

# Filmmaking Tips for the Independent Filmmaker



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## Elia Kazan: On What Makes a Director

by PETER D MARSHALL

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**In the autumn of 1973, Elia Kazan, director of such classic films as *Gentleman's Agreement*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront*, was honored by a two week retrospective of his films at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. At the conclusion of the program, Mr. Kazan gave this timeless talk to students.**

“This is the traditional instant for me to thank all of you who have helped mount this retrospective. I think you did a damned good job. Together we may have finally begun to move this university, and, by influence, those like it, towards a serious and devoted study of films as the art of this day. I hope and – judging by the number of you here present – have begun to believe that this retrospective and the appearance of a distinguished French critic on your campus will be the first in a series of similar events.

A reporter from your campus paper, the Argus, asked me why I'd given my papers to this university. I gave a superficial answer. I said Wesleyan is close to where I live, so my things would be available to me after an hour's drive. I added that the authorities here had been generous, eager and accommodating. All true.

But the real reason was that for years I've been thinking it was about time our institutions of learning became involved in film as the subject of formal courses of study both for themselves as pieces of art and for what they say as witnesses to their day. I saw an opportunity here to progress this cause.

Tonight I urge you who direct the program of this university to now place the Movie on the same basis of regard, esteem and concern as, for instance, the novel.

We simply can no longer think of movies in the way we used to years ago, as a pastime between supper and bed. What your faculty has particularly contributed here was to make these two weeks of study with Michel Ciment part of the curriculum. Credit towards graduation was given, a first step in the right direction.

I have been examining the excellent book you have assembled with this showing of my work – I was going to say life's work, but that would not be totally accurate. It should be noted that at the Yale Drama School and elsewhere I had a valuable time as a backstage technician. I was a stage carpenter and I lit shows. Then there was a tedious time as a radio actor, playing hoodlums for bread. I had a particularly educational four years as a stage manager helping and watching directors and learning a great deal. And, in between, I had a lively career as a stage actor in some good plays. All these activities were very valuable to me.

In time, I was fortunate enough to have directed the works of the best dramatists of a couple of the decades which have now become history. I was privileged to serve Williams, Miller, Bill Inge, Archie MacLeish, Sam Behrman and Bob Anderson and put some of their plays on the stage. I thought of my role with these men as that of a craftsman who tried to realize as well as he could the author's intentions in the author's vocabulary and within his range, style and purpose.

I have not thought of my film work that way.

Some of you may have heard of the auteur theory. That concept is partly a critic's plaything. Something for them to spat over and use to fill a column. But it has its point, and that point is simply that the director is the true author of the film. The director TELLS the film, using a vocabulary, the lesser part of which is an arrangement of words.

A screenplay's worth has to be measured less by its language than by its architecture and how that dramatizes the theme. A screenplay, we directors soon enough learn, is not a piece of writing as much as it is a construction. We learn to feel for the skeleton under the skin of words.

Meyerhold, the great Russian stage director, said that words were the decoration on the skirts of action. He was talking about Theatre, but I've always thought his observations applied more aptly to film.

It occurred to me when I was considering what to say here that since you all don't see directors – it's unique for Wesleyan to have a filmmaker standing where I am after a showing of work, while you have novelists, historians, poets and writers of various kinds of studies living among you – that it might be fun if I were to try to list for you and for my own sport what a film director needs to know as what personal characteristics and attributes he might advantageously possess.

How must he educate himself?

Of what skills is his craft made?

Of course, I'm talking about a book-length subject. Stay easy, I'm not going to read a book to you tonight. I will merely try to list the fields of knowledge necessary to him, and later those personal qualities he might happily possess, give them to you as one might give chapter headings, section leads, first sentences of paragraphs, without elaboration.

Here we go.

**Literature.** Of course. All periods, all languages, all forms. Naturally a film director is better equipped if he's well read. Jack Ford, who introduced himself with the words, "I make Westerns," was an extremely well and widely read man.

**The Literature of the Theatre.** For one thing, so the film director will appreciate the difference from film. He should also study the classic theatre literature for construction, for exposition of theme, for the means of characterization, for dramatic poetry, for the elements of unity, especially that unity created by pointing to climax and then for climax as the essential and final embodiment of the theme.

**The Craft of Screen Dramaturgy.** Every director, even in those rare instances when he doesn't work with a writer or two – Fellini works with a squadron – must take responsibility for the screenplay. He has not only to guide rewriting but to eliminate what's unnecessary, cover faults, appreciate nonverbal possibilities, ensure correct structure, have a sense of screen time, how much will elapse, in what places, for what purposes. Robert Frost's Tell Everything a Little Faster applies to all expositional parts. In the climaxes, time is unrealistically extended, "stretched," usually by clasps.

The film director knows that **beneath the surface of his screenplay there is a subtext**, a calendar of intentions and feelings and inner events. What appears to be happening, he soon learns, is rarely what is happening. This subtext is one of the film director's most valuable tools. It is what he directs. You will rarely see a veteran director holding a script as he works – or even looking at it. Beginners, yes.

Most directors' goal today is to write their own scripts. But that is our oldest tradition. Chaplin would hear that Griffith Park had been flooded by a heavy rainfall. Packing his crew, his stand-by actors and his equipment in a few cars, he would rush there, making up the story of the two reel comedy en route, the details on the spot.

**The director of films should know comedy as well as drama.** Jack Ford used to call most parts “comics.” He meant, I suppose, a way of looking at people without false sentiment, through an objectivity that deflated false heroics and undercut self-favoring and finally revealed a saving humor in the most tense moments. The Human Comedy, another Frenchman called it. The fact that Billy Wilder is always amusing doesn’t make his films less serious.

Quite simply, the screen director must know either by training or by instinct how to feed a joke and how to score with it, how to anticipate and protect laughs. He might well study Chaplin and the other great two reel comedy-makers for what are called sight gags, non-verbal laughs, amusement derived from “business,” stunts and moves, and simply from funny faces and odd bodies. This vulgar foundation – the banana peel and the custard pie – are basic to our craft and part of its health. Wyler and Stevens began by making two reel comedies, and I seem to remember Capra did, too.

American film directors would do well to **know our vaudeville traditions.**

Just as Fellini adored the clowns, music hall performers, and the circuses of his country and paid them homage again and again in his work, our filmmaker would do well to study magic. I believe some of the wonderful cuts in Citizen Kane came from the fact that Welles was a practicing magician and so understood the drama of sudden unexpected appearances and the startling change. Think, too, of Bergman, how often he uses magicians and sleight of hand.

**The director should know opera,** its effects and its absurdities, a subject in which Bernardo Bertolucci is schooled. He should **know the American musical stage and its tradition,** but even more important, the great American musical films. He must not look down on these; we love them for very good reasons.

Our man **should know acrobatics,** the art of juggling and tumbling, the techniques of the wry comic song. The techniques of the Commedia

dell'arte are used, it seems to me, in a film called O Lucky Man! Lindsay Anderson's master, Bertolt Brecht, adored the Berlin satirical cabaret of his time and adapted their techniques.

Let's move faster because it's endless.

**Painting and Sculpture;** their history, their revolutions and counter revolutions. The painters of the Italian Renaissance used their mistresses as models for the Madonna, so who can blame a film director for using his girlfriend in a leading role – unless she does a bad job.

Many painters have worked in the Theatre. Bakst, Picasso, Aronson and Matisse come to mind. More will. Here, we are still with Disney.

**Which brings us to Dance.** In my opinion, it's a considerable asset if the director's knowledge here is not only theoretical but practical and personal. Dance is an essential part of a screen director's education. It's a great advantage for him if he can "move." It will help him not only to move actors but move the camera. The film director, ideally, should be as able as a choreographer, quite literally. So I don't mean the tango in Bertolucci's Last or the High School gym dance in American Graffiti as much as I do the baffle scenes in D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation which are pure choreography and very beautiful. Look at Ford's Cavalry charges that way. Or Jim Cagney's dance of death on the long steps in The Roaring Twenties.

**The film director must know music,** classic, so called-too much of an umbrella word, that! Let us say of all periods. And as with sculpture and painting, he must know what social situations and currents the music came out of.

Of course he must be particularly INTO the music of his own day – acid rock; latin rock; blues and jazz; pop; tin pan alley; barbershop; corn; country; Chicago; New Orleans; Nashville.

**The film director should know the history of stage scenery,** its development from background to environment and so to the settings INSIDE WHICH films are played out. Notice I stress INSIDE WHICH as opposed to IN FRONT OF. The construction of scenery for filmmaking was traditionally the work of architects. The film director must study from life, from newspaper clippings and from his own photographs, dramatic environments and particularly how they affect behavior.

I recommend to every young director that he start his own collection of clippings and photographs and, if he's able, his own sketches.

**The film director must know costuming,** its history through all periods, its techniques and what it can be as expression. Again, life is a prime source. We learn to study, as we enter each place, each room, how the people there have chosen to present themselves. "How he comes on," we say.

Costuming in films is so expressive a means that it is inevitably the basic choice of the director. Visconti is brilliant here. So is Bergman in a more modest vein. The best way to study this again is to notice how people dress as an expression of what they wish to gain from any occasion, what their intention is. Study your husband, study your wife, how their attire is an expression of each day's mood and hope, their good days, their days of low confidence, their time of stress and how it shows in clothing.

**Lighting. Of course.** The various natural effects, the cross light of morning, the heavy flat top light of midday – avoid it except for an effect – the magic hour, so called by cameramen, dusk. How do they affect mood? Obvious. We know it in life. How do they affect behavior? Study that. Five o'clock is a low time, let's have a drink! Directors choose the time of day for certain scenes with these expressive values in mind. The master here is Jack Ford who used to plan his shots within a sequence to best use certain natural effects that he could not create but could very advantageously wait for. Colors? Their psychological effect. So obvious I will not expand. Favorite colors. Faded colors. The living grays. In Baby

Doll you saw a master cameraman – Boris Kaufman – making great use of white on white, to help describe the washed out Southern whites.

And, of course, there are the instruments which catch all and should dramatize all; **the tools the director speaks through, the CAMERA and the TAPE RECORDER.** The film director obviously must know the Camera and its lenses, which lens creates which effect, which one lies, which one tells the cruel truth. Which filters bring out the clouds. The director must know the various speeds at which the camera can roll and especially the effects of small variations in speed. He must also know the various camera mountings, the cranes and the dollies and the possible moves he can make, the configurations in space through which he can pass this instrument. He must know the zoom well enough so he won't use it or almost never.

He should be intimately acquainted with the tape recorder. Andy Warhol carries one everywhere he goes. Practice "bugging" yourself and your friends. Notice how often speech overlaps.

**The film director must understand the weather,** how it's made and where, how it moves, its warning signs, its crises, the kind of clouds and what they mean. Remember the clouds in Shane. He must know weather as dramatic expression, be on the alert to capitalize on changes in weather as one of his means. He must study how heat and cold, rain and snow, a soft breeze, a driving wind affect people and whether it's true that there are more expressions of group rage during a long hot summer and why.

**The film director should know the City,** ancient and modern, but particularly his city, the one he loves like DeSica loves Naples, Fellini-Rimini, Bergman-his island, Ray Calcutta, Renoir-the French countryside, Clair-the city of Paris. His city, its features, its operation, its substructure, its scenes behind the scenes, its functionaries, its police, firefighters, garbage collectors, post office workers, commuters and what they ride, its cathedrals and its whore houses.



**The film directors must know the country** – no, that's too general a term. He must know the mountains and the plains, the deserts of our great Southwest, the heavy oily, bottom – soil of the Delta, the hills of New England. He must know the water off Marblehead and Old Orchard Beach, too cold for lingering and the water off the Florida Keys which invites dawdling. Again, these are means of expression that he has and among them he, must make his choices. He must know how a breeze from a fan can animate a dead-looking set by stirring a curtain.

**He must know the sea**, first-hand, chance a ship wreck so he'll appreciate its power. He must know under the surface of the sea; it may occur to him, if he does to play a scene there. He must have crossed our rivers and know the strength of their currents. He must have swum in our lakes and caught fish in our streams. You think I'm exaggerating. Why did old man Flaherty and his Mrs. spend at least a year in an environment before they exposed a foot of negative? While you're young, you aspiring directors, hitch-hike our country! And topography, the various trees, flowers, ground cover, grasses. And the subsurface, shale, sand, gravel, New England ledge, six feet of old river bottom? What kind of man works each and how does it affect him?

**Animals, too.** How they resemble human beings. How to direct a chicken to enter a room on cue. I had that problem once and I'm ashamed to tell you how I did it. What a cat might mean to a love scene. The symbolism of horses. The family life of the lion, how tender! The patience of a cow.

Of course, **the film director should know acting, its history and its techniques.** The more he knows about acting, the more at ease he will be with actors. At one period of his growth, he should force himself on stage or before the camera so he knows this experientially, too. Some directors, and very famous ones, still fear actors instead of embracing them as comrades in a task. But, by contrast, there is the great Jean Renoir, see him in Rules of the Game. And his follower and lover, Truffaut in The Wild Child, now in Day for Night.

**The director must know how to stimulate, even inspire the actor.**

Needless to say, he must also know how to make an actor seem NOT to act. How to put him or her at their ease, bring them to that state of relaxation where their creative faculties are released.

**The film director must understand the instrument known as the VOICE.** He must also know SPEECH. And that they are not the same, as different as resonance and phrasing. He should also know the various regional accents of his country and what they tell about character.

All in all he must know enough in all these areas so his actors trust him completely. This is often achieved by giving the impression that any task he asks of them, he can perform, perhaps even better than they can. This may not be true, but it's not a bad impression to create.

**The film director, of course, must be up on the psychology of behavior, "normal" and abnormal.** He must know that they are linked, that one is often the extension or intensification of the other and that under certain stresses which the director will create within a scene as it's acted out, one kind of behavior can be seen becoming the other. And that is drama.

**The film director must be prepared by knowledge and training to handle neurotics.** Why? Because most actors are. Perhaps all. What makes it doubly interesting is that the film director often is. Stanley Kubrick won't get on a plane – well, maybe that isn't so neurotic. But we are all delicately balanced – isn't that a nice way to put it? Answer this: how many interesting people have you met who are not – a little?

**Of course we work with the psychology of the audience.** We know it differs from that of its individual members. In cutting films great comedy directors like Hawks and Preston Sturges allow for the group reactions they expect from the audience, they play on these. Hitchcock has made this his art.

**The film director must be learned in the erotic arts.** The best way here is through personal experience. But there is a history here, an artistic technique. Pornography is not looked down upon. The film director will admit to a natural interest in how other people do it. Boredom, cruelty, banality are the only sins. Our man, for instance, might study the Chinese erotic prints and those scenes on Greek vases of the Golden Age which museum curators hide.

Of course, the film director must be an authority, even an expert on the various attitudes of lovemaking, the postures and intertwining of the parts of the body, the expressive parts and those generally considered less expressive. He may well have, like Bunuel with feet, special fetishes. He is not concerned to hide these, rather he will probably express his inclinations with relish.

The director, here, may come to believe that suggestion is more erotic than show. Then study how to go about it.

**Then there is war.** Its weapons, its techniques, its machinery, its tactics, its history – oh my – Where is the time to learn all this?

Do not think, as you were brought up to think, that education starts at six and stops at twenty-one, that we learn only from teachers, books and classes. For us that is the least of it. **The life of a film director is a totality and he learns as he lives.** Everything is pertinent, there is nothing irrelevant or trivial. O Lucky Man, to have such a profession! Every experience leaves its residue of knowledge behind. Every book we read applies to us. Everything we see and hear, if we like it, we steal it. Nothing is irrelevant. It all belongs to us.

**So history becomes a living subject, full of dramatic characters, not a bore about treaties and battles.** Religion is fascinating as a kind of poetry expressing fear and loneliness and hope. The film director reads The Golden Bough because sympathetic magic and superstition interest him, these beliefs, of the ancients and the savages parallel those of his

own time's people. He studies ritual because ritual as a source of stage and screen mise-en-scene is an increasingly important source.

**Economics a bore? Not to us.** Consider the demoralization of people in a labor pool, the panic in currency, the reliance of a nation on imports and the leverage this gives the country supplying the needed imports. All these affect or can affect the characters and milieus with which our film is concerned. Consider the facts behind the drama of *On the Waterfront*. Wonder how we could have shown more of them.

**The film director doesn't just eat. He studies food.** He knows the meals of all nations and how they're served, how consumed, what the variations of taste are, the effect of the food, food as a soporific, food as an aphrodisiac, as a means of expression of character. Remember the scene in *Tom Jones*? *La Grande Bouffe*?

And, of course, **the film director tries to keep up with the flow of life around him**, the contemporary issues, who's pressuring whom, who's winning, who's losing, how pressure shows in the politician's body and face and gestures. Inevitably, the director will be a visitor at night court. And he will not duck jury duty. He studies advertising and goes to "product meetings" and spies on those who make the ads that influence people. He watches talk shows and marvels how Jackie Susann peddles it.

He keeps up on the moves, as near as he can read them, of the secret underground societies. And skyjacking, what's the solution? He talks to pilots. It's the perfect drama – that situation – no exit.

**Travel. Yes. As much as he can.** Let's not get into that.

**Sports?** The best directed shows on TV today are the professional football games. Why? Study them. You are shown not only the game from far and middle distance and close-up, you are shown the bench, the way the two coaches sweat it out, the rejected sub, Craig Morton, waiting for Staubach to be hurt and Woodall, does he really like Namath? Johnson,

Snead? Watch the spectators, too. Think how you might direct certain scenes playing with a ball, or swimming or sailing – even though that is nowhere indicated in the script. Or watch a ball game like Hepburn and Tracy in George Steven's film, *Woman of the Year*!

I've undoubtedly left out a great number of things and what I've left out is significant, no doubt, and describes some of my own shortcomings.

Oh! Of course, I've left out the most important thing. The subject the film director must know most about, know best of all, see in the greatest detail and in the most pitiless light with the greatest appreciation of the ambivalences at play is – what?

Right. **Himself.**

There is something of himself, after all, in every character he properly creates. He understands people truly through understanding himself truly.

The silent confessions he makes to himself are the greatest source of wisdom he has. And of tolerance for others. And for love, even that. There is the admission of hatred to awareness and its relief through understanding and a kind of resolution in brotherhood.

**What kind of person must a film director train himself to be?**

What qualities does he need? Here are a few. Those of -A white hunter leading a safari into dangerous and unknown country;

A construction gang foreman, who knows his physical problems and their solutions and is ready, therefore, to insist on these solutions;

A psychoanalyst who keeps a patient functioning despite intolerable tensions and stresses, both professional and personal;

A hypnotist, who works with the unconscious to achieve his ends;

A poet, a poet of the camera, able both to capture the decisive moment of Cartier Bresson or to wait all day like Paul Strand for a single shot which he makes with a bulky camera fixed on a tripod;

An outfielder for his legs. The director stands much of the day, dares not get tired, so he has strong legs. Think back and remember how the old time directors dramatized themselves. By puttees, right.

The cunning of a trader in a Baghdad bazaar.

The firmness of an animal trainer. Obvious. Tigers!

A great host. At a sign from him fine food and heartwarming drink appear.

The kindness of an old-fashioned mother who forgives all.

The authority and sternness of her husband, the father, who forgives nothing, expects obedience without question, brooks no nonsense.

These alternatively.

The illusiveness of a jewel thief – no explanation, take my word for this one.

The blarney of a PR man, especially useful when the director is out in a strange and hostile location as I have many times been.

A very thick skin.

A very sensitive soul.

Simultaneously.

The patience, the persistence, the fortitude of a saint, the appreciation of pain, a taste for self-sacrifice, everything for the cause.

Cheeriness, jokes, playfulness, alternating with sternness, unwavering firmness. Pure doggedness.

An unwavering refusal to take less than he thinks right out of a scene, a performer, a co-worker, a member of his staff, himself.

Direction, finally, is the exertion of your will over other people, disguise it, gentle it, but that is the hard fact.

Above all – COURAGE. Courage, said Winston Churchill, is the greatest virtue; it makes all the others possible.

One final thing. The ability to say “I am wrong,” or “I was wrong.” Not as easy as it sounds. But in many situations, these three words, honestly spoken will save the day. They are the words, very often, that the actors struggling to give the director what he wants, most need to hear from him. Those words, “I was wrong, let’s try it another way,” the ability to say them can be a life-saver.

The director must accept the blame for everything. If the script stinks, he should have worked harder with the writers or himself before shooting. If the actor fails, the director failed him! Or made a mistake in choosing him. If the camera work is uninspired, whose idea was it to engage that cameraman? Or choose those set-ups? Even a costume after all – the director passed on it. The settings. The music, even the goddamn ads, why didn’t he yell louder if he didn’t like them? The director was there, wasn’t he? Yes, he was there! He’s always there!

That’s why he gets all that money, to stand there, on that mound, unprotected, letting everybody shoot at him and deflecting the mortal fire from all the others who work with him.

The other people who work on a film can hide. They have the director to hide behind.

And people deny the auteur theory!

After listening to me so patiently you have a perfect right now to ask, “Oh, come on, aren’t you exaggerating to make some kind of point?”

But only a little exaggerating.

The fact is that a director from the moment a phone call gets him out of bed in the morning (“Rain today. What scene do you want to shoot?”) until he escapes into the dark at the end of shooting to face, alone, the next days problems, is called upon to answer an unrelenting string of questions, to make decision after decision in one after another of the fields I’ve listed. That’s what a director is, the man with the answers.

Watch Truffaut playing Truffaut in *Day for Night*, watch him as he patiently, carefully, sometimes thoughtfully, other times very quickly, answers questions. You will see better than I can tell you how these answers keep his film going. Truffaut has caught our life on the set perfectly.

Do things get easier and simpler as you get older and have accumulated some or all of this savvy? Not at all. The opposite. The more a director knows, the more he’s aware how many different ways there are to do every film, every scene.

And the more he has to face that final awful limitation, not of knowledge but of character. Which is what? The final limitation and the most terrible one is the limitations of his own talent. You find, for instance, that you truly do have the faults of your virtues. And that limitation, you can’t do much about. Even if you have the time.

One last postscript. The director, that miserable son of a bitch, as often as not these days has to get out and promote the dollars and the pounds, scrounge for the liras, francs and marks, hock his family’s home, his wife’s jewels, and his own future so he can make his film. This process of raising the wherewithal inevitably takes ten to a hundred times longer than



making the film itself. But the director does it because he has t~who else will? Who else loves the film that much?

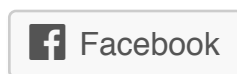
So, my friends, you've seen how much you have to know and what kind of a bastard you have to be. How hard you have to train yourself and in how many different ways. All of which I did. I've never stopped trying to educate myself and to improve myself.

So now pin me to the wall – this is your last chance. Ask me how with all that knowledge and all that wisdom, and all that training and all those capabilities, including the strong legs of a major league outfielder, how did I manage to mess up some of the films I've directed so badly?

Ah, but that's the charm of it!"

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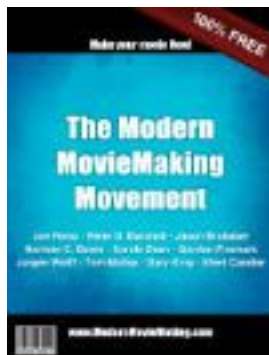
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