
You hold in your hand a guide to making your dream come true. Now what do you do?

It's up to you, but let us tell you about the path we chose that led us to writing this book about digital moviemaking. It might help you decide.

The two earlier versions of this book, *Persistence of Vision: An Impractical Guide to Producing a Feature Film for Under \$30,000* and the re-named *Digital Filmmaking 101: An Essential Guide to Producing Low-Budget Movies*, passed along everything we learned from doing three independent low-budget feature movies.

The movies were *Resident Alien*, *Beyond Bob*, and *Grown Men* — a science-fiction comedy romance, a romantic-comedy ghost story, and a comic-drama about what it means to be a grown man. Of course, there were trials and tribulations in making them, as well as some of the best fun we've had in our lives.

We love film. We're products of the home-movie boom in the 1950s. Well, actually byproducts, because, in the true spirit of independent filmmakers, we each started filmmaking using 8mm cameras that were castoffs from our uncles. There's nothing like the excitement of looking at the film after it comes back from the processor or splicing together a scene out of your shots or realizing you're part of a 100-year chain linking back to the Lumière brothers' first movies. Like most filmmakers, between films we also tried out film's electronic cousin, videotape. We even found jobs working with video. But our first love was always film.

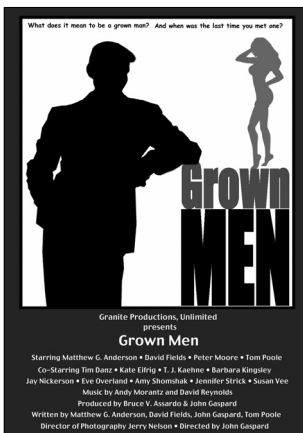


Poster art for *Beyond Bob*, *Resident Alien*, and *Grown Men*.

It's a measure of the magnitude of the digital-film revolution that when we were planning to embark on our third feature film, *Grown Men*, it quickly became clear that we would shoot it on digital video. We also realized that we might never shoot film again, at least not when we were putting up the budget.

There had been signs for a half-dozen years that a revolution was in the making. The advent of low-cost non-linear editing systems and inexpensive high-quality formats like Hi8mm and S-VHS were changing how filmmakers edited and how documentary filmmakers shot. When digital-video formats entered the arena with broadcast quality and price tags that were within the reach of filmmakers' personal finances, the revolution burst onto the streets. The movie products from these new tools have proven good enough to be transferred to film stock for theater presentation and good enough for cable television and home video, which are the most common distribution routes for low-budget, independent movies.

Now, far be it from us to suggest film is dead. It's a well-loved format that is deeply imbedded in our perceptions of what cinematic storytelling is, and it's survived virtually unchanged for over 100 years. As moviegoers, when we see the look of a film, we've been visually trained to settle back and fall into the story being told. Film's not going away anytime soon, but on the other hand, independent filmmaking won't ever be the same again. Digital moviemaking further loosens the budget shackles on movie production, and lightweight, moderately priced, flexible equipment creates new opportunities for those of us working on the fringes of the movie world.



Also, the Internet and the continual invention of new ways to communicate on it promise to revolutionize the second half of the moviemaking process — getting your movie to an audience. The gates of distribution in theaters have long been guarded by the large corporations that run the Hollywood movie machine. Only a small percentage of little movies were ever granted permission to pass into wide distribution. Using the Internet, many independent filmmakers have now found ways to circumvent the Hollywood system and are delivering their movies directly to consumers.

All of these changes have turned the two of us into digital moviemakers. The quality of the format and its low cost fit our possible audiences and our budgets. And this book tells you everything we've learned about making digital movies.

As we write this book, digital moviemaking means shooting on one of the digital videotape formats, but undoubtedly other developments won't be far behind.

What we won't be talking about are shooting and editing on motion-picture film. So if that's your plan, get a copy of the earlier film edition of this book. If a digital movie is your goal, don't worry that you're missing good stuff from that earlier book. In this digital edition, we've kept the parts that are universal to movie storytelling and the parts that tell you how to turn the chaos of a movie production into an actual finished movie. And for this second edition, we've also included fresh examples, updated information, and new insights on digital-movie production.

The one disadvantage to the fast pace of change in digital production is that this book started to be outdated the moment we typed this sentence. The technology is changing faster than software developers change Porsches. Then again, every book on digital filmmaking is going to be behind the times before it reaches the bookstore shelf. But if you're an independent moviemaker (the polite way of saying "mostly impoverished moviemaker"), that's not all bad. Outdated technology is cheap, and it still does the job. And, even though the technology changes, the techniques for doing a professional-looking movie on a shoestring budget apply whether you're making it on digital videotape or the latest and greatest technology.

These techniques served us well. We used them when we shot our first two feature films in four weekends each. *Resident Alien* was described as “the best low-budget independent project ever to come out of the area” by a big-city newspaper critic in Minnesota, which was high praise given the large number of independent films done in the metropolitan area where we live. *Beyond Bob* received a bronze award at an international film festival up against other films with budgets close to a million dollars. Studio executives and distributors who saw the films guessed that they had casts from New York or Los Angeles and had budgets in the million-dollar range. In truth, the casts were all from the talented pool of actors in our area, and our budgets were 30 times less than guessed.

Our techniques put all of your tiny budget up on the screen where it helps to tell your story. With our first digital feature, *Grown Men*, we used these methods along with new digital techniques that saved us a bundle in production and postproduction costs, so we could dedicate our efforts to getting a great story on the screen, rather than to raising funds and searching for deals on lab work.

If digital video had been available, we could have shot a half-dozen feature films for the cost of our first two 16mm movies. Because independent movies are financially risky, it’s important to keep your budget low to reduce the financial stress of the production, letting you spend more time doing what you love — making your movie.

Now that we’ve told you what this book will do, let’s take a moment to cover what it won’t do. This book won’t spend a lot of time on movie history and theory. There are lots of good books on those topics, some listed in our bibliography. We’re here to help you get your project finished, so expect nuts-and-bolts, down-to-brass-tacks, practical advice on how to take your movie from a nagging idea in a corner of your brain to the glowing screen in front of your audience. The new digital-video tools can do great things, but owning a hammer doesn’t mean you know how to build a house. We’ll tell you what you need to know in order to put these new tools to use creating a professional-quality production.

But that doesn’t mean it will be easy. Some people will tell you that making your own movie is impossible. We’ve heard that, and so have lots of other moviemakers. What makes independent movies happen is a fierce

persistence of vision — a complete unwillingness to give up even when all signs and reason say you should. Be sure you have a bunch of this persistence stored up in the closet, in the attic, and under the basement steps before you start. You'll need all that you can get your hands on.

Besides a little bit of money and a lot of persistence, you'll need a strong vision and some creativity. If you've got these ingredients, we'll be happy to be your guides in putting them all together into a movie.

We realize that the readers of this book may have a wide range of experience and knowledge, so we've tried to balance our presentation so we don't talk down to people who've done a lot of film and video work and so we don't confuse those just starting out. Undoubtedly, we'll fail sometimes. So if you find yourself at any point patronized or perplexed, please accept our apologies in advance.

Well, have you decided to take a shot at that dream of making your own feature-length movie? If so, hop on board for a wild ride.

Chapter 1

The Dream ~ *Taking a Leap*

Everything we're about to tell you is wrong.

Really?

Well, no. Not really.

However, a healthy dose of skepticism will help sustain you on the long journey that lies before you. The process of making a digital feature requires breaking lots of rules. Sometimes all the rules. Even the rules we've laid out in this book.

However, if nothing else, the rules in this book can act as a good starting point and touchstone for you to return to as you make your way through the preproduction, production, and postproduction processes.

And how, you impatiently ask, do you start on this amazing, frustrating, and often exhilarating journey?

With a dream.

≈ • ≈

They used to call moviemaking a "silver addiction," referring to the old days when silver salts were used to create film stocks. Although you won't need film stock to make your movie, you will need that addiction. And it better be a strong one. It has to be, because often the dream of making your movie is all that carries you over the long days/weeks/months/years that it takes to go from idea to screen.

Since you're reading this book, odds are that you already have at least the beginnings of a dream. You have:

- A story you're dying to tell,
- A character you'd love to see developed, or
- An idea or issue you're burning to explore.

The next step is to look at that dream with a cold, realistic eye: Is it a reasonable dream? Can you produce it with few resources?

While there's certainly no absolute answer, there is a ballpark that you should at least try to play in if you're going to work at this level. For example, is your story idea a historical costume drama, involving large crowd scenes and multiple, historically-accurate locations? If so, then keep dreaming. Or is your idea a small, contemporary dramatic (romance, comedy, suspense, horror, farce, mystery, melodrama, science-fiction) story that can take place in just a few locations with a handful of characters? Great. Now you're in the ballpark.

Once you've defined your dream, you're ready to take the next important step. Start telling people that you're going to make a movie. It doesn't matter where. At a cocktail party, after church, on a bus, or at the water cooler. It also doesn't really matter who. Your parents. Your significant other. Your co-workers. Your dentist.

It only matters that you say it out loud. "I'm going to make a movie."

Why do you have to say it out loud to someone else? Two reasons. The first is that, since this is a statement most people aren't used to hearing, you're bound to get some interesting responses. Responses along the lines of, "What's it about?" "Where are you getting the money?" and the best of all, "Great. Can I help?"

While all these questions are valid and important, it's the last one that you're really listening for, because once you've got the dream, the next step is to get other people excited about it. You need other people excited about your project because there's virtually no way you can do it all alone.

The second reason you should begin telling people that you're going to make a movie — saying it often and out loud — is because it takes your dream and begins to make it real. Just saying it isn't going to make it happen, of course, but it does put your pride on the line. You're more likely to push forward if your friends start asking, "Whatever happened to that movie thing you were going to do?"

It also makes the idea more concrete, and it raises other questions that you have to start thinking about. When will you start shooting? Where will the equipment come from? How will you fund it? Who's going to be in it? When is it going to be done? How are you going to edit it?

The following chapters will provide you with the means to answer those questions. But nobody's going to ask the questions until you make the statement... out loud.

"I'm going to make a movie." (Congratulations. You've just taken the first step.)



Making a feature-length movie, even for someone who's done it before, is a daunting process. For someone who's never done it, it can be downright overwhelming. Take solace that it isn't one long process, but is instead a series of discrete and attainable steps. Each step leads logically to the next.

You also don't have to navigate these unfamiliar waters without charts. Others have done this before, or at least something similar. The model for making a digital feature is very similar to making any type of feature-length project, whether it's a low-budget Roger Corman-style masterpiece or a mega-mondo-budget Hollywood spectacular.

Reading this book and others on writing, producing, and selling movies can provide valuable background. Taking classes can be good preparation on specific parts of the process. Working on other people's movies (regardless of the budget) can be an education in itself on what to do and what not to do.

One of the best sources of information we've found is people who have made a feature before, whether on film or digitally. They're generally more than happy to talk to you. They'll mention a few pitfalls to watch out for, recommend some cast and crew people, suggest who else to turn to for free advice, and maybe even volunteer to help. At least, that's been our experience.

If there's one thing we learned, it's that dreams are contagious, and you should try to infect as many people as possible with yours. You have a long, challenging journey ahead, and you'll need their help if you're going to start — not to mention finish — a digital movie.

Regardless of the length of your journey, there is a destination — the moment when the finished movie is projected in front of an audience. And at this moment you can see the fruits of your labor — your dream — come to life. The audience laughs. They cry. They gasp. They applaud.

And your dream has become reality.