

# THE REEL LIVES OF INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS

## Realizing a Dream Five Minutes at a Time

by Kevin Jeong

There is something to be said about the character and optimism of those who strike out on their own as the daredevil explorers of that strange and wondrous land called independent filmmaking. It is a path cut through the wilderness, marked and worn by the pioneers before them, but often indeterminate and overgrown with the barbs and undergrowth of rough country. There's an incredible strength of spirit there and a camaraderie among those who tread that uncertain territory developed through months and years of hard fought lessons learned and the process of getting to know the lay of the land. In their own right, they too, are pioneers, challenging the established order - seeking - and finding their own way.

For Chicago-based, independent filmmaker Larry Ziegelman, it's been his own sort of manifest destiny; a childhood dream come true through dedication and a lifelong passion finally and fully realized. "Like most kids growing up in the 70's and 80's, I was crazy about movies, TV and comic books. My dream was to go to film school, but my parents wanted me to be a doctor."

As a compromise, Ziegelman set out to become an Art Director in advertising. "My thinking was I was still telling stories, they just happened to be 30 seconds at a time and my parents' thinking was that I still get a paycheck," he jokes.

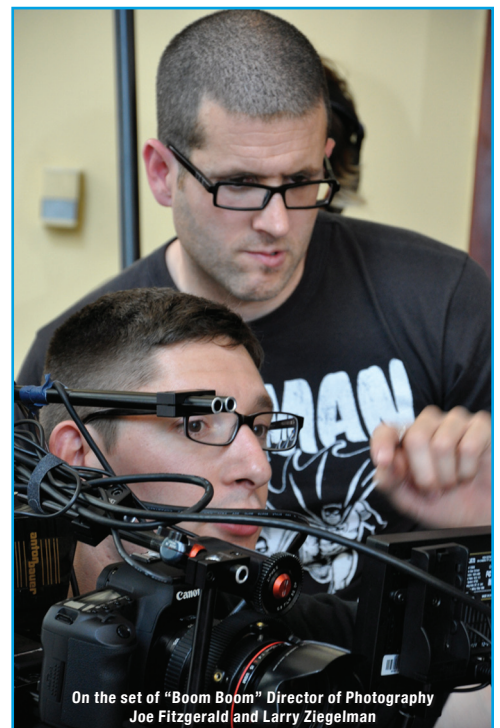
As far as paychecks coming and going, his desire to be a filmmaker had never diminished through those early years. "The ad agency was my film school. I learned a lot about production from all the shoots I was on. I worked with a lot of talented commercial directors and a lot of not so talented ones. At a certain point I thought, 'I could do that. Hell, I could do that better.'"

And so he set out to.

Quick-witted with a quip or joke always at the ready on the tip of his tongue, Ziegelman poured himself and his sense of humor into the work of his heart and his love for the work. That sense of humor and



On the set of "Boom Boom" (L-R) Terry Ziegelman, Larry Ziegelman, and Jastine Dumlaio



On the set of "Boom Boom" Director of Photography Joe Fitzgerald and Larry Ziegelman

inspiration were veins of gold that run deep within him, throughout his being, painting the stories he creates with an extraordinary palette of colorful dialogue and situations.

"I grew up in what I thought was a normal, middle-America, Jewish family. Then, I watched 'Seinfeld' and realized the Costanza's were actually my parents. Everything I thought was normal, wasn't. I grew up in a sitcom."

Also drawing inspiration from the "masters of the 'painfully awkward moment': Larry David and Ricky Gervais," Ziegelman goes far beyond uncomfortable silence, the one-line non sequitur or double entendre and wrangles the awkwardness, building upon it and shaping it - mastering the essence of each beat in order to draw the marrow from its very bones. The final outcome is a carefully timed, tasteful, ever natural and organic, altogether hilarious piece of himself.

"When I have a good idea I usually let my subconscious work on it for a while. By the time I actually start writing it, I'll have the major-



"Boom Boom" (L-R) Karthik Srinivasan and Behzad Dabu



Larry Ziegelman on the set of "Boom Boom"



"You Shouldn't Have" Aaron Walters and Lacy Katherine Campbell



"Check Please" (L-R) Doug Manley, Danielle Hoetmer, Meg Thalken, and Doug James



"You Shouldn't Have" Nancy Baird and Malcolm Rothman

ity of the storyline thought out," Zeigelman says of his creative process. "From there it's just 'how can this be funnier, more interesting, more surprising?'"

Still, as far as filmmaking goes, clever dialogue and interesting situations will only accomplish so much when assembling ideas onto celluloid. For Zeigelman, as hilarious as a premise may be, it all comes down to a directing philosophy focused on believability.

"There are so many times when I watch films that have scenes, characters or dialogue that don't ring true – it sets off the BS meter." He adds, "I work a lot with my actors. Because I write the material, I hear the voices and the beats in my head. I like the actors to get as close as possible to what I'm thinking."

"I also encourage the actors to bring their improvisations to the script." He jokingly adds, "When we rehearse, if new and funnier jokes emerge, I write them into the script. That way I can take all the credit and the glory!"

Perhaps most interesting of all is Zeigelman's approach to the art of comedy. "I treat comedy like I'm shooting a drama. All my films have some pretty serious themes, but with the right wit, you can find comedy in all situations."

"At the end of it all, I want people to be entertained," Zeigelman adds.

It seems, though, that even in comedy, the work behind pushing a project through to completion is much more than just fun and games. Even now, still early in his career, Zeigelman holds fast to four early lessons learned starting out as an independent filmmaker.

Rule one: "Keep it simple, stupid. Tell a great story in one location. Use one or two actors. Start off simple and concentrate on the story."

Rule two: "Surround yourself with talented people. Whether it's actors or cameramen or directors of photography, the better they are, the better you are."

Rule three: "Have patience. Don't give up. It's an independent film-

maker's job to convince people to work on a shoot for little to no money. If you believe in your visions, others will believe in it, too."

Rule four: "Networking. Keep meeting people. The more people you know, the better. You never know how someone might be helpful to you, or how you might be helpful to them."

Ultimately, however, it's not about lessons learned, it's about telling stories; entertaining people and hearing their reactions. For Zeigelman, the screening is the culmination of everything – past challenges overcome, the endless hours and dedication, the ambition and drive – goal and reward all wrapped up in the cushioned seats of a darkened room.

Rather philosophically, he reflects, "Is a great short still a great short if nobody sees it? It's just not enough to know I made a good film." He adds, "There's nothing like hearing people laugh at your film. That's the greatest feeling!"

And with success defined as something less tangible and more based in the philosophical, for Zeigelman, pressing onward through the difficulties and overcoming the challenges of what's to come next is seemingly more a matter of "when" than "how".

"Why does an artist paint? Why does a poet write? Why does my Mom nag? Like them, I'm compelled to do it." He adds, "When I'm hit with an idea, my mind latches onto it and won't stop until I write it down."

"And once it's written, I have to bring it to life."

