Table of Contents

Introduction

YouTuber

 Andrew Hales - Losing All Hope was Freedom

Producers

 Jason Faller - The Business of Film

 Ken Kragen - Joys of Producing Film and TV

 Scott Swafford - Producing for TV

Directors

 Kieth Merrill - Directing as a Career

 Rob Diamond - Directing small crews

 Tom Durham - 95ers: Echoes

Crew members

 Dean Andre - Sound of Life

 Kathy Jarvis - Rolling with the Punches

Actors

 Danny Trejo - 250+ Films

 Joseph Blanca - Acting from Stage to Screen

 Charan Probaker - Building your Network

 Frank Gerrish - The Actors Life

 Sean Astin - Growing Up Hollywood

Conclusion

# Intro

In the summer of 2012 a small crowd of adults and children with folding chairs filled my back yard. The children were running to our folding table, scooping up popcorn. Older kids were helping younger children create snow cones.

As the sun began to set I announced the two short films and one feature film we would be playing this evening. I gave a brief history about each film and about their directors. Telling the history was easy for me because I had talked to the directors frequently about their films as well as other films they have worked on.

I turned on the films and silently went to the back of the yard, making sure the volume was loud enough for the audience.

While the film was playing a director approached me. His film would be the feature that would be playing shortly. He wore a broad grin on his face and handed me a pin he gives to fans of his film.

“This is great!” he said.

I told him I wished there were more people here to see the films. He waived off my concern.

“No. This is a great little crowd that would never have had the opportunity to see my film”, he said. “This is what indie filmmaking is all about for me.”

We went on to discuss how filmmaking has evolved over the years, starting with the old penny films and leading up to the new Star Trek movie that just came out.

Then he asked me a question.

“Warren, why do you do it?”

It took me a while to form my thoughts around the answer. I have asked myself this same question for the past two years. I had to make a list of everything so I could answer him thoughtfully. Over the past two years, I had visited film sets. I had interviewed filmmakers and actors. I helped create TV shows, films, commercials, music videos and web series.

I created a TV show to promote the independent filmmaker. My TV show led to the creation of an award show. The success of the award show and TV show led me to a larger audience where I could tour the films across the country.

“Tom,” I said, “I do this because good stories need to be shared with as many people as possible. Movies, television, and online videos have the power to captivate the imagination and make a change for the better.”

“Filmmaker Diary” is a compilation of conversations I have had with actors, directors, producers and several others that have found success in filmmaking.

All of the conversations give a personal perspective of filmmaking, and because of the candid nature of the interviews, I have chosen to keep them as unedited and unaltered as possible.

I hope this book will act as a guide and an inspiration for young filmmakers who are looking for the next step to take in their career.

# YouTuber - Andrew Hales

## Losing All Hope Was Freedom

Filmmaking has taken on several forms over the years, whether you’re making a television show, a film, a music video, a web-series, or even just comedy sketches on YouTube. The filmmaker of today’s generations have three to five new boundaries, and that’s what we’re going to talk about today. I’ve Andrew Hales on the phone right now, and Andrew runs a website on YouTube—it’s called LAHWF. Right now they have over 697,000 subscribers. He has over 85 million views on his channel as well. What he does is set-up awkward social situations. I’ve got Andrew telling us what he’s doing that makes his channel unique and how he’s found a niche on YouTube.

**Andrew, how did you come up with the idea for all these really bizarre situations on YouTube?**

I try to think of what I want to see someone else do, and then I go do it. It just comes to me randomly during the day. I think of what would be kind of funny. A lot of people comment ideas, so that helps, too.

**With all the subscribers you have here, do you take most of your ideas from what they suggest?**

They’ll have ideas and I’ll try them out. Basically, just whatever comes out funny. We’ll try out a bunch of different ideas and sometimes it’s not that funny, so we’ll try another. We’ll tweak it a little bit. We keep filming until something is funny enough.

**One of the things that I think is really cool is you’re very consistent. You have a new video come out at least once a week. Is that by design?**

Oh, definitely! From the start, I wanted to be consistent and I knew that would be a good strategy because everyone has it in their head that we have a new video every Monday. Even if the video isn’t even that good, our audience will still watch it because they have it in their head that it’s every Monday. So I think that it’s a good strategy to have. I think it keeps a lot of YouTube videos going viral. It’s hard to tell which videos will go viral or not, so it’s a numbers game.

Even if you don’t think the video is that good, you should still consistently post the videos once a week.

**Most of your videos have several hundred thousand views to millions. You’re almost at the 100 millionth view mark. You have 85 million views on your YouTube channel. How in the world are you generating that much attention? Are you actively out there campaigning for people to watch your videos?**

You just keep making videos and you’ll go through a couple months where the videos aren’t that funny, and then you’ll have a game-changer. It’s 5 million views in a week and then that’ll bring all this new traffic to your channel so all your videos get these views. Now you have 8-month old videos that are stacking up views. New viewers will watch them all after they see one that goes viral.

**The first time we met was at a film festival where you were doing one of these competitions, and it was similar what: 24-hour type film-competitions?**

Right, right.

**Just a few months after that you launched your YouTube channel. What was your inspiration to do that instead of going into traditional filmmaking?**

Well, it’s always been about the money. I’m an entrepreneur first, entertainer second. I knew I could make money on YouTube and, I had plenty of ideas. I had a nice camera and I wanted to start planting seeds, so that’s why I make the videos.

**What does LAHWF stand for and what are your long-term goals??**

It’s an acronym for “Losing All Hope Was Freedom”. It’s a quote from the movie Fight Club. I made the account four years ago when I wasn’t making videos at all. I was just really into the movie Fight Club.

**What are your goals with all this?**

Just to keep growing. It’s not too difficult to maintain the channel. It’s become a cash cow. I have been able make a living from it. I would like to keep experimenting. I’m just going to keep making videos as fresh as possible.

**What advice would you give anybody who is either an aspiring filmmaker, a YouTuber?**

Figure out what you’re good at. I’m called “the master of the art of being awkward,” and so people coined me as the “king of awkwardness,” so I capitalize on that. Also, if you’re not having fun you’re doing it wrong. I have as much fun as possible when doing it, and that breeds a good, successful, wholesome paradigm.

**UPDATE**: As of the fall of 2014 LAHWF has over 1.6 million subscribers and has had over 195 million views. His most popular video has received over 9.4 million views by tipping servers $200.

# Producer - Jason Faller

## The Business of Film

I was on my way to talk to the producers of the new film “Osombie”, a film about Osama Bin Laden returning from the dead as a zombie.

My GPS had me driving in circles. I kept passing this run-down old building with a “For Sale” sign out front.

This can’t be the right place, I thought.

I looked up the address again. Sure enough this was the right place.

When I opened the front door of the old building it looked like the police station from the movie Fargo, except there was a giant crossbow pointed right at me with a giant arrow locked into place.

Feeling this was a strong message for me to not go any further, I called out to Jason and Kynan whom I had an appointment with. I relaxed when they called me back to their office and we chatted about their film.

Over the next few months I kept returning to the old building with the “For Sale” sign still staked in the lawn. I was delighted to find that more films were being made in that unique location.

I got to know Jason Faller pretty well and asked him if he would be willing to sit with me and discuss what his company Arrowstorm Entertainment was doing that allows them to be full time filmmakers.

**Jason, give me a little background. Where did you go to school and how did you get into film?**

I went to five universities but I ended up at BYU, and Birmingham University in their film program.

I worked on a number of short films there. I was into writing emphasis and also did a lot of directing; did two short films on 35 whole, 3 on 35mm back in the day and a bunch of others.

**What is Quietus all about?**

Quietus is about a security officer; something that I wrote and directed.

The concept was that there were a lot of crazy things that I wanted to do as a filmmaker. I took all those crazy things and found a way to put them into a story. The things came first and the story came after.

I wanted to throw a running camera off a 200-foot cliff and get footage on the way down and have it survive.

I wanted to shoot in some really cool sewers that I had found.

I wanted to do a lot of crazy things with lighting and shutter and stuff like that.

I wanted to do a bullet time shot, like the Matrix sort of thing.

I wanted to do a 40 camera bullet time shot but I wanted to do it underwater, which had never been done before.

There were 21 shooting days or something like that which was what I normally shoot a feature on.

That was my first film. It was something that I wanted to go all out and try all these different things, all these ideas I had and threw them all together in a film.

That was Quietus.

**Shooting bullet time underwater and throwing the camera over the cliff. That has to be pretty daunting for your first time filming.**

Yeah. I guess it was kind of horrible for everyone involved.

To be honest, at that point in my life I believed that producing was not filmmaking at all, It was a business side.

I couldn’t care less about producing and producers.

I wouldn’t take any classes on producing or production management or anything like that because that was for people who wore ties and suits. I had no interest whatsoever in producing.

Everybody who was on that film, I became kind known for, “Don’t get on one of Faller’s films, they're insane.”

“You're going to go through the worst thing ever”.

I learned a lot on that film like what really goes into the final product, what's important, what's not, what's worth doing and what you spend your time better on.

I think I started to learn a lot about producing just through that process.

It was when someone came and had a socially driven piece and they had money and I needed money.

They said, “Hey do you want to produce this film for me?” That’s when I really started to produce.

**Was this a feature or a short?**

This was a short.

It was something to be shown in schools. It was about religious tolerance and some kid in an American school who gets picked on.

I put this film together and learned what producing was. It’s about working with writers. It’s about looking at a lot of ideas and scripts and figuring out how to get the best possible thing; putting a crew together; finding the right director; and I found that I loved it.

I enjoyed that process and there was plenty of creativity going into that. I worked really close with the writers.

I worked really close with the director.

Anyway, that’s when I found producing and producing found me. It changed where I was headed and I became a writer, producer, rather than a writer, director.

**What was the name of that piece that you really learned a lot about?**

In the end I think it was called “Consent Forms”.

It was distributed to a bunch of schools. Every now and again I bump into teachers or people who work in the public school system that have seen it.

I don’t know if it really got credited, but it’s out there.

**About 2 years after you put out Quietus you did The Ivy Exchange. Can you tell me about that film?**

Yeah, The Ivy Exchange was another written/directed/ produced kind of thing. I think Kynan ended up producing that with me.

I met him on Quietus. When we became producing partners was really with Ivy Exchange.

Ivy Exchange is a film about an insurance adjuster who experiences a miracle. It’s very typical student fair. It’s kind of smart and hard to understand.

This was a film where after I had made and done so much work on it, I began thinking about why I didn’t like it; why I wasn’t really happy with the film.

The biggest reason was because I don’t watch films like that. I thought about how I wished I had made an action film instead so that my brothers would think I was cooler instead of an artist, which they didn’t have a lot of respect for.

It’s kind of a negative way of putting it but at the same time I realized that I love a lot of things that a lot of other people love.

I love The Godfather.

I love Jaws.

I love the old Star Wars movies.

I love Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

When I realized that those were the films that I actually liked I thought maybe I should start making films like that.

That was when we first started thinking down that path and saying, “You know what? Let’s not try to win Sundance. Let’s try and make a movie that people really like to watch.”

**I think that might lead us into your very first feature which we have as Pride and Prejudice. Can you tell me about how you got introduced to this remake version of the film?**

Me, my film friends, we were all going to graduate and I was sort of the producer of the group.

It was, “So, what are we going to do? How are we going to get something off the ground? We need to get funding.”

The Mormon film industry had sort of jumped to life recently before that. I looked at a number of story models and the thing that jumped out at me about Pride and Prejudice was that there was a lot of Mormons who loved it and I thought a little about why.

It’s sort of a social structure in the Pride and Prejudice story. By the way, I don’t like Jane Austen. That wasn’t any of it.

**You're not a huge Jane Austen fan?**

No, not even a little bit.

The thing that I was marveling over was how much people loved the story.

I realized that a Mormon or LDS or very conservative mid-western culture actually knows a lot about this kind of story. A story about a mother who’s trying to marry off her daughters and one daughter maybe getting too old to get married off and a lot of social proprietary issues; good boys and bad boys and these kinds of things.

It made me think about why Mormons might love Pride and Prejudice. I also considered the name power, the title power of Pride and Prejudice.

When we did this, it was before the new Pride and Prejudice version. It hadn’t been in theaters since the 1940s, so we decided that there were a lot of good reasons to try and get this going.

We put a pitch together and raised all of the capital locally.

I'm not from here and Kynan’s not from here. I'm from eastern Canada. He’s from South Africa. We had no contact. It was kind of just going out and finding people one by one.

One of the main investors was a friend of ours who ran a restaurant and we loved the food there. We found him and found out he was interested in film. He became one of our investors. Then we had in all about 20 or 25 investors compiling together about whatever $400,000 could get.

**When you talk about these investors, are these passive investors? Do they give you the money and let you make the movie? Or are these more active investors who say, “I’ll give you money, but I want my input?”**

No, very passive.

Passive investors with the exception that one main fellow who really knew nothing about film.

**How did you get funding for your first feature film?**

I think crucial to getting funding and crucial to getting money is having a very strong pitch.

What I mean by a very strong pitch is you’ve got to make a case that you're different from all the others and I think that’s hard to do.

We had this budding Mormon film industry that had only hits when we did this. We said, “Look, nobody’s missed yet and they even hit the Singles Ward. We've got Deseret Book and these sorts of outlets which are supported by women shoppers. This is a women’s venue, and we should make a movie for women. They’ll buy it like crazy and Deseret Book will love us.”

That was a big part of the pitch and the number of units we’d have to sell wasn’t much.

Anyway, the point I'm making is, I think we had a very strong pitch. When we met with people, they had difficulty coming up with reasons why we wouldn’t make our money back.

The film was a success and of course made money and the investors all profited and it went well in the end. I think it was largely due to the nature of the pitch that we were able to get funding.

Like I said, we knew no one and no one knew us.

**Tell me about “Moving McAllister”.**

Moving McAllister was the only film that I've ever been a “producer for hire.”

I had known Ben Gurley for a long time. We went to film school together. He had this concept and was looking to make a film.

We had a verbal understanding with John Heater that he would be involved with the film. That seemed like a great thing. John Heater recently became a star because of Napoleon Dynamite. So, that was an exciting possibility.

We raised over a million dollars for Moving McAllister.

We searched for the right actress and found Mila Kunis from That 70s Show, and got her signed.

In the end, this is a film that cost over a million dollars to make and brought in just over a million dollars.

That’s what it had in signed sales. It had legal issues later that got complicated for getting investors their money back. But the movie was basically a break-even scenario.

**Well that’s lucky. Most indie films don’t do that well.**

Yeah, we can see it’s lucky.

I would say we were crazy to spend a million bucks.

We should’ve done it for 300 and everybody would be very happy, or even 400.

We had a big crew on it. We went “Hollywood” on it.

We had all kinds of positions filled. We did everything right by the book. We bought a number of books and read them and decided to do this the right way.

But in the end, I don’t believe in that at all anymore. I wish very much that I had done it differently. It would have been a very profitable film.

**In 2008, you made a turn in your career moving out of feature films into video games.**

This was when you were first introduced to a game called Saga. Can you talk about Saga?

Saga was a video game concept that Kynan and I worked on together. When we came across it we thought it was kind of a phenomenal pitch.

We were bringing MMO to the real-time strategy gaming market. Real-time strategy was the biggest segment for PC games and back in the day that was a big deal. It hadn’t done anything multi-player massive-type games. So, we decided to do that.

We raised the capital for that company and over the next five years, right up until recently, we worked and worked and worked on that video game.

It was tough. It’s a tough business, video games.

Once again, if I knew then what I know now, would have done it differently. We would have spent money differently and probably would have had much more success.

It’s a big game. A lot of people played it. A lot of people have enjoyed it, but that’s one where I feel like I owe the investors because they were not able to break even.

Since then, I've kind of gotten out of gaming. I’m not interested in gaming anymore. I’m just loving our success in film and backing away from gaming all together.

**Can you tell me about how you came up with Dragon Hunter?**

We were in the thick of making video games at the time, working on Saga. We were kind of fantasy fans all along through this. We were interested in doing a fantasy film but kind of knew that we couldn’t afford to do it.

It would take a big budget to do it decently at all.

Kynan, not myself but Kynan, was fond of every now and again going to pick up a low budget fantasy film and watching it to see what were the possibilities.

I got kind of excited about a terrible, terrible film which was a fantasy film.

I said, “I wonder how much this could possibly be making?”

We bought it. It’s there in Wal-Mart. We went out and we researched it and it is just an awful film. We said we could do that for just next to nothing and I decided to experiment.

At the time, I was teaching a producing class at BYU. I said to my producing class, “If anybody wants to make a movie with the following specifications, I’ll give you $100,000 to do it.”

The specifications were: 1. It’s got to have a dragon. 2. It’s got to have an elf girl with a bow and arrow. 3. It’s gotta have orcs and a hero.

Nobody really wanted to be involved with it.

Even Kynan kind of moved away from it and said, nah, you enjoy that. I don’t think that’s going to work out really well.

In any case, I teamed up with McClain Nelson on it who co-produced it, produced it with me, and acted in it.

We put that together. I didn’t do any diligence on the script. I stuck to my word which was to accept these things and it’ll be alright.

I guided it and checked the boxes that I needed checked.

Big mistakes weren’t being made. A student who was in my class at the time took the challenge and made this movie for $100,000 that went on to make 4 or $500,000.

It made a bunch of money for those investors and it did pretty well.

The distributor who had distributed it was very excited because they didn’t expect it to do that well.

I think that’s when I realized the kind of space that’s out there for science fiction and fantasy that the fans are eager and have money and you can do a lot with that space.

**It’s definitely a genre that seems underfed that you can really supply tons of fantasy and sci-fi type films to this audience, and there's never enough.**

Yeah, I think that’s kind of true.

We’re testing that because we keep making them.

Sometimes we get feedback that hey, there's too many of these on the market.

We’re not the only ones making them. Sometimes we get that but the truth is we have been able to keep our budgets low and make all our movies profitable.

I don’t know. All the films that we've made, all ten have been profitable films.

All of the projects I've been involved with now have a very high success rate.

Some of them are zombie films. We haven’t just done fantasy, but fantasy films have always done well for us and continue to do so.

**Tell me about ORCS.**

Orcs was an idea that we had way back in film school. It was kind of a joke.

The concept was what if Bruce Willis was tired of being a New York cop and he just wanted to settle down and move to a farm and live there. What if the farm and the property around him was plagued by orcs? We knew that didn’t make a lick of sense, but we thought it was really funny.

Years and years later we were kidding around about that concept again and we literally said, “We have nothing to do for the next 2 or 3 months.” We were making video games at the time.

“We got nothing to do for the next couple of months, it’s gonna be slow.” Let’s make a movie.”

We decided to make this Orcs movie on the quick. That’s what we did.

The script was done in a week and a half,

The preproduction was about 3 weeks and then straight into production, and we sent the movie out very, very quickly.

**How many production days did you have on Orcs?**

I think 13.

**Is keeping those production days really short essential to your process?**

Yes. Orcs was a very crucial production for us because it was the first time we had ever worked with a small, small crew.

It changed our lives in that sense. We said, “Let’s never go back to a big crew; Pride and Prejudice big crew; Moving McAllister big crew; Dragon Hunter big crew”.

Even though it was only $100,000, we had a ton of student help on it.

The Orcs was the first time we said we just don’t have any money .

What we realized was there was very little difference in what we would have done if we’d had double the crew.

Double the crew is basically double the cost. All of your money pretty much goes to people these days.

I was talking with someone you’ve worked with before, John Lyde and all the shoots that he does have a very small crew; typically about 5-6 people on set.

You have the director stepping in as DP. You often have actors that work on scripts, and you have an AC that also is a gaffer.

**Yeah. John has a really interesting team of actor crew-member production folks.**

He also can keep his crew very small.

The truth is, even on a John Lyde film, you're still looking at for a feature film, there's got to be 12 to 15.

You’ve got to have makeup people.

You need the key crew that are there every single day. It’s true. There's only 5 or 6.

But on any given day, you're usually maybe 12 crew to 15 crew. You can absolutely do it and that’s what we try to do now.

We’re very much into that model of keeping the crew small.

**In 2011 you produced “Dawn of the Dragonslayer.”**

Dawn of the Dragonslayer is, from my standpoint, my truly executive produced film.

I did not go to Ireland.

**Whoa, you didn’t even get to go?**

Everybody else went to Ireland. I stayed. To be fair, when that was being shot, I was in school full-time.

That’s when I went back to do my MBA.

I felt like I had been doing business for 11 years, running a business and never really understood any of the business principals.

When I talk to our investors, and I'm always working with investors and other people, they're business savvy people. They used terms I didn’t understand.

They’d talk about concepts that I didn’t understand. I thought, why not? I should get my business degree because that’s what I am now.

I'm a filmmaker. I still write a lot but I'm a business owner and I need to understand business principals.

There are a lot of people that make movies that don’t know much about business. Sure, you can make films without knowing how to run a business, but it’s not likely you can make any money from making films this way.

Yeah. I don’t know if everybody should go out and get their MBA’s in film, but I think everyone should understand where the producer is coming from.

They should understand the business side of film. I feel pretty strongly about that. If you don’t, then you don’t know how to work with that system and be successful in that system.

You don’t know what's making everybody tick.

Anyway, so I went back to get my MBA and that was an excellent benefit. The MBA program at BYU and most MBA programs is a job hunt. Everybody else it out there looking for jobs. For me the MBA was largely, everything I'm learning, everything I hear, I'm going to apply directly to my business that I'm currently owning.

Every concept, whether it was leveraging capital or turnaround or any concept that I was doing classes on or studying, I was appointed director of what we were doing.

I changed our complete business model; changed everything that we were doing; looked at it in a very different way.

Largely, I believe the success we’re having now is mostly due to those changes in the business model.

**Can you talk about that for a minute? What does the term “business model” mean for filmmakers?**

A business model is the way that you're doing business.

For instance, for several years I did one film at a time with a separate company. Now let’s say you make a film and it’s a success.

Let’s say that you spent $400,000 and the film made $600,000. At the end of the day there's sort of $200,000 extra dollars.

The first $400,000 goes back to paying the investors and they need a little extra: ten percent. Then there's $180,000 to split up and you get half of that and the investors get half.

When I say you get half of that, I mean you're splitting that between three and four people; the producer, the director, maybe some composers.

At the end of the day, you pay yourself a little bit to make the movie and you get a paycheck a year and a half down the road. That’s a success.

Then, you're back to square one.

You're going out. You're trying to raise capital. You're trying to build a product. You're making pitches and you're spending a lot of time in-between. You make one film per year, or two, if you're working hard.

**Sounds like a good way to be broke.**

Yeah, that’s exactly what it is.

Then the new business model, something that I took out of this business school and worked through with Kynan, would be to do a lot so we got more into executive producing.

What we said was if we could raise enough money to make two or three films, the money that comes back from those films, rather than closing the company and sending envelopes to investors, we go on and make more films with that money.

That’s how we can actually grow a business and that’s how we can actually make five films a year or ten films a year. We become executive producers and we work with multiple creative teams.

That’s leveraging your capital.

That’s a growth model.

That’s sustainable business and it’s just very, very different from what most filmmakers do.

**After you were done with Dawn of the Dragonslayer, you started working on Osombie. Where did you shoot that?**

Tooele. Utah area. Anywhere that looked believably like Afghanistan I guess you could say.

It took off very quickly once we put the word out with the trailer. I think the biggest reason for that is it’s such a simple, short message.

The concept of the film is Osama Bin Laden comes back as a zombie and raises an army of zombie terrorists.

That idea just gets an instant quick laugh from people. I think that’s part of the essence of what's viral.

If it can be remembered and stated in 5 to 10 seconds, then people want to tell somebody else about it.

There were two separate sources that we put it out to which didn’t know each other existed. Both of those sources went viral.

I believe that no matter where we put this out, it didn’t matter. We even had a spot on The O’Reilly Factor about it.

I believe it was going there no matter what. It didn’t matter how we really sustained this idea along with the trailer (which John Lyde cut). It was a really, really cool trailer. It was just was enough for people to say, “Oh I have to show this to someone else.”

I learned about how that works there. That’s one way to have success.

I believe the film benefited in making sales worldwide because of the media success. And, just the fact that the same effect happens when you're talking to a buyer or you're talking to distributors, they go, “Oh that’s cool”.

Sometimes that’s enough to sign a deal.

**Then that led you into four films that came out or are coming out in the exact same year: The Crown and the Dragon, Orc Wars, Zombie Hunter, and Dragon Lore: Curse of the Shadow. Four films! How daunting was it to take on so many projects at the same time?**

We had multiple teams. We were shooting films very quickly, plus we raised not all that much capital to do it.

The thing is, we learned a lot and this is part of my business schooling too. Turnaround is so important.

People don’t think it’s important, but making a movie, having that movie completely finished and delivered in 6 months and having money come back from it 8 months later; it’s crucial to this model because we get to spend it again and make another film.

The Osombie money was back through the door. We were spending it on the next film.

We executive produce now. I know it sounds daunting to produce that many films, but in a sense, we’re executive producing films.

We’re not micromanaging every little thing on the ground. We find filmmakers who are able to produce their own material. We watch carefully and make corrections and adjustments where we see necessary. We make sure all the marketing is right, that all the boxes are going to be checked and that we will have a saleable product for a distributor.

**What is the difference between being a producer, and what you guys do now being the executive producers?**

A lot of producer’s job is going out creating capital, working with the investors, working on the business side of things.

Well, we don’t have to do any of that setup anymore because it’s a revolving fund. Once that work is done, it’s kind of look at projects, read scripts, come up with concepts, get things written which you're betting through a distributor, find the right team to make it with the right director, right production designer, the right team and then hand over the money and have strong agreements in place for when that movie’s going to be delivered back to you.

When you find good teams and you're working closely with the distributors, it’s not hard to make money with a film if you keep your budget low.

**Should you contact a distributor about your film after it’s made or can you contact them before to see if they will back the film?**

The trick is once you’ve built a reputation and you’ve done a number of films and you say, “Hey it’s going to be like these”, then you just need a script and the key art.

You can sell some DVD rights and get some deals signed. Once you have those deals signed and you at least know you’re close to breaking even already on these deals.

Then, you feel comfortable making the film with those deals in place. It’s a little tricky to get there if somebody is just starting making films and they don’t have a body of work to point to and say, “Trust us, it’ll be of the following level of quality”.

You have to get your first one in order to do that, but yeah, in the long run, you can do that.

**Is there anything that you can announce that you guys are working on? Any concepts, or is it too early?**

We are working on kind of a mega project this fall. It’s a five film series.

It’s very exciting and we have a great expectation of doing well and it’s because of the success of all our previous films in the company that have enough capital to do all those at once.

We’re going to do a ten episode series which can be sold as five films or ten TV episodes.

**UPDATE**: As of fall 2014 Jason has produced five more films and continues to be a panelist on several Salt Lake Comic Con panels. His new films include Survivor, The Christmas Dragon, and a trilogy called MYTHICA.

# Producer - Ken Kragen

## Joys of Producing Film and TV

Driving through the canyon is very peaceful for me. The colors of the trees on the riverside seem magical as they zoom past.

I am traveling to the set of 12 Dogs of Christmas 2 which is being shot at an old fashioned railroad station in a small town.

The first person to meet me on the set was Ken Kragen, the producer of the film.

Although he has been producing television and film for several years, he still has the excitement of a first time filmmaker as he showed me the stills of the film that he had shot.

**Ken can you tell me how “12 Dogs of Christmas” got started?**

It started with my 7 year old sitting bored at a Christmas luncheon, turning the placemats over, drawing dogs, and then writing a parody of the 12 Days of Christmas. She wrote the 12 Dogs of Christmas. It was hysterical.

We took it home and typed it up. Then we sent it off to a publisher. Lo and behold, we sold 600,000 copies. Actually, I had a book with the same publisher and they canceled my book and gave my daughter an advance. We made a smart decision. She would have out-sold me 10 to 1.

The book was so successful.

We then put out a line of stuffed dogs and we sold 400,000 of those at Wal-Mart in two years.

Later, I was at a party and I took the book to a party in Malibu that was near a very big-time producer’s house, and the guy from Sony pictures was there.

He said, “You’ve got to make this a new film. We’ll make an animated DVD. It will be a direct to DVD kind of movie. You’ve got to do that.”

“ Jeez.” I said “It’s a little 24-page book with pictures.”

“No, no you’ve got to do it,” he said.

So, we had a treatment written and we went into Sony and they loved it. They said it’s the best in everything except that the treatment was live action, a full-length feature film. It was not animated dogs. We used real dogs, and we also based the story in the 1930s.

Well, they got ready to produce it and they decided to close that division and fired everybody. I'm out in the street with a project. I’ve got no other studio that will buy it.

Nobody wants it at that point.

I took a second mortgage out on my house, much to my wife’s regret. I went out and I sent a copy of the treatment to Keith Merrill. He had sent me a copy of two of his. He had 25 children reading my daughters book and I sent him back the treatment.

Two weeks later in January of 2005, he sent me a full script.

I said to Keith, “While we’ve got snow, let’s go film.”

So, we went off to Bellman to film the picture. We came back. Again, we couldn’t get a studio to buy it.

We couldn’t get a network to buy it. We went out on our own and now we've sold 1.2 million DVDs.

We’re in our 7th year. My daughter is 22 years old now. She’s graduating from college.

This last year, our 7th year, we sold 137,000 DVDs.

**Was the film self-distributed?**

Yes. We sold to Wal-Mart. We were pretty direct to Wal-Mart through a company called Anderson Merchandising. We made a deal because I needed the money to finish the picture.

We made the deal that went through a company called Screen Media to Universal Television and they distributed it in non-Wal-Mart areas.

Here we were in our 7th year and we were top at Netflix.

We sold out at Red Box.

We did $60,000 or $70,000 at Wal-Mart in our 7th year.

Now, all the studios want it.

So, now I go around and Universal wants it, Warner wants it, Disney wants it. I go back to Sony and I say, ‘Look, you guys had one shot at this and you blew it. You want to do it again?”

They said, “Sure.”

We made a deal with them to distribute the DVDs. They put up half of the money for the movie. Once again I had to put my house on the line.

So here we were in Utah making a film, having a ball, and making the sequel.

Keith wrote the script again and it was as much fun as I've ever had making a movie.

This was the most relaxed I've ever been making a movie.

 I'm just had a ball.

 I love Utah!

 I love the people.

We could’ve used a little more snow.

About a week ago we started our actual principal photography.

We were sitting in the office one day late in the afternoon and we got a call from our assistant director who said, “I'm out in Heber. There's nine inches of snow on the ground. We have got to have a crew here first thing tomorrow morning.”

Well we had to go shoot and get the snow. It’s a Christmas movie. We had to have snow, otherwise we were going to have to CG it and it was going to be expensive.

So, we threw everything together.

We raced out here to Heber.

We shot the whole day out there with the snow. It was the day before we were supposed to start principal photography and we got enough snow. The picture would now look like Christmas.

Of course, now that we are back a week later there’s hardly any snow anywhere.

But the timing worked so we got that shot. It happened here in the state of Utah because we have the beautiful mountains, and it helped add to the time period that we were looking for as well.

Heber was absolutely perfect for us.

Utah in general is good. I have to tell you, the crews here are amazing. In order to take advantage of the rebate that Utah gives, we cast almost exclusively here in the state.

We brought a couple of good starts and we talked about that. We cast and I'm thrilled with the acting we’re getting. There is just a tremendous pool of young actors and old. We got a few older actors that came in with a lot of credit.

I can’t possibly praise Utah enough as a place to make films.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm coming back to Utah time and time again. This is the place to do it.

**What advice can you give new filmmakers just starting out?**

Find projects you're passionate about, that you care about, and that you really feel so strongly about that you’ll overcome every obstacle.

Producing a film can be a war.

It’s one crisis after another, usually.

I happen to be on a production right now that’s an absolute pleasure to do, but I've been there when every single thing you can imagine goes wrong too.

If you don’t believe in the project you have and if you don’t fight through it and fight your way to get the financing and fight your way to get the best people involved and fight your way to get it distributed, then you're just simply not going to be successful.

You have to find something that you care enough about; something that you believe in enough.

I heard Martin Sheen the other day give a wonderful speech about making a commitment, about taking a risk, and having that passion to care enough to make a difference.

That’s the best advice I can give any new filmmaker.

# Producer - Scott Swafford

## Directing for TV

I got lost. Again. What good are these GPS units if they keep sending me to the wrong place? I am going to invest in a map and start doing things the old fashioned way.

I called the publicist, who was very sweet. She helped lead me to the set of “Granite Flats”. It was nestled just off the freeway in a surprisingly quiet area that looked like a throwback to the 1950s.

Several large trucks full of lights, racks of costumes, props, and even food tables lined the trail to “base camp”.

I was greeted by several familiar people, and they seemed happy to see me.

One of the production assistants came up to me and let me know that they were shooting the last episode this week.

“We should be ready to break for lunch within the next half hour,” he said. “Would you like to see what they are shooting?”

We walked in on set where the sheriff was interrogating a man. All around the room were people watching monitors with headphones on.

Once the director called ”cut” the production manager came up to me and introduced me to the cast and crew. Everyone was very kind and personable.

The director/ producer Scott Swafford, called to break for lunch. As the cast and crew filed out to the meal tents, Scott and I sat on the porch and discussed the new TV series.

**Scott, here on the Granite Flats, you are filming the last episode that you have been directing for this first season.**

Yes.

**What kind of adventure has this been for you?**

It’s been pretty amazing. I've always operated under the theory that if you have great material and amazing cast, there's not a whole lot for the director to do. It’s proved true. Great actors, great material; It’s just guiding what is already a really successful ship.

I've done it for a couple of episodes. We brought in Ryan Little who everyone would know from *Saints and Soldiers* and *Airborne Creed*. He helped us out.

We have a top-notch crew.

We are taking advantage of all the great talent that is here in Utah.

We work on huge films.

Plus, bringing in a great cast locally and from both coasts has given us a chance to have a leg up.

It’s not a painful process. There are long hours and frankly I am kind of worn out. Other than that, it’s been a great experience.

**It’s been so long since we’ve seen a narrative in Utah.**

I worked on a lot of film projects that lasted for a number of weeks. I created relationships in the beginning. The filming “machine” finally started to run, and then it was a wrap.

It’s very depressing.

The wonderful thing is you get this machine running and then everyone knows their part and it’s quite well oiled.

This morning, as a matter of fact, it was supposed to be a terrible day. We were driving down from Salt Lake City.

 It was snowing.

There was already a back-up set.

We knew where to go.

We plugged that in and it became a nice day.

We moved inside.

 All the things that take such a drama to solve on a feature film became very second nature on television. By Episode 8, we had gotten a pretty well oiled machine.

**Your films typically have a positive message. What is the mission statement you are making for your programs?**

The mission statement used to be “Keeping Us Connected.” It was about keeping up with this community and its culture. Our ownership asked us about 3 years ago.

They said they would like me to make the programming available to people of all faiths, who share our values. Thus, instead of “Keeping Us Connected,” it’s now “Seeing the Good in the World.”

We literally went out and talked to the people we wanted in our audience. We went across the country, and had 36 focus group situations. We learned that people really want to be entertained.

They are happy to be edified and educated, and to be uplifted, but only if you pay the price in entertainment.

**I watched the first two episodes already and it’s a very entertaining show. It was good people trying to live the best life that they could in a rough situation.**

Absolutely. Our point is that everybody on the earth is striving to become better people, to handle life’s persistent issues. We show people who are doing things right, and who are making good choices.

If they're not making good choices, we show them facing the consequences of their actions in a very realistic format. That’s full romance, intrigue and adventure.

Then people would tune in. They may not even have noticed it by the time they're done. They’ve watched 100 right choices being made because they are so entertained. Whereas if you say, “We’re going to show you for the next hour how to make right choices,” nobody watches that anymore.

**One of the great things I've also noticed on your set is that you have a lot of young actors. You** **have 4 really young actors. I keep hearing people say it’s a nightmare to have children or animals on a set, but these kids are like little adults. These actors really know their stuff.**

We went to Los Angeles and had a casting session. We probably saw 100 bright, young, amazing people who could all sing, dance, and be cute. Only four of them could act consistently and very believably. It’s been a total delight.

All four of these young actors had a history of being expressive on camera, but had not done a lot of acting that required them to be incredibly believable. They had to show real emotion because that’s not the Disney channel. I mean no offense to them, but we were not looking for a bunch of happy kids singing and dancing.

When they came to audition, we said as a prompt, “You’ve lost your dad, we want you to sit on the porch and talk to him. He’s in heaven and we want you to cry when you're unhappy.” Those young actors just asked for a minute, then adapted so quickly and did what we asked. We formed quite a bond.

They know the crew. They talk to us off the set. I've had pizza with them. I've gone bowling with them. They are just really quite remarkable.

 It’s been a total joy.

**What advice would you give them, being a veteran in this industry, to really help them get their feet in the door or submit themselves in this industry?**

Thirty years ago when I was in film school, there was a huge barrier to entry. You had to run the camera. You had to buy film. You had to come up with $15,000 or $20,000, which in those days was a lot of money to make a student project.

So there was this natural barrier.

Now people say to me, “I want to be a director. I want to be a cameraman.” Well, I tell them to stop wanting to be and just be.

Using a MAC book and a camera, you can make your movies right now. Let me tell you, people like me are always looking for new content. We will watch those pieces and say if a person is talented.

We have to figure out some way to involve students in our organization, and we need to do it a lot faster than getting a diploma from NYU film school.

Great. I love that.

But what has he done?

What does it look like?

In my day, it was a huge deal to get a reel. Now anybody who thinks they are a filmmaker should just go and be a filmmaker.

**Update**: “Granite Flats” in now in production on its 3rd season. Scott also is the executive producers of the comedy improve series “Studio C” which has just completed its 4th season.

# Director - Kieth Merrill

## Directing as a Career

Right after my chat with Ken, I was at the back of a passenger car on the Heber Creeper stream train. I watched on as the director, Keith Merrill was giving notes to an actress for the scene.

I had a hard time recognizing him and picking him out from the rest of the crew in his letterman’s jacket and baseball cap.

Keith Merrill has been directing films since 1973. Some of his more-well known films include Mr. Krueger’s Christmas, Legacy, Wind Walker and Harry’s War.

As a fan of his work I was excited to discuss how he approached each project; but since we had a chance to discuss the process of filmmaking, we talked about why he discourages his son from going into a filmmaking career.

**The first film did so well. You just had to come back and do a second one!**

Well, yes. Our funding came a lot easier on the sequel, which had been a precedent. I think as much as anything

Ken and I love making movies. We love making movies everybody can look at. It worked once, so we thought we’d do it again.

We’re bringing the kids back. It’s the same story, the same movie. We’re bringing them back as high school kids to give it a Glee, High School Musical flavor, but it’s still set in 1937. We’re having some fun with that.

**How difficult is it to make a period film?**

 You just have to come to Utah. That’s all you have to do!

You want to find a wonderful period railroad train. The Heber Creeper is the best one on the rails and it’s right by us.

Period films are challenging because of that factor, but my mantra is really simple. Cars and costumes sell the period. Most people are not architecturally savvy. They can look at a house and never know if it was built in the 30’s, 40’s, 50’s, or 90’s.

Older buildings built in the 1800’s sell fine. Anything before 1937 does. Our approach is that we have a very modest budget so we focus on cars and costumes. If we get those two things right, then everything else goes too.

The other thing however, is that the young people in the movie need to appeal to the audience today. We’re not jamming them into some period. We’re letting them be the darling kids from 2012, but in period costumes. Hair and other things are pretty contemporary!

Look, it’s not a documentary.

So we’ve got a 1930s film with a 2012 hairstyle?

Yes as far as the teenagers go, but not the old folks!

We want teenagers and tweens to love this movie, and we know that if they look at kids the way they dressed in 1937 they’re not going to relate.

We’ve got a gorgeous cast and the camera loves them. Our young cast is incredibly talented.

**What advice could you give to somebody who wants to go into directing these large-scale productions?**

Go to dental school!

**Dental school? Why dental school?**

Yes, because you don’t want to be in this business.

Be sure you always have a legitimate career to fall back on. I think it is the classic paradox.

It’s one of the most challenging and difficult businesses to get into; to be able to fulfill your dream to make big movies.

So on one side I say make sure you have a legitimate career, make sure you have the passion to drive you all the way because it’s not going to be an easy road.

But on the other hand, it is like when my son said to me when he announced he was going to film school.

I said, “What? No!”

But then he said, “I have just been accepted at the University of Southern California film school and I’m going”. I asked him why he wanted to go.

He said, “Because you put me in a jungle on a film crew when I was 13 years old, and for five weeks I said to myself every day ‘this is amazing and this what I want to do for my living’.’’

He said, “It’s your fault!” and it’s true! It is my fault.

Film is an extraordinary profession when you are able to do it.

Film plunges you into a whole bunch of different worlds, for example, now we are filming the 1937 time period. It’s a fantastic profession.

**But don’t quit your day job?**

I’m a great believer that people should pursue their dreams, but I think young filmmakers have to be very realistic.

They can learn and be vetted by their friends, first investors and everybody else. They can find out fairly early whether or not they have the skill. I would say honestly to young filmmakers, if you really want to be in the film business, don’t fantasize that you are going to get there by coming to work for me, or by working as a production assistant and working your way up in 25 years.

In today’s digital world with the access we have to technology, I suggest you beg, borrow, steal, write a movie, direct it, produce it, and put what you can on the screen.

That’s all that matters. If you get it out and people watch it and will say ‘wow’ and then you’ve got yourself a career. If you put your film out there and investors say “That’s the last time I’ll ever give you $10,000” then you might want to go to dental school.

# Actor/Director - Rob Diamond

## Directing Small Crews

I didn’t get lost this time, but I would have if the caravan of grip and electric trucks had been any harder to see from the side of the road.

I had an appointment with a director that has been making independent films for several years. Every year I see a new title on the shelves at my local bookstore and big box retail outlets.

The first thing I noticed when I came on set was how few cars were in the parking lot.

Typically when there are fewer crew members on set it indicates they are filming second unit segments such as close-up shots, b-roll and other pieces of the film. These segments do not require a large cast or crew to accomplish.

When I walked on set, I was greeted by several familiar faces. The director Rob Diamond was rehearsing the main actors for the finale of the film.

The film was shot with one director, one director of photography (shooting on a Canon 7D camera), one gaffer, one grip/second AC, and one boom operator/sound mixer. In total, five people where shooting this feature film.

Within 1 hour the small crew had shot the final scene which consisted of two pages, from six angles. The crew was quickly preparing for the next scene on the other side of the building.

Before we started the interview, Rob also told me that this film had already been sold and would be in stores by the Thanksgiving holiday because of its holiday theme.

**Rob, tell me, what got you interested in acting in the first place?**

Well, it started a long time ago as you read in my file. I’m from California and I was a surfer living on the beach. It was one sunny, summer afternoon and a bunch of us were grouped together. Some people came waddling across the sand that were dressed in normal street clothes. We were all dressed in bathing suits. One of them tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Do you want to do a commercial?” and I said, “What?!”

The people were actually a company from Japan for Coco-Cola. I said, “Well, what do I have to do?” They said they’d give a brief overview. It was to be a summer love story commercial.

They had picked another really pretty girl on the beach also. They paid me and they fed me. I got to meet a pretty girl, and the rest is history.

I fell in love with the process because the commercial was a little story. We were walking on the pier, hand-in-hand, splashing in the water, running in the sand, and I just thought, “This is for me.”

That experience led into modeling. Someone else saw me in Newport Beach and took some photos of me. Soon I was off to Japan.

What I was always most drawn to, even in my modeling career, was bagging commercials that were story-driven. That’s what got me into filmmaking and acting.

**Was that back in 1998? Was that the time we talked about your meeting Mickey Rooney? It was on a film called, “The Face on the Barroom Floor.”**

Yes. It was an independent film.

**Was this the first film you acted in?**

Yes. I had done some modeling. I did a lot of commercials. I got out of it for a while when I got married. I was in corporate America, but was still very driven inside.

I was continuing to study and I ended up in Utah. I had a friend out here who had another friend. His neighbor had an agency. It was Stacey Eastman actually, who is still around. He represented me and liked my first audition. It was for an independent film with Mickey Rooney, and I landed a character role named “John the Lover.” I really fell in love with the process and the director.

He was a nice guy, but when I watched him and I kept thinking, “Well, I would talk to this actor this way,” or “I would talk to this actor that way,” or “I would rewrite this scene,” or “I would shoot this camera angle,” and so on. I decided I had to try it. So very soon after that, I met a buddy of mine, Greg Hayman. He was a really good filmmaker himself who had mentored Rocco De Villiers, another good buddy of mine. Greg wrote a script. I helped and played lead in it. Basically that was my school.

Over a three or four month time-period we filmed an independent film called “*Slow*,” and after that I jumped into my first writing gig in 1999. I wrote “Three Days to Live,” and I raised money and filmed it. I haven’t stopped since.

It’s been 13, 14, 15 or even years and I’ve been writing and directing and teaching. I’ve been heavily involved in the Utah film industry ever since.

One of the first films that you directed was “Three Days to Live,” back in 1999.

I had just done two projects. I did one where with Mickey Rooney, and I did one in which I went through the whole process with a filmmaker who already had some films released world-wide in Blockbuster. His name was Greg Haynes.

Greg was very much an actor’s director. He was into performance and very interested in being there for the actor. That was my schooling. I was there from the inception of the projection. I was there from “okay, what are you going to write?”

I said, “I’m going to play the lead-in. I’m going to produce it. I’m going to watch the whole process from beginning to end.” Before that was done, I had already decided that I was going to write, direct, and produce my own little film, no matter what it took.

My wife and I took a little vacation in Florida and I literally wrote the entire script from beginning to end in one week. I always look back to these emotional, redemptive stories about a guy who is dying of cancer. He has three days to live, so he starts in Utah. He meets a girl and they go on the journey of his life. They were retracing some of his roots.

They ended up in Las Vegas where his dad had abandoned him. He confronts his father, and then he ends up on the beach in California. He hadn’t been there since he was a boy visiting his mother. That’s where he ends up dying in the girl’s arms.

I don’t know where I thought of the story. It just came to me. I fleshed it out and people said, “You can’t make a movie. You haven’t gone to film school.” I said, “Watch me.”

So I wrote it, literally in one week. I revisited the rewriting for about a month. I raised $30,000. I cast it and I filmed it in three weeks.

That was another process of schooling for me. I’m the type of guy who can’t sit in a classroom and have people lecture me.

I learn by doing. I learn by trial and error, and that’s how my film career started: by just going out and not taking ‘no’ for an answer; by just doing it.

**So, let me get this straight. You made a feature film with $30,000?**

Yes, and I had already watched two professionals work, Rocco and Greg, and I loved them. I watched the process and extracted things that I liked. I put my own flavor on it and I just did it.

I remember people at the time, 15 years ago, before independent film was really moving. Some people were almost offended. They were saying, “Well, you can’t do that.” and I replied, “Why can’t I?”

It’s interesting. I’m all for education, I’m an advocate for education. I just didn’t go that route. My life took me on a different path, so this is the route I took.

I’ve had graduates come to me and say, “Will you show me how to do this?” and I sat,

“Just get out and do it.” “Just take what you’ve learned.”

I’m all for school. Go to school, but while you’re going, you have to understand that the biggest learning curve is for doers. If you go out and do it, it’s going to tell you a lot about yourself. Surround yourself with people who know what they are doing.

I’ve learned so much from people who had already experienced it before. The two people that come to my mind are two of my buddies, Rocco De Villiers and Gregory Haynes. They are what I think of as part of the pioneers for independent film in Utah. I came right after them, after they got started.

**Tell me about “Propensity”**

Propensity came out after I did my first film, and I wanted to take a breath and work on my writing. I was really teaching heavily at that time. I knew folks who had lost some people to suicide. I had people close to me who were tempted by it, and I wanted to make a story about it, and so I wrote this.

It’s an interesting story, because it’s kind of a spiritual and edgy film with a neat twist. It was really hard to find a market for it. To this day, I’ve had people offer to distribute it. The money wasn’t right or the deal wasn’t right, and so that film sits on the shelf.

It’s probably one of my better films, but it’s so deep and it’s so emotional and some of it’s so dark that when people watch it they don’t know how to take it. It addresses some really, really heavy issues. It’s about three guys who in the prime of their lives had taken their lives. They’re caught in what I call a “no-man’s land”. They’re somewhere between Heaven, Hell and Earth, and they’re caught in the middle, trying to figure everything out and pick up the pieces of what happened before they can move on.

It was a great experience—and we did have a bigger budget on it, not huge, but we went on it and I was able to afford to get Danny Trejo out here and it was a wonderful, incredible experience.

I’m working towards getting that film distributed. Now, my films all get distributed; I’ve built honest relationships and I’ve just started talks on being at film-release. I’ve held onto it because my gut told me to not let it go until I felt the time was right.

So I’ve had offers on it with distribution companies.

**Well, good, I’m excited to finally see this. I mean, it’s been on the shelf for over 6 years.**

**Another film of yours that I haven’t seen yet,is “Tears of the King.”**

Yeah, yeah.

**Now, when I hear “the King,” we’re not talking about a monarch; we’re talking about “the” King. Tell me about this film**.

I’ve never been an Elvis fan one way or the other. He’s always just been part of my life, you know? I remember where I was working when he died, and I remember feeling the sadness, but for me, “Tears of the King” came about through a friend of mine.

A student had brought me up to the LDS Church archives and they sat me down and said, “Put on these white gloves.” They handed me a Book of Mormon—which, if you’re in the LDS culture, you know that’s a book of scripture—and they said, “Elvis read this,” and I was like, “Whatever…” But two or three hours passed and I had made notes on everything that was circled, everything that was said, and by the end of it I believed that Elvis had held that book in his hands.

And I go, “I’m going to make a movie called ‘Elvis was a Mormon!’” because I wanted to get people’s attention.

It wasn’t so much that he was a Mormon, but it was his spiritual quest I became entrenched in.

There was a scripture in there that said, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” and he had it circled it and beside it wrote, “That means me, too.”

I knew that this guy knew what persona he had come to assume in the public eye, and so I entrenched myself in his life, studied him, and I took six months to write the script.

I had a couple names that were already interested in playing Elvis— I had my feelers out there— but I happened to stop in Vegas and do some teaching down there, some acting lecturing, and I went and saw a show called “Legends in Concert” and the last person was Elvis Presley—I was enthralled by the performer.

The way he sang, his movements, his persona—afterwards, I handwrote my name, “I’m a film-maker,” and he’s like, “Yeah, sure you are.”

I said, “I want to do a movie about Elvis.”

Well, one thing led to another and I went back down there, met him, got him on board, raised the money and filmed it.

We had worldwide distribution, like 400 Wal-Marts, and it was going to have a theatrical release.

Well, Elvis Presley enterprises, prior, had said that they would not stop me from getting the rights to the songs because Elvis never wrote any of his own songs; all these different writers own it and we were doing covers of it.

Once they got wind that it had a spiritual/LDS theme, they pulled all rights and they sicked their lawyers on me and said, “No one’s going to give you the rights to any songs.”

So, that’s another film that had a world-wide release that caught up in litigation to this day.

**That would be an interesting one to see.**

Oh, the performances are awesome. The guy who plays Elvis is breath-taking. But you know, when you approach a movie in that level with someone that famous, people are going to take pot-shots after you no matter what.

I don’t care if Elvis was reincarnated and he himself played the part, people would say, “That guy sucks.” I had a lot of bad press and good press over it—and so that was one of the reasons, I just wanted people to look at Elvis from a different side.

It didn’t show his glitz and glamour; it showed him literally behind closed doors. I got existing blueprints of his home in Memphis that people to this day aren’t allowed up into, and I had Clarke Schaffer rebuild me that room where he would stay in for weeks at a time.

We built the room and then the film progressively slowly broke it down into different parts that we needed through the film until there was nothing left at the end of the film.

**Tell me about “Cinders of My Soul.”**

“Cinders of My Soul” was about a 15 or 20 minute short that won some film festivals for best dramatic film.

It was a girl who came to me with the story of her life, how she was abused physically and sexually by her uncle and no one believed her—and it was a very hard story to tell— she ended up only relying on her and God to take care of it, and her uncle was literally killed within two weeks in the Canyons.

Years later, in her therapy, she was asked to write a letter and put it on his grave and burn it, and so I called it “Cinders of My Soul.” Very hard one to write, very hard and good, it gets people’s attention.

As a matter of fact, it went to a conference with over 500 psychologists, that some of them wanted to use it in their therapy.

Your next project returned you to feature films with “Once Upon a Summer.”

Well, the same lady who I’d done “Cinders of My Soul” with, she came to me with a story and it was based on her childhood memories of her and her friend.

She came to me with some handwritten notes and entrusted me with it.

I ended up writing an entire feature-length script from some of her notes and her thoughts of her life, and then together we honed it, we finished the script and raised the money and did the film. I think it was a really good success, it did really well in the LDS market—distributed in Wal-Mart and Blockbuster, Hollywood Video.

To this day, it’s still selling. Candlelight Media picked that film up.

**Your next film was a fun Science Fiction/ Action feature called “Justin Time”. Did this film feel like an adjustment to your previous work?**

Well, I don’t know if it was an adjustment; it was an opportunity to reach outside the box.

A friend of mine, Troy Hinkley—who’s known mostly for post-sound and has done probably post-sound design and sound-mix on 40 to 50 movies—had come to me, and he and his team were going to do a TV series out of it.

They had hired a writer (and I’d been hearing about it) and he wanted me to help to cast it. They were going to do it in Idaho.

Well, it got down to it where the writer and they weren’t happy with it, so literally, last-second, they approached me with it. It was going to be like 4 to 6 episodes that they were going to try to pitch to television, and a lot of it I was co-writing with Troy during the filming of this.

It was the most intense film…they basically hired me to move down to Rexburg, Idaho and said “Let’s shoot this over the next three or four months while we’re writing.”

So, I did that and said, “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it chronologically and linearly, because television is hard to sell to; at the end of it, at least we have a feature film.”

That’s what happened. We finished it, and someone ended up buying the rights to the television show for Canada, and then here, what we had filmed and cut ended up being a feature, and that got a worldwide release through Artisan Entertainment.

That movie was all over—it was in Blockbuster, all over the country and we sold them overseas. That was just kind of a fun departure for me, and I enjoyed it. I would maybe consider doing something like that again if the opportunity presented itself, but I wouldn’t go out of my way at this point to pursue that genre.

**What was the inspiration for “Elizabeth's Gift?”**

I was dating a girl who had lost a daughter. She was tragically killed, and this girl would have experiences of seeing her daughter’s spirit.

Just being around this girl really touched me—and she actually came up with the idea and came to me with the first draft, and I went and completely rewrote it for a couple of months, and then Troy came in and had a few ideas here and there which were good… But it really started with a girl named Christina; it was the story of her daughter, and then we really elaborated on it.

It was very emotional from the beginning. She didn’t know how to write a script and so basically just wrote her feelings down, and I remember reading it and was so moved because it was so raw and so honest. I said, “Would you mind if I took this and you gave me some creative freedom and liberty?” and I structured it, formatted it, developed the characters on it, and she was very open to it.

It was a healing process for her. I was really touched by it then and am to this day touched by stories of parents who have lost a child, and how they overcome that, and that’s really what the story was set-up to do.

**You made 12 films in 10 years. What advice would you give to filmmakers trying to break through to the next level?**

Well, I think there are so many different kinds of people. I’m a big advocate for education and I think that’s great, but I’m also a big advocate for “doers”.

I’ve made a choice that I’m always going to make films. If the big dollars come, they’re going to come. If they don’t, I’m as happy as a pig in mud doing the things that I love to do, telling the stories that I want to tell and getting better and always learning.

I’ve just gotten smarter on the business side of it over the last 5 or 6 years, and the genres that I like happen to be in demand, so I’ve spent years developing relationships with honest people.

Now when I go to do a story, it’s not just “I’m going to do this story because I’m this artsy film-maker,” I’m going to do this story because, one, it moves me; and two, I believe that there’s a market for it; and three, with the technology that’s available to us today, anybody, if they had any sort of ingenuity and drive, can pull the pieces together.

 All the wishful thinking in the world does someone no good unless they’re willing to put the blood, sweat and the tears into making it come to life. I think that’s what successful people do—they have an idea, they’re positive about it, but they’re willing to literally do whatever it takes to get their project done— and that’s what works for me in film.

I see what I want to do, and I do the necessary things to make sure it gets done and I don’t take “no” for an answer.

It’s all about action—and it starts with drive.

Don’t get me wrong; action, drive, motivation, positivity, hope, all of those things. Looking back at every film I did, I just did the work— I did whatever was asked of me to get it done.

There might be 30, 40, 50 people that say ‘no,’ but I always know that one of them will say ‘yes,’ and so I just don’t stop until I get to the ‘yes’ people. And I don’t take it personally when people say ‘no.’ I don’t take it as, “Well, they don’t believe in me,” and I don’t wait around because—yeah, it would be nice just to have big budget films, don’t get me wrong, but so many big budget films are made to this day that aren’t story driven, that people will never remember.

You can make just as memorable and marketable film on a low budget as you can on a bigger budget to some degree.

Now, if you’re talking Iron Man, all those things, you do need studio dollars, and you need that backing—but for me, that’s not my interest. So, I wouldn’t know what to tell a film-maker who wanted to make big-budget action films.

I would just say, “Well, do what you can with the technology that’s available, because you can do so many things in green screen and CGI now for cheap,” I would say, “Do whatever you have to do to get to that place.”

**UPDATE**: after our interview, Rob Diamond’s film “Saint Street” went on to win awards at the Filmed in Utah Awards. Rob also produced two additional feature film “Wayward: The Prodigal Son” and “The Last Straw” which both have their theatrical debuted the same week in November.

# Director - Tom Durham

## 95ers: Echoes

Tom Durham has directed, written, produced, done pretty much everything that you can do on a film called “95ers: Echoes Echoes.” It’s a sci-fi visual masterpiece to me. I really enjoyed it—I saw it the first time at the LDS film festival and it blew my socks off when I asked them a few questions like, “how much did it cost to produce it,” and things like that.

Tom has graciously offered to discuss the process that he went through to make this one movie that has taken up several years of his life to do.

**Tom, how did you ever get interested in film-making?**

When I was a little kid, I saw Star Wars, and that was pretty much it. I think that’s the story for a lot of people. I saw something that was visually awesome. I loved the story. It was uplifting.

As a kid I made all kinds of little videos so that kind of trajectory just led me towards making movies.

I’m a writer at heart. Making movies is really hard. Writing is a little bit easier—but it’s very hard to get someone to pay you as a writer.

As a kid I just had this love of cool movies and I finally got a chance to make one.

**Did you go to school for film-making?**

Yes, I went to BYU’s film-school, which is a pretty awesome program as far as the gear that they have, the access to equipment, gear, all that kind of stuff. I think they have a great faculty. It’s not one of those super-connected film-schools, that you walk out of school with big Hollywood connections though.

They do have pretty awesome internship programs. You can go and intern at studios while you’re a student. I went to film-school first as an actor and then as a writer.

I didn’t go to film-school to learn production. However, I did learn production. I helped teach some of those classes because I’m technologically ‘with it,’ but I graduated as a screenwriter, not as a producer or as a visual effects guy.

**Was 95ers the first film you wanted to make**?

It was, it was, and that process started 15 years ago where my brother and I—James, who helped create the 95ers science-fiction universe said, “Hey, you know what? We want to make an Indie film.”

This was during the mini-DV revolution. I said, “Hey, you know, we can at least make something. Cameras aren’t that expensive.”

 He had a Canon XL-1. We spent months developing a sci-fi universe. We just had no idea what we were doing but I knew that I wanted to make something in this 95ers sci-fi universe because I just really loved it.

It had everything that I wanted. It was an adventurous, exciting, multi-storyline, epic, sci-fi playground. I failed many times in different versions of the script until I got to this one.

**In 1998 was when you started writing. How long did you go till you had a finished, workable draft that you wanted to start making the movie?**

I had a draft of that first story screenplay a couple of years later. However that script was a 50 million dollar film, at least, and so we dropped that one.

Then we went onto another 95ers story in the same universe, and that one also got dropped because of budget issues.

**It was in development for 6 years after we started?**

I’ve written multiple screenplays of 95ers stories, and multiple storylines. It was about six years ago when we had something that we could actually shoot.

**You’ve written your sequels before the first film was shot?**

I realized my first film would have to be a very tight budget but still touch on all the different elements in the universe.

**Your original budget was $60,000. Did that change?**

It did change, yes.

I thought I could make it for $60,000.

**How did you go about casting this first film?**

With that budget, I couldn’t get a star so I’m also going to use the best local talent I can find.

I put out a casting call and called all the agencies in my area. I had been working professionally as a producer/director for a while of commercial media and so I knew a lot of the local talent.

We held auditions in the production company that I worked at. We auditioned the best talent in the area at that time, and we felt we found a strong cast.

**Who was your lead?**

My lead was the lovely and talented Ali Durham, who also happens to be my wife. She is a professional actress. She’s been in different movies and commercials.

That was one of the things that I wanted to do with my first project. I figured I’m paying for most of it and this is a dream that my wife and I have so I want her to be in the movie!

She does a great job and we have a great supporting cast.

I was really overwhelmed because on an Indie-film you’re wearing lots of hats. You have a huge amount of pressure on your shoulders because you’re not only directing your talent, but you are producing, you’re helping the DP, you’re helping solve camera issues all because you don’t have a larger budget to hire experienced people on your set. You are really hands-on in all of the different elements, making sure that everything’s coming together.

It was very stressful, very overwhelming. I was sleep-deprived through the whole project. The first scene that was shot had a lot of cast in it. I drove in, and everybody was relying on me to set the pace, to keep the energy going, to know what I was doing!

I did a few acting exercises that I learned when I was at school to get everyone loose and excited.

It was wild and crazy.

There were all kinds of problems that we were solving along the way, but for those first couple of weeks of shooting, everybody was fully excited and engaged.

**When was your first hint that there was going to be a problem with your budget? That $60,000 was not going to be enough?**

After one of these long 18 hour shoot days, my partner sat me down. His aunt was going to invest a significant chunk of money into the film.

He said, “Well, Tom, it looks like my aunt… has backed out.”

She’s a totally awesome lady but for a variety of reasons, she wasn’t able to put the money into this. This kind of thing started happening throughout the whole process.

He said, “We are going to be out of money in X number of days. We don’t have enough money to finish this film.”

I just sat there for a couple of minutes. We were already into these shoot days, so I said, “Okay…we’re just going to keep going.”

In my mind I was thinking, “Okay, this is going to involve credit cards, and this is going…” and I’m starting to sweat some bullets here.

Then I realized, I’m going to have only 30% - 50% of this movie shot, and I’m going to have to go find money!

That was the first moment of “this project is in peril.”

Before I decided to mortgage my house and try to make this movie, we went through a whole bunch of different fundraising options.

We did traditional fundraising. I spent a ton of money on business plans, private placement legal fees, and research numbers (where you can go buy numbers of movies and what their performance has been).

I went through the whole gambit. I hired consultants, preparing an awesome business plan to show how we are going to make all this money for investors.

Some people are really good at that, and they know how to do that, and now I know how to do that because now I know what investors are looking for and what sales agents and distributors are looking for—but at that time, we did everything that we thought you were supposed to do to go raise money.

We had ads in business papers and we were raising money online through Angel funding sites…I mean, you name it, we did it.

Concept artwork, trailers, whatever.

I raised $0 from all of those efforts. As in none. We had a few small investor people who were excited, but as far as raising significant money, nadda.

When I was running out of money during the production, I realized I can’t really go back to that normal fundraising because it was completely unsuccessful. It cost a lot of money. I raised no money!

I didn’t know how I was going to do it, and in the back of my mind I was thinking, “I’m just going to have to fund this, whether through my freelance jobs or through whatever I can do.” The burden of this film is going to come down to me finding a way to make it happen.

That terrible thought was creeping in my mind as we finished up our first production cycle. I started thinking, “Okay, what am I going to do?”

**What was the motivating factor that was able to lead you to shooting again? How were you able to do that?**

There was this combination of things. There was this thing inside of me that absolutely would not give up.

It was people just saying, “Don’t give up.”

I told myself, “I’m not going to give up. I’m just going to find a way to do this.”

I think this is the moment where a lot of Indie film makers, they have a crisis like this and this is the crisis that will either end the film or refuse to give up.

I had a bunch of crises after this, but this was that first crisis of, “I’m not going to just stop right now.” I had hours of footage I thought was great, I loved my story, and I had people who were depending on me.

None of the actors would’ve killed me if I had stopped. None of the crew would’ve killed me if I had just stopped. But that just wasn’t good enough.

I’m going to make a movie.

It’s time for me to make a movie in my life.

I’m just going to make this happen.

That was getting through crisis number one, but there was still the money issue.

**Were you able to find—you mentioned the Angel investor—did you ever find such a mythical creature as the Angel investor anywhere?**

I did not.

**Did you ever find a lot of success through those business ads you were told to put out there?**

Zero.

**So, you had to do some creative funding ideas, you all had to come up with other alternatives. One of the things that I think you alluded to, which is you started shooting in smaller pieces.**

Yes!

I took our footage from first couple of weeks of filming. I did a rough edit of what I had.

“Okay, we have these holes. If we run out of money, we still have to fill these holes to tell this story.”

I would get a little freelance job, I would get a bonus at work or something, my wife would get a commercial or voice-overs, and that money just got dumped into 95ers. For the next couple of years, we filled these holes, and we finally got to a point where the movie got 80% done, and we are completely out of money.

We maxed every credit card, we were out of money. I’m not going to let any family member that isn’t my parent give me anything, any more money.

It was at that point where our final financial crisis took place and had to figure out what to do?

Do we release the movie as is?

Do we move on?

Do we throw the footage in the river?

This time there was some severe soul-searching and tears. It was very stressful on the family.

That’s when my brother, Lockhart Schaffer, who was a Hollywood miniature and visual effects dude said, “Have you heard of Kickstarter?”

“I have not heard of Kickstarter.”

I put together a compelling Kickstarter video. We had lots of footage of the movie. We had cool art, and we had a great script.

We also had this behind-the-scenes story of a husband wife wife team team struggling to get this project finished and somehow, people responded to it.

There was this moment where I was sitting at work at my day job and all of a sudden my iPhone started getting these ding-ding-ding e-mails.

These e-mails are popping up on my phone saying, “You’ve got a donation.” “You’ve got a donation.”

In a couple-hour period, we got a couple thousand dollars!

Over the whole Kickstarter process, we ended up getting 20 grand and I thought that was going to be enough to finish the movie.

The money was great, we needed it, but it also filled me with an awareness that there are people who are out there that want to see this film get made!

They didn’t have a million dollars to give me, but they loved my story. They cared that it gone done. They loved the story of this Indie craziness that began with my brother and I, 15 years earlier.

$5 here, $10 here, $500 there from some complete strangers in other countries. I realized, I really have to finish this.

People care about this.

This means something to a lot of people.

You get beat up so many times in this process by people telling you, “No one’s going to give you money.” Crew members and partners disappear. Your cast and crew are not being excited to go one more night, deep into the night.

But Kickstarter showed me a group of people, and guess who they are? They’re my audience members, around the world, who care—and that gives me what I need.

We ended up dumping another $30,000 into the film after Kickstarter because there were some visual effects scenes I wanted to add.

**So you cross this finish line, the film is finally shot, you’re happy with what you’ve got—what now? What did you do once you got to that point? Because this really wasn’t the final version, yet, this was the final version for you at that moment.**

We had finished shooting the film and it was pretty much edited. Then there was a couple last hills to climb. We still had some visual effects that needed to get done.

I had been doing a lot of it along the way. I didn’t do all of the visual effects, but I did the majority of them. It was a big personal trial because there’s so much green-screen, compositing after-effects. image correction, rotoscoping, particle effects—you name it.

It was this personal battle that I had to do to get through all of those shots.

There are several visual effect shots—and that was hard because it wasn’t a money issue at that point, it was me just slaving away in my basement, going through the shots like a crazy man.

That was really hard.

I remember talking to my wife one night. I was almost at the point of tears.

“Honey, I can’t do it. I just can’t do it,”

There were so many shots I had to do, and I couldn’t pay anyone to do it.

That was that big hill to climb but then when the movie was done.

I was amazed how easily I got a sales agent, a distributor.

I realized why it was so easy for me to do that later.

After I finished the movie, I did go back and tweak things. I added some more visual effects scenes to improve the pacing, bump the production value up, altered the edit, went through that kind of stuff, but it’s been this last climb of “oh my gosh, I finished the movie and now I’m going to learn why movies get funded and why movies get sold,” and I had no idea.

I had a little bit of an idea, but I had no idea, really.

This is when I started discovering what that movie business was really like. Why movies get sold. Why they get bought.

Anyone can make an Indie film and put it out there and distribute it yourself.

But I want to make money on this because we have ludicrous amounts of debt from this film. I need to make some money back.

I’ve been in this process of getting the film out there and trying to get it sold. That’s where my eyes opened and I realized that this is a huge hill.

I have had several new filmmakers discuss distribution of their film. I ofter hear “I just finished my movie, it should be easy to sell it now, it’s done.”

“What’s so hard about selling this movie? I made it. It’s good, I give it to a distributor, they should give me money now. Isn’t that how it works?”

That is not how it works, because if you want to sell a movie, the first thing that you do is you talk to the distributor before you ever try and make your movie.

The first thing you do is you take to successful sales agents, successful distributors on what they’re looking for.

Audience members don’t buy the movies; they don’t buy what you have created. Sales agents take what you have created and they try to sell them to buyers at markets or buyers that they know and those people then get it out to the public.

You have to understand that there are a million people between you and your audience.

They’re not bad people but they don’t care about the filmmaker and they don’t care about the audience. They care about the next person that they’re selling to, which is not an audience member.

It’s a buyer. It’s a catalog. It’s some cable station, not an audience member.

It’s really important to understand that.

If you want to make a movie that’s going to sell at market, the first thing you do is talk to those distributors and sales agents and ask, “What are people buying? What do you need?”

They’re going to say, “Okay, we need this, this and this” and mostly, what they mostly need is they need name-talent.

That’s the number one thing that they need that will help them sell a film.

**So name talent makes it marketable?**

Well, it makes it marketable to buyers; that’s a huge distinction.

I think my movie is marketable. I don’t have name talent yet I think it’s marketable. People who see the movie, like the movie. To me, that makes it marketable, but not to buyers.

Because I have tons of visual effects in my movie I have buyers interested. I have sold the movie—it’s being distributed in Asia. I got a UK deal, and so all these things are happening because it’s a decent movie, it’s got a good trailer, it’s got good key art (which is your poster art) and it looks flashy and cool. I’m negotiating my domestic deal now too. I’ll be lucky if I break even on the film.

“Break even” means I just barely get my money back.

My next project is not going to pursue that business model, because I so much believe in the film-maker and the audience, and I frankly don’t want to make the kind of movies that buyers want to buy.

I just don’t want to deal with a bunch of people that money is just the bottom line. It’s just not fun for me.

**UPDATE**: 95ers: Echoes was renamed to 95ers: Time Runners as is now available worldwide.

# Sound Engineer - Dean Andre

## Sound of Life

Dean Andre has been working in sound as both a composer, as a singer, music editor, producer, sound mixer—he pretty much, if it revolves around the sound world or music world, Dean has been a part of it. So, he’s been around the block a few times, he knows what he’s doing; he’s made a lifelong career out of working in this very specialized field.

Dean and I met on the set of an Indie film called “The Way Shower,” and one of the first things that you notice about Dean when you see him is his long white hair, and I’m thinking that’s how he kind of got his nickname “the Wizard,” but the next thing that you noticed about him was that he’s also so warm and happy and just loves life and loves the people he works with.

**Dean, how have you been able to keep such a positive attitude for so long in your career, where most other people get so jaded and bitter about everyone and everything?**

I worked with probably some of the finest people on the planet, bar-none. We’re all trying to do the very best we can, and especially in the film-industry, I found that people really give it their all.

They give it 100%, and there are very, very few people who don’t do that. And those people who don’t do that don’t last long.

They fall by the wayside because they don’t find any joy in life. I find joy in every minute that I’m alive. I’ve chosen a career (or a number of careers, actually, one led to another) and each career has been so much fun that I’m just happy! I’m happy being there.

What better thing can you do in your life than be on set working with creative people or in the studio creating music or mixing or doing things that are involved with television, film, records, radio? It’s amazing.

It’s just so great to be alive, and it is my honor to be working with the very best of the best on the planet, so that’s what keeps me happy. I’m not jaded because there’s no reason to be. There’s something to look forward to every second of the day, and that’s for sure.

**You started very young in music; where did you get your start?**

Being born and raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, which was like the furthest thing away from anything in the entertainment business, my mother, being a teacher, wanted to offer us as much of the fine arts as possible.

It was a natural talent we had in our family, singing and entertaining. By the time I was 16, I was the national rudimental champion drummer in the United States.

Two weeks later I was working with Doc Severinsen who used to be Johnny Carson’s arranger/conductor for the Tonight Show. He was the host before Jay Leno.

I worked with Doc Severinsen for about two years. In the interim I worked with Diana Ross as a background singer and Mike Douglas (who was a talk-show host). I was 16, that was a very cool thing. It would be like if I was working with the conductor from the Tonight Show now with Jay Leno’s guy or working with Christina Aguilera or Lady Gaga. I worked with the finest people, and as a background singer and as a dancer, of all things.

**You’re doing this as a teenager?**

Yeah, yeah. I was in my last two years of high-school. I missed pretty much my last two years of high-school, and it was quite a trip, let me tell you.

I was working during the week, long days traveling on airplanes and buses and traveling over the United States. The rest of my class is hunkered down studying Spanish, German and algebra.

Although that did present its own problem in that I nearly didn’t graduate. It wasn’t because I didn’t have my homework done or my grades weren’t great. It had to do with time in school. I had to write a special paper for my high-school gym teacher. But I made it through high-school.

Shortly thereafter, I was still working with those fine people and I went into the commercial business, singing on commercials out of Chicago (usually from Wisconsin). I was working and singing on commercials.

I did that for a number of years. I played in clubs and decided I wanted to do records. Whenever I put my mind to it, things happened.

I signed the deal with Atlantic Records and they flew me out to California. I did a record for them and happily was dropped from the label and said, “Oh my God, I’m out in California! What the hell am I going to do here?”

I started writing. I started writing music and one thing led to another and I ended up, shortly after that, being the staff musical director for Filmation studios.

Filmation did Fat Albert and The Archies—and I did over 450 television episodes for them as a composer and a singer. I did that for 7 years. That was a hoot.

I’m seeing Archie’s Bang-Shang, Lollapalooza Show, the Fabulous Funnies, the New Adventures of Mighty Mouse and Heckle and Jeckle. We even have—I’m guessing this was more like a special—but Mighty Mouse in the Great Space Chase.

I just had lunch with the last remaining survivors of that time, one of the greats, the great animator, Fred Ladd, and Fred created Gigantor and he created Speed Racer, he created Astro Boy. This guy, he’s like an icon in the business. I worked on like Aladdin and Little Mermaid and some other shows like The Tick, which is a really cool series.

I didn’t force any of this stuff to happen in my life. It just happened. When cartoons stopped coming in, I started doing movies. It just all happened. I’m blessed. Every day, I’ve worked with the best people in the world.

**You moved from cartoons into film. You even dabbled in video games a little bit and you did a video game that I still play called “Twisted Metal.”**

Twisted Metal was one of the first games that Sony came out with. I did some location sound work on it. That was a hoot because it was a whole new industry that I didn’t really know what I was doing and nobody else did. The people at Sony didn’t even know what they were doing. Everyone was shooting it from the hip.

I was the oldest guy on the team, and back then, I was 40, okay? And these guys were like 20, they were 18, 19 years old, and they were creating games. How cool is that? To be able to work with people, creative people who’ve been around since their teens and into the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s, and you work with these people all the time, just creative people.

I don’t know what else to say about that other than we are very, very fortunate to be able to do this. Oh, I wanted to mention one thing: creativity is a very interesting talent to have, and creativity in itself is a specific talent that encompasses a very, very wide range of careers, of things that you can in your life.

If you’re creative and you can think of something that has never been or you can take nothing and make something out of it; that’s a creative person. A creative person can jump from one field to another very easily because they take what they’ve learned. They can do it because they can fill in those empty spaces where there’s nothing there.

So, once a person is creative you can jump anywhere you want in this field. You can be anything you want. Explore other areas that you can become very good at, because creativity has no limits. The only real limit we have is time, that’s it. We’re here for a certain amount of minutes, and then we’re out of here, so…enjoy it while you’ve got it.

**Can you remember your very first on-set experience, when you were on your very first film set? I’m not talking television, I’m talking movies.**

Yes, I do, actually I do. It was a film called “Private Obsession,” and a very good friend of mine, Lee Frost who’s passed away, who was—Lee Frost was great. Lee wrote, directed and produced probably 200 films in his life, and one of which was The Thing with Two Heads with Ray Milland and Rosey Grier, which was a classic movie. He did Mondo Bizarro, he did Mondo Bizarro 2.

This guy was out of his mind, he was from Arizona originally from when his father was in the Navy, I do believe, and he was a crazy guy, but Lee and I were buddies. And he played the Ukulele and I was strictly a music guy—this was 20-some years ago, 21 years ago—and so Lee calls me up and says, “I’ve got a movie for you to do. I want you to do the music on this,” and I went, “Oh cool, very, very cool, this is great. Let’s have lunch and talk about it” and blah-blah-blah.

Well, he told me the schedule of the film and it was going to be, probably I think eight weeks before they started principal photography and usually I had a couple of things happening at the same time. I would have like a TV show or doing a record or something, I always had something going on, but this time I didn’t have anything happening.

It was just like, that was it, and I said, “Okay, so it’s going to be eight weeks till they start filming, then it’s going to be another eight weeks…” well, they had like a four-week shooting schedule. Then they’re going to edit and Lee’s editing and he’s doing it on flatbed, the old film, 35mm flatbed he’s going to edit on, right? So that’s another month.

Now I’m talking four months. Now, what am I going to do for four months? I don’t know what to do. And I had done some voice-over engineering for Disney’s Aladdin and the Little Mermaid.

I had done actually engineering with the actors and it was all those voice-over talents from the Disney back then, 20 years ago, Frank Welker and June Foray.

I said, “Well, gee, I’ve done voice recording for cartoon shows in studio; what could be the difference recording on location?”

And so I called up Lee, my friend the director and the producer, and I said, “Hey Lee—have you hired anybody to do the sound for your picture?”

Now, mind you, I’d never done sound on location before, ever in my life. I hadn’t been on the set, and he says, “No, I was just going to call my dad, but what do you have in mind?”

“Well, I’d like to record sound, and I want to go digital, I want to go all digital.”

At that, 21 years ago, no one did digital recording on set. It was all—they still used the Nagra with the 2-track Nagra, but still was analog.

So he turned to his executive producer (which was his wife, Phyllis, who was a dear friend of mine) and said, “Phyllis, Dean wants to do the sound for us.” She goes, “Okay, he can do the sound for us.” I went, “Okay, great!”

**And that’s how it got started?**

Yeah, and that’s how it got started—I knew nothing about it.

Lee asked, “Well, do you have a Nagra?”

“A what? What’s a Nagra?”

And he went, “Oh boy…”

I said, “We’re going to go digital,”

And this guy was so sweet; he said, “Do you need any equipment,”

“I have none.”

“How much do you need?”

He bought me my first kit for recording on location; he bought my first post-production studio. He bought it for me, as a gift!

Again, I have been blessed by knowing some of the finest, most loving, beautiful people on the planet, and that was my first…the thing is, it went really, really great.

**Were you doing everything on this set? I have you down here as doing the ADR, the final mix, production sound, sound designer, sound effects, sound effect recorder and doing all the musical score.**

Yeah, right, yeah.

**Holy smoke!**

From start to finish. And it was a hoot—I mean, if you get a chance, pick up the movie. It’s really a good movie. It didn’t have any legs, distribution wasn’t that great. I can’t remember what the name of the company is and even if I did, I wouldn’t mention it because that wouldn’t be fair to them. I don’t even know if they’re in business anymore, but it was a good movie, it deserved, I think—I mean, I made money, don’t get me wrong. I mean, I made money on it and everybody did; I think it could’ve made a little bit more, that’s all. It’s just—it is what it is.

**So is that how you got recommended to go onto Cyberella? Was it from the work on this film that led you into that?**

Oh, yeah. I didn’t know what the positions in the film business were. I walked on set and there’s all these people on set and they all had walkie-talkies and I didn’t know who any of these people were.

Well, it turns out that one of the gentlemen on set who was line-producer, a guy named Mike Tristano—he’s done probably 400 films in his life. Mike took me along on all of his films for probably two years. I did a number of films; he couldn’t stop recommending me for things. It was wonderful, and then of course once you get recommended for something, there’s other people that come onboard and they let you meet on set—and one things leads to another. So, finally, you have a base of operations.

I’m getting back more into what I started with 21 years ago in the film industry. I just did a picture called “Waiting in the Wings,” some Disney people pooled their money together. We’re talking Disney employees, we’re not talking executives. We’re talking—one of the guys, for instance, the writer of the script, a guy named Jeffrey Johns is—well, he used to be Peter Pan at the park, at Disney Land. And now he’s the head of casting for Disney Land, and he cast all of the parts like Cinderella and all those.

Well, anyway—so he’s put all of his friends and his friends money together and all this stuff and they produced this film called “Waiting in the Wings,” which we just finished principal photography on; I was fortunate enough to be able to do the sound on it, and they invited me to do—now, it’s a musical, so they already had the music done for the picture, the special songs like the on-camera featured songs.

I came in late in this project, but they needed someone to score the pictures, so after working with them for three weeks, they invited me to score the pictures and also do post, all the sound design and the mixing and all that stuff.

I began the score and what’s totally cool about this is these people are so sweet and so nice, I’m brought in one of my buddies that I used to work with, and here’s how far these contacts go back. You think about this person you know, well, when are you ever going to see them again? It’s years and years and years past. Well, I’m bringing in a guy—Larry Kenton, who I worked with—with Doc Severinsen who just orchestrated the new Star Trek movie.

He’s my orchestrator for this and has a gift—he says, “Dean, whatever you want, I’ll help you out.” I mean, how cool is that?

Sometimes you don’t get along with everybody, but for the most part, like I said, once every 400 or 500 people you run across someone who really shouldn’t be in the business. But if they have a good disposition they should be fine.

We’ve both been on sets where that happens, and I think you hit it on the head; the people who are just not meant to be here kind of filter out and find something else, find something that they do fit into—which is good, because at the end of the day, you want everyone to be happy doing something that they enjoy, and it just happens that that’s not the right fit for them. So that just happens, it’s okay.

Not everybody is cut out to do 16 hour days or 18 hour days. As you and I know, being on set can be a very, very long day and it can go on for weeks—and it’s okay because you have to love it and you get paid for it, but you’ve got to love it, too. If you want to do eight hours a day, you’re in the wrong business. You are in the wrong business.

**Dean, have you ever worked on a film where the pay was either so low or even free, but you took the opportunity because you just loved the people or you loved the project or anything like that?**

Yes, I have—and it was actually before I did the “Private Obsession” thing which was the full on-set, everything from start-to-finish sound and music. My very first film was with a very young director who I liked right off the bat after meeting him, and I had met him through some friends of mine who owned a recording studio in Los Angeles, that the son of the owner of the studio was one of the producers on the film.

He said, “Dean, will you help me out doing sound design and some music editing and stuff like that for the…” and basically editing, even dialogue or whatever for the film.

“Well, let me meet with the director ad let’s see what’s going on.”

I met with the guy—he was a creative young guy. The film was interesting; it was incredibly interesting. I hadn’t seen anything like it, and I thought, “Wow, this is cool, this could be the start of something where this guy could do something good if he gets this done right.”

So I agreed to do the project and it was very little money, I mean, we’re talking like nothing.

They had no money. Well, it turned out to be a movie called “Public Access,” and the director was Brian Singer.

Brian went on to do, of course, Superman and Valkyrie and Usual Suspects and it was interesting because he called me, he called me for his second film and I couldn’t do it—I was working on another film. I said, “Brian, I can’t help you—I’m really, really sorry,” he said, “Oh, it’s okay, Dean—maybe the next one.”

Well, it was Usual Suspects. I missed out on that one.

If someone has a vision and the vision is good and they’re good people and they want to do good things, I will help in any way that I can, as long as it doesn’t jeopardize my family, in other words, if I have to give up work that is going to make me so much money that I can’t say no to it, I will do it. But you always have to be careful about all this stuff, because there’s a fine balance between the love of what you do and doing it as a business, and you have to balance it equally. People who have 100 dollars or people who have like a hundred million dollars, they’re all doing it because they love the business.

I do stuff with Ron Howard now, and I’ve got good relationships with a number of networks. I’m also producing television now, two in addition to that, so it’s not—I’ve expanded. I’m taking what I’ve learned and the creativity that I know I can fill in those gaps, and I’m also producing TV, so that’s something that’s coming up.

**How is it that you’re able to be gone so much doing all these different projects and still have a personal life and be able to spend time with your family?**

I have the most wonderful wife on the planet, and she and I have a son who will be 26 in September. I met this young lady when she had just turned 17 years old in Wisconsin, and I was 19 at the time. We fell madly in love. When you’re living in Wisconsin and you’re on your first date with a woman and you turn to her and you say, “Someday I’ll do records and movies and television and commercials and I’m going to do all this stuff, and music and…” and you tell that woman what you intend to do in your life and she turns back to you and says, “I believe you.” That’s a woman you want to marry.

And I did.

I married her, and she has been my partner and I love her.

I love her so much.

She’s not in the entertainment business; she’s in the medical field.

She’s in the educational part of medicine and she’s a program director for a very prestigious medical university and she’s great at her job and I love her, I love her so much, she’s great. I guess maybe I nailed it on the head when I said, you know, “If you find someone who believes in you, that’s important.” And if you’re going to go away for a while, you want to know that when you come back, they’re going to be there and you’re going to be there for them.

Everybody needs stability, and I’m not talking just about our business. It’s ironic how relationships can go awry in any business, no matter what your economic structure is or your sociological structure…it still can go bad. Work is harsh, and there is no “magic bullets” for it.

I don’t know what that is, but we’ve had a wonderful relationship. It hasn’t been always perfect; I can tell you that. We’ve had our ups and downs, but that’s what a marriage is all about. There should be one thing that you can always constantly rely on and that is that one person. I always say—she’s not very bright because she’s still with me, but I’m the smartest guy on the planet.

**What advice would you give someone that is just starting out to make a go at this film career?**

There’s a number of things. First of all, always be honest to yourself in that, if you really want to do it, just do it. It’s not going to be easy, but nothing is easy. You’re going to have to work your ass off, so get used to it.

Number two; be very, very fair and honest with the people that you work with. Always give them exactly what you’ve agreed to do—and a little bit more.

Make them happy. You know, it’s about making other people happy, too. It’s not just about making yourself happy. If you give of yourself then you’re going to be getting that much more back. If you give 100%, you’re going to get at least 100% of what you gave back, and I can guarantee you that. It might not be right away, it’s not something that you get right away, but I believe in karma—I’ve seen it happen in my life, and I’ve spent a number of nights in my life sleepless and crying and “Why isn’t this working the way it should work?” And then there have been a number of nights where I’m going like, “Man, life is freaking great!”

Be the very best person that you can, be loving and giving to everyone you’re with.

If you’re creative and you have something to give, always remember that you have a piece of the puzzle that is so important to complete the project, and you need to remember how valuable that is.

Every position is really critical in completing the process. Just go out and work hard and if you have to move to an area where they’re doing more films, do that. If you can make a living in an area where there’s some work coming in and you just, you’re at the top of the echelon—enjoy that, too.

I have friends in Atlanta, have one of my very dear friends that I’ve known for 40 years—Clyde Brian—he’s done “Romancing the Stone,” and “Roger Rabbit” and he did “Meet the Faukers” and all those movies. He’s a great camera guy, known him for—and I’m godfather to two of his children, he’s a great guy. This guy, he lives in Atlanta now, or outside of Atlanta, and he works in LA, he works in Atlanta, he works in Georgia, he moves all over the place.

That’s the cool thing about this business. You could really live anywhere and you can work anywhere because—right, if you’re gone for three or four weeks or three or four months, it doesn’t matter. You can find a place to live or it’s in the per diem thing, or so—be flexible, have the ability to say, “Yes.”

By the way, here’s the important thing: before you say “no” to anything, and even if it’s a project that is little or no money, really think about who you’re working with.

Meet those people, get to know them a little bit, as much as you can—but sometimes it’s only a brief hour or two meeting, whatever. But get to know them and feel them out. If they’re good people and they don’t have a lot of money, it’s okay to do it, because—here’s what I believe, and I’ve seen it happen in my life a number of times: you have serial killers, you have people who are serial heroes like soldiers and police officers and the like, you have people who do things over and over and over and over again.

Right? So, we have serial film-makers, and those are people who, they do one film—chances are they’re going to do another.

So, if you see somebody that you like and you get along with them, but they don’t have a lot of money—go ahead and do it anyway. If you have the time, do it. Because it’s going to be good for them and they’ll remember you, and it’ll be good for you.

I agree, and it’s one of those things that just—you know, good deeds lead to other good deeds; it’s a whole karma thing where good work begets more good work.

**UPDATE**: since my interview with Dean he has been on 28 additional series and films according to his IMDB profile.

# Stunt Performer - Kathy Jarvis

## Rolling with the Punches

Kathy Jarvis is a Hollywood Stuntwoman and has been working in the field for the past 18 years. She has been in major feature films including GI Joe, The Italian Job, Air Force One, and many more. She has stunt-doubled for A-list actresses like Demi Moore, Charlize Theron, Meryl Streep and Hilary Swank.

Kathy has been thrown off buildings, lit on fire and blown up.

In the feature film, Six Days Seven Nights (Harrison Ford and Anne Heche, Kathy jumped off an 80-foot cliff into only eight feet of water.

**I’ve got a Film Utah magazine here, and when you open it up, I mean, there’s this big story on you and this story specifically discusses how you work with kids in the film industry. There’s Miley Cyrus in there and Will Ferrell with the kids from Kicking and Screaming.” You get in there with the Hollywood big boys and teach people how to do stunts or you take a punch for someone when it should be someone else, correct?**

Yeah, I love my job—I am a stunt professional, and like I said, I’ve been doing it for a long time and I’ve been able to work in LA even though I am a local here in Utah.

So, I do work around the world and it’s really a great thing, I mean, I really love working with the kids and I love working with the A-list actresses and I really just love bringing a script to life—to be part of the character, whatever character that the A-list actress is creating, I love to take that a little bit further and be part of that and integrate it, so…

**One of the thoughts that just keeps coming through my head is “ouch.” I mean, the whole reason why the stunts look as big and as amazing is because there’s no way that anyone could do that, but they bring you in and you have to do that thing that it looks like no one could ever do. Do you get injured?**

Yes, I have been injured multiple times; my knee and knocked my teeth out, unfortunately, and had a few concussions.

It does happen. We hope it’s not regular on the job. That’s why we’re stunt people. There’s always an element of danger, there’s always an element of getting hurt—and so that’s why they bring us in, because of course you want to make sure that your actors are protected, and even if they get a scratch on their face, that’s another 20-30 minutes in makeup that, bottom line, affects your budget.

So, they bring us in to do the stunt safely and to do them well, and I really like to make it seamless between the actress and myself.

**What gets you into this? Were you a tomboy as a kid?**

Yeah, I guess if you want to say I was a tomboy—I did a lot of sports and I went to college, ended up here in Utah on a ski scholarship.

Somebody suggested that I become a stunt performer—it was not on my radar. People don’t understand it’s not so much about that one skill you may have really well, it’s about doing the action on mark and on time and in the space provided. In this whole room right here, we could have a big fight scene or I’d be doing a wheelie on a motorcycle.

**So a filmmaker comes to you and you show the actors how to take hits or throw punches safely as well?**

Yeah, how to throw punches, how to take hits, how to make it look real and hopefully how not to get hurt in the process.

**Have you actually bopped one of the actors?**

I have not; I have friends who have, and it’s horrible, especially when you’re on a big film and it happens in front of the whole set—it’s just embarrassing. You want to be very good at your job and you want to protect those people; you want to protect your actors and you want to make sure that you do your job extremely well and you don’t make mistakes.

The average mistake at someone else’s job might be they get a paper cut. The average mistake at your job is thousands of dollars and…

Somebody gets hurt. Safety is always of paramount importance; it’s always the first thing I look at when we step on step, and you know—so I look at the safety of it and I also look at the script. You know, a lot of times people want to make the stunts bigger, but if we don’t have the right frame for that and the story doesn’t lead to that, it’s pointless.

**Have you ever said, “No, absolutely…that seems too dangerous?”**

No. There is no “no” in this industry, so the “no” is “how about perhaps we do this?” or “What frame are we on?” or “Okay, let’s double-check this for safety reasons,” but there’s no really “no.” There’s “let’s make this happen for the director and for the producers, but let’s do it safely and let’s get the shot you need and let’s hopefully do it in one take.”

**UPDATE**: Since our interview Kathy went on to be the stunt coordinator for the Disney feature “Cloud 9” as well as two other features: “Don Verdean” and “Manson Girls”.

# Actor - Danny Trejo

## 250+ Films

Meeting a bon-a-fide celebrity was intimidating for me. So when I got the call that Danny Trejo was available for an interview I got butterflies in my stomach.

I arrived on set where several dozen zombies in full makeup where huddled in packs in the shade. They were trying to keep cool on one of the hottest days of the year, trying to keep their makeup from running.

Danny had just arrived on the set. The makeup artist was giving him “last looks” right before the director called “action.”

Danny came out of the warehouse with all the zombies coming after him. He pulled out his ax and stated to slice the zombies apart.

The stunt actors where hitting the ground with such force, you would believe that Danny had superhero strength.

After the director called cut, the cast would set up for 7 more takes to get the different angles.

Two hours later Danny was done for the day so we took a few minutes to chat about how he got into acting and what advice he has for any actors looking to make a lifelong career as a working actor.

**Danny, you have filmed over 250 films throughout your career and several of these films have been made in Utah.**

I love Utah.

**Why do you typically play the bad guy?**

Well, when I got into this business they kind of said go with what you got. Well, I don’t look like Brad Pitt, you know what I mean? So, you know, I'm not what you call a pretty boy and I didn’t get here being pretty.

The first five years of my career, I was inmate #1. That was fine with me. I just kind of grew into being the bad guy. I've done a lot of good guy movies lately.

I did Machete that I starred in and I was a good/bad guy. When me and Robert Rodriguez talked about that, we kind of talked about Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson; the hero but he doesn’t have to wear tights. You know. So, it was like I can’t’ fly but I still kick ass.

**Speaking of Robert Rodriguez, you found out after working with him on a couple films, that you two are related?**

We’re second cousins!

I found that out when we were doing Desperado. My family came down from San Antonio, Texas, we were filming in Mexico. My uncle pointed, hey, that’s our cousin Robert. They started talking so I say, okay cuz, let’s make that limousine seem longer.

**How do you juggle family life with your career?**

I bring the family with me.

**I was given a few questions from my students that they would like to know if thats ok. Which one would you prefer, cupcakes or donuts?**

Cupcakes.

**Would you prefer water skiing or snow skiing?**

Uh, suntan lotion on the beach.

**Which one of your characters you have portrayed in your 250+ films could destroy Chuck Norris?**

Oh, god!

I know Chuck. I don’t think that too many people can destroy Chuck Norris; he’s an amazing man. Great, great, great humanitarian.

It’s funny but all the guys in the movies that are supposed to be like karate experts, all of them need to shut their mouth when it comes to Chuck Norris. You know, he’s still Mr. Norris to everybody; that’s even all the super heroes.

**Now, because we are on the set of Zombie Hunter, I gotta ask you a zombie related question. It’s the end of the world, you got the zombie apocalypse coming up. You can use any of the weapons you’ve had in any of your films, what do you use?**

You know, I gotta go with the machete. I've seen too many zombies that get shot and keep coming but if I cut him in half, I don’t care if he’s coming; it’s a short guy.

**How has your experience been on your latest film?**

I love the movie. I love that the director’s cool. Producers are all pretty cool. All of the stunt guys…

They're amazing.

The stunt guys do not know how to hold the bag. It’s a rehearsal guys. Okay, so they're really gung-ho and that’s awesome; makes it really easy for an actor.

**What advice do you have to actors just starting out?**

For me, it’s perseverance. I hear a lot of people, I don’t want to be an extra. It’s like, I was blessed and I just kind of got tough hardly to stop one runaway train because I could handle Eric.

Basically for the five years of my career, I was a glorified extra. You know, I had lines like, let’s go kill the sons of bitches and that was about it. But I was basically inmate #1. I loved it; I was making scale. The first time I got a name I was Art Finela in a movie called Death Wish 4 with Charles Bronson. I said, wow, I'm like a real actor now. I'm not inmate #1.

**Update**: Since our interview Danny has been in 53 productions. 2 of which brought him back to Utah as Captain machine Gun in “Cyborg X” and Angel Malvado in “Juarez 2045”.

# Actor - Jonathan Blanca

## Acting from Stage to Screen

When I attend independent film screenings I come with very little information about what to expect from the film. Often, there is no trailer, no poster, and no buzz about the film. So when I was asked to attend the “Resistance Movement” film premiere I was a blank slate.

The film was a spiritual story set in Germany during World War II. The story was about three young men that passed out pamphlets that told the public about the extermination camps. The were arrested and tortured for treason and were sentenced to death.

This was a powerful movie with some fantastic performances, particularly from the lead character placed by Joseph Blanca.

**Joseph, Resistance Movement was a film you were in that was adapted from a stage play and shot as a movie. How did this film compare to your other work?**

This was actually the first film I had ever done. It was very intense. It was a form of acting I had never practiced before and it was in around entirely new to me.

It was extremely powerful; one of the hardest things I've ever done but also one of the most fulfilling things I've ever done and something I hope to do a lot more in my life.

**Were you able to do any research, explore your character for Resistance Movement?**

Yes, I did significant amounts of research. I read several books that were written by Rudolph Folbay as well as others that experienced it with him. As well as documentaries that had been available through things such as history outlets and what not.

I did as much research as I could to make sure that I was able to capture the truth of who this person was to the best of my abilities.

**How did you prepare for this character?**

It all came down to all the research done prior to filming. I was in rehearsals for three or four months. Before we started I as much research and training with my incredible director,

Katherine Moss and it took a lot of work. It’s such a delicate subject that when it comes to history you have to be careful with what you do with it and what you're able to do with it.

 I think that we were able to capture these characters, these moments, and these times in history exceptionally well.

**How important were rehearsals for this film?**

I would have been absolutely nothing without the rehearsals. I had only ever been a character actor I had never portrayed a historical or real person before and the rehearsals became such a vital, vital thing for me.

Had I not had those, had I not had that experience with my fellow cast members and my director and my producers, I would have been a fish out of the water.

I had absolutely no chance in the world of any sort of decent performance without those months of rehearsal and hard work.

**Do you have any advice about being an actor that would help new actors in their career?**

Never underestimate how much studying your character can help you. A lot of people believe that once you memorize, you’ve done all the work you need to do and that you just go on stage, you say those lines, and it’ll be great. people will laugh.

Good writing is a great thing but you can’t underestimate the value of rehearsal and the value of truly getting to know your character so that you're not portraying yourself in a different form but you're truly becoming another person on stage or in film, whatever outlet you may be using your acting for.

# Actor - Charan Prabhakar

## Building your Network

I met Charan Prabhakar during a premiere of “Abandoned Mine,” which was called “The Mine” at the time. I’ve had an opportunity to visit him on several film sets; he’s been acting now since about 2004.

**Charan, when did you discover that you wanted to be an actor?**

I got into acting in High School. I started doing plays and acting classes and I really, really enjoyed it. I always felt like it was like a hobby, it wasn’t something that I really was going to end up doing, and my dad’s like, “Alright, Charan, time to grow up, get a good career.”

So while I was going to school I was going between majors. I couldn’t really figure what I wanted to do with my life and it was the summer of 2004.

I remember having a really tough week and just questioning myself, questioning everything I was doing. I remember thinking, “when I get really old, if I regret something, what is it going to be?” And I knew that if I didn’t give acting a shot, I totally would regret it, because I knew that’s exactly what I wanted to do.

Then I started thinking, “Why haven’t I done it yet? What’s stopping me?” and I realized it was because I was afraid, I thought I was going to fail.

So when I realized that it was just something that I was afraid of, I’m like, “Alright, that’s it. I’m going to really go for it!”

After I made that decision, the weirdest stuff started happening that week—people started calling me randomly and they’re like, “Charan, you’ve got to go live your dream, and you’ve got to go pursue what you’re supposed to be doing.”

At that point I started taking acting classes and started meeting film-makers. Before I knew it, I started doing all these short films and feature films.

**One of your very first IMDB credits that comes up as an actor is the short film “Of Genies and Goldfish.” Tell me about your experience on this production.**

Ah, Genies and Goldfish. That was a production that my buddy asked me to be a part of. We were trying to come up with different movie ideas and a friend of mine, John Chen, wrote this script about this kid who goes to this barber who happens to be an ancient Indian genie. I got to play this older Indian genie guy that basically inspires this kid to live his dreams and ask this girl out.

But, it was ridiculous; it was very, very ridiculous. We shot for three days and it was a lot of fun, and I got to feel what it was like to be in production of this film and helped carry it through—and it was very, very ridiculous. It was awesome.

**Has your ethnicity worked to your advantage when being cast for films?**

Oh, totally to my advantage, especially in Utah, its ethnic diversity is so minimal. I was getting these different ethnic roles. But I’m more than playing Indian, I was a Chinese guy, a Bolivian guy, all kinds of different roles because Utah didn’t have the diversity—and it was cool.

When I moved to LA, I was like, “Oh, great, now I’ve got to learn how to actually act,” because the competition was a lot tougher, but I’m definitely thankful for it.

**Tell me about your experience on “Return with Honor: A Missionary Homecoming.”**

Well, that was a great experience. It was my very first feature film that I had any lines in, so I was very excited about it. It was very simple.

I didn’t have to do too much, it was just one day of shooting, but the main producer who ended up casting me, we ended up becoming really good friends—and actually, interestingly enough, he is going to be doing another movie next year that I’m being considered for the lead on.

I just am so grateful because I think, the biggest thing I learned is that it’s so important to make friends and keep friends and network and all that stuff.

**Tell me about how you got involved in “Money or Mission.”**

I had just graduated from BYU. I knew that once I was done with school, I could fully dedicate time and energy towards making movies and acting. My good buddy Dave Skousen, who was the cinematographer for “Money or Mission”, invited me to come along just to be a part of this crew. I was just there to help the director out—whatever he needed and all that type of stuff.

It really wasn’t a crazy role because while we were making this movie, he needed someone to be a thug, so he said, “Charan, you look like a thug,” and I’m like, “Uh, sure.” So I was a thug.

Later, the director had a dream. While he was making this movie that the main actor, Nick Whitaker was going to be dressed up as a missionary, walking side-by-side with another missionary, and he dreamt that the other missionary was going to be me. So he called me up, and said, “Charan, can you please be a missionary?”

 “Well, only if you dreamt it.”

And so I was a missionary and I just walked side-by-side with this Nick Whitaker. We filmed a little bit of it which ended up being the cover for the movie.

Soon after Money or Mission was wrapped, you got another call, but this call led you to a film that was going to be seen by a large audience, larger than anything you’ve done so far.

**You had an opportunity to work on a Disney film called “High School Musical 2.”**

“High School Musical 2” was great. It was a definite learning experience for me. I had to audition for it in December of 2006, then January of 2007. I got a call back, and then I heard nothing. I assumed I didn’t get it because a week goes by, two weeks go by, nothing. Then, sometime in March, my agent calls me and says “Charan, you booked High School Musical 2!”

 “Are you kidding me?” I said

Then my manager told me, “You have to get down to St. George on Monday, you’re shooting on Tuesday.”

The problem was that I was supposed to be working all day Monday but somehow I was able to make it work. I got off work around 6PM and then I raced home and had dinner. I didn’t end up leaving until 9PM and my brother was sweet enough to drive me to St. George.

We get down to St. George around 12:30 or 1:00 am.

That morning I find out that the role I was cast for wasn’t even the role I auditioned for! A completely different role!

So I’m learning lines—it’s only two lines—and I have a call time for 6:30 that morning. It was really very rushed. The cast was very cool.

I got to act with Zac Efron—he’s a very nice guy—and it was interesting because acting’s acting. I think once the camera goes on, you just do your thing. It doesn’t matter if it’s a small film or large film.

However, because it was so rushed the day before and not knowing who my character was—when I was finally doing it, I just struggled a little bit. I felt like I was thinking too much, I didn’t know my lines or I kept messing up my lines even though there were only two of them.

Funny story about High School Musical 2—my second line I say to Zach is, “Hey Bolton, Fulton wants you in the lobby.”

I hated that line…the Bolton-Fulton thing confused the heck out of me.

And so I talked to the director and I said, “Can I just say ‘Hey Troy, Fulton wants you in the lobby?’ It just seems more natural.”

He had said, “No, no, I want you to say Bolton, Fulton,” or whatever, and I ended up saying.

During my ADR session, I said it that way still—but when I watched the movie, they dubbed my voice with a totally different actor, and they said, “Hey Troy, Fulton wants you in the lobby!”

 I was like, “I knew it! It was my idea!” So, it was hilarious. It was really good.

**Right after “High School Musical 2” you were cast in “Heber Holiday” and “Bagboy.” Tell me about these films.**

Heber Holiday was a film done by McKay Danes, and it was good. I got to meet a lot of great people. I got to meet some new friends that I still talk to and work with to this day. In both of those movies, I was a typical Indian guy.

Heber Holiday we shot at night and it was very quick. Bagboy was a National Lampoon movie. I had one line. I got to act with Paul Cambell from “Battlestar Galactica” which I love.

**Tell me about your experience on “CTU: Provo.”**

“CTU: Provo” was a great movie—I produced that movie.

I raised funds for it and helped get a lot of the locations and Donnie Osmond’s a really good friend of mine—he’s like an adoptive father to me. I call him my albino father and he calls me his Indian son…it’s really kind of pathetic, but, I grew up with Donny Osmond and so I just asked him, “Hey, would you be in our movie for just a day?”

He was super-gracious and willing. That was a lot of fun. We shot for a really low budget spread out the shoot. We shot most of it in 2007, and released it in 2008. It was one of those where we weren’t paying anybody so we had to shoot around people’s schedules…which I would never recommend.

What should have been a 2-3 week shoot ended up taking 4 - 5 months. That was my first experience behind the camera, actually shooting it. We had Alan Seawright, a very talented director, direct that for us.

**In 2009 you were cast “One Man’s Treasure.”**

John Lyde (the director) had talked to me about the film back in 2006. I went to help run the auditions. I was reading against the actors and Darin Southam blew us away.

Darin’s a funny guy. I’ll be honest; at first, I didn’t really know what to think of the guy. He seemed kind of closed off.

I invited him over to my house to do a read-to get our characters more in sync and understand each other more. The moment we started actually shooting, I realized he’s such a cool guy. He’s also become one of my best friends. Later on I knew I wanted to work with him again so I called him up and asked him to be in “Last Man(s) on Earth.”

**What happened in 2009?**

In 2009 I moved to California. During that time it was just a process of me figuring things out, making new contacts and all that stuff.

I wasn’t as connected as I was with the Utah scene. So I didn’t do as many projects. I started doing more commercial work out in California.

I did a bunch of different commercials. I worked on an educational web series. In 2010 that I met the team that would be doing the “Last Man(s) on Earth”.

**When you went out to California, it sounds like you got plenty of commercial work, but to do the films, you had to leave LA and go back home.**

Yeah, you know—it’s interesting. I’ve built up quite a list of people I like to work with in Utah. I’ve been fortunate that they keep calling me. I ultimately wanted to do in California what I did in Utah; make a network of friends, a network of people that I can start working with.

I wasn’t even living in LA proper when I first moved to California. But since moving here, I have met those people and I’ve met some really cool cinematographers, directors, and hopefully we’ll be doing a lot more projects in California.

The auditions are great, but there’s a lot of competition and at the end of the day, I still want to create my own content.

**What’s happened in 2012? You have been in just about every single film set that I visited this year.**

When it rains, it pours.

I’ve been super-blessed.

I have been networking a lot and one of the things I’ve learned is that people who are busy, they get more stuff done. A lot of actors sit around and wait for the next audition to come or for the next big break. They keep taking acting classes and all that stuff—and it’s great, I admire them—but for me, is actually working is acting class. It’s creating content.

I’m meeting new filmmakers. I’m getting projects together; I’m finding different investors to raise money. I’m constantly thinking about my next project, my next big thing, and as I’ve been doing that, people have seen my work and they call me.

Case in point, I did this film called “Adopting Trouble,” and the reason why I was able to do “Adopting Trouble” was because one of the producers saw “The Mine” and loved me in it and asked me to come and audition.

The character that I auditioned for was originally written for a Spanish guy, but after they had me audition they changed the character’s name and everything.

Then I got cast right after in “Inspired Guns.” I’m in this film because one of the producers of “The Last Man(s) on Earth invited me. It’s one of those things where work begets work, and I’ve been constantly creating more projects, stay busy, and as a result, it’s just been awesome.

People are always saying, “You can’t make money as an actor,” but it’s not true—because you’re proving them wrong just by all the work you’re doing.

Don’t get me wrong—it’s still a struggle. It’s still something where I have a side-job to help pay the bills. When I get cast I get pretty decent money. But I still don’t have the consistency of a TV series. something where it’s a TV show or something where it’s consistent, consistent work. So I still do side jobs to make a bit of extra money. At the end of the day, I have passion for what I do.

I love it.

Because I love it, it’s not work.

I always try to have fun on my projects and stuff that I do, just by how stressful it gets, and sometimes you have to take a step back.

I was doing “Last Man(s) on Earth,” we were shooting like 17, 18 hours a day consistently and sleeping between like 3 to 4 hours a night.

It was definitely weighing on us.

There were times when you had to take a step back. We just made sure that we were having fun and we were enjoying what we were doing.

I was watching Star Trek interviews, because one of my favorite film-makers is J. J. Abrams. I love his movies. I think they’re really fun and they have all elements; action, humor, you know and a lot of heart to them.

The actors were talking about their experience working with J. J., and how they just loved him to death. They were saying that he keeps things so light-hearted and there’s just a great amount of levity on set.

He’s very collaborative—and to me, that is the type of film-maker I want to be.

**UPDATE**: After filming “inspired Guns” Charan five more productions including the TV series “Silicon Valley”

# Actor - Frank Gerrish

## The Actors Life

Over the past 25 years, Frank has appeared in over 70 feature films, documentaries, and television series. Now, recent work including Daddy Day Camp with Cuba Gooding Jr., Blind Dating with Jane Seymour and Chris Pine, the Sundance film festival award winning film, The Maldonado Miracle with Peter Fonda.

Frank has also appeared in several national commercials and stage production. Frank has a Master's degree from Penn State University and has been an educator for several years while working as an entertainer.

Now, I met Frank several years ago when I was asked to be his stunt double for a film called Mobsters and Mormons.

He was so impressed with Frank’s talents and both acting and music.

**Frank. I can still remember what you were playing on the piano in Wallsberg in between takes of “Mobsters and Mormons.”**

What was I playing? I don’t remember?

**You were playing a Ray Charles “Georgia’s on my Mind.”**

Oh, my. You have a better memory then me.

**Frank, can you recall one of the first instances that really cemented in your mind that acting was what you wanted to do as a career?**

Wanting to do it and enjoying doing it and doing it as a career? The doing it as a career was a bit of a major leap but I always was excited by the idea of creating particularly music, later on. I got my start in my high school choir, actually.

From there I did a couple of musicals just in the chorus. My first was The King and I playing some kind of high priest wandering around humming to myself. I thought, oh, this is good; I made it now. I'm in the chorus of a Rogers and Hammerstein musical. That’s when I seriously said, you know, I really could spend my life doing this.

Everybody says you're an idiot for wanting to do that professionally but, I don’t know, people die after how many decades and then what did you do with your life?

**Did you enjoy your commute, metaphorically speaking?**

Do you remember about how old you were at that time?

Well, I remember the film. This is going to sound so low brow but the film that made me want to do that was Animal House, 1977.

I remember seeing John Belushi on the screen and went, that really is more fun that anybody should be having.

 I felt such a thrill go through me in that movie and watching. I watched it before VCR so I watched it in a theater. But it was that experience and then later on more sophisticated experiences, of course.

But I thought, I really want to do this and then I started seeking out placed to do it. I majored in theater as an undergraduate and I wasn’t sure. My freshman year of college I was political science but I started realizing I was spending all of my time in the theater building.

Then I asked, “What am I doing? Why am I kidding myself?”

It’s not a passion it’s more of an obsession than anything else. I think when we get so obsessed with only doing one thing whether it’s acting or being into the medical sciences if you can’t think of anything other than helping people. Once you’ve found that obsession, you can’t really do anything else. I don’t think you can function as a person.

LA is an interesting town, in terms of obsessions. It’s people full of obsessive behaviors basically unchecked.

Richard Dreyfuss was talking “Inside the Actor’s Studio” saying his goal was to be a movie star; he says it flat out. And he said, sometimes it’s not so good to what you want right away.

**You earned your Master’s degree before you started in film?**

I did almost exclusively theater. I went straight through from my BSA to my MSA. I went through like basically 7 years of college straight. In my graduate school training, I was trained pretty much for Conservatory Theater, regional theater.

We weren’t trained to be in the movies. I had one on camera class in 3 years of my MSA and that class was like an old-fashioned TV studio with like these big old Westinghouse cameras. So, I was really ill-prepared.

I came to Utah that summer after I finished my MSA and started auditioning for stuff right away. I didn’t know how to behave in a film audition. I didn’t know how to do voice overs. I learned, pretty much, I learned by doing in Salt Lake.

**When you first experienced on set, now tell me if I'm right, was this “Nora’s Christmas Gift?” Was this your first experience on a film set.**

That was my first film experience and I remember the audition very well. It was with Kate Predascus and she was terrific and the director of that film was Michael McLane, the composer – he was super, super nice.

I remember going in and I didn’t know how to slate. I knew a lot. If you were talking to me about Shaw or Shakespeare, I could keep up with you, but walking into a film audition…

I remember my first agent was Brooks and Perkins, they no longer exist, and they had to tell me how to walk into a room. When I think of what i did not know, frightens me.

**When you were there you had a smaller role in the film**.

Oh, yeah. A very, very tiny role actually.

**I think they only credited you as the deaf man but it was an experience that led you onto nearly 80 films, now.**

Holy crap!

**You were in shows such as “ The All-New Mickey Mouse Club” as Gus.**

That was one of my earlier jobs, too. I auditioned. We did a film, you know how they break up like dramatic stories into serial form? You remember the old Banana Splits or you're not old enough? They were sort of on Danger Island in the Banana Splits and they filmed them like movies but they serial form them; every day you get like 10 minutes. I was in a film on the new Mickey Mouse club which had Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake and somebody else.

**So, this one was out in LA?**

No, we filmed it up in the mountains, Solitude and Brighton. It was all in Utah.

It aired during the Mickey Mouse club. A lot of those credits, it’s really funny, they look like LA credits. I’ll take it, I don’t have to say it here, let them think what they want.

**I noticed you have a lot of experience with one of Utah’s most prestigious festivals or organizations with Sundance.**

I do.

**You have been involved with them as early as 1991.**

‘91 was my first Sundance film lab and I've been to several.

That’s before they had casting directors. I remember you would show up and they would do a lottery. ‘91 is really early. That was way back to like “Reservoir Dogs” days.

I remember I was there the summer they did Reservoir Dogs and some friends of mine got to workshop with them and the rest is history with that one.

This was back in ‘91, the labs were really just starting. They really hadn’t got that much momentum just yet.

Now, it’s insanely competitive to get involved into the labs and even harder for actors to even get a call to come in and audition, let alone land any pieces in these projects.

Yeah, I believe they have fulltime casting directors now. Jeff Johnson is one, locally, and they have an LA casting director and maybe one in New York, too.

I'm not sure but they bring in bigger names and they also bring in mentors on the projects, too.

I remember the first mentor, in ‘91, I worked with a soviet director who barely spoke English at all but his mentor was Steven Spielberg’s cinematographer at the time.

He had shot ET and a few other things. Just being with those people is unbelievable.

**Yeah, I'm looking at the cast in this film. I can’t even say the name; it’s a really long Russian name**.

You want to know what a really funny thing is? I play Joseph Stalin of all people. They shot me, they didn’t even have a costume, this is back when they were still printing.

They didn’t have anything to fit me. I wore like an extra-large coat, I'm a 3x. I wore an extra-large coat over my shoulders. I couldn’t even get my arms in it.

**Wow. Now, you also started doing it a bit more serious though, when you got into ‘92. You were juggling a new career as an actor and starting off a young family. What kind of balancing act was this?**

I had a little stability, if you want to call it that. I was a resident member of Pioneer Theater Company at that time. I didn’t have a fulltime job but I started adjunct-ing as a University of Utah, as a part-time teacher in ‘90. I was at the community college actually. For a year and a half, I was top at the community college.

Then, I left the community college and I started getting more fulltime work at Pioneers as an equity act. I joined set in 89 and equity in 91, I think it was.

So, I had a bit of a home there. I was in several plays and that’s where my real actor training happened; it was actually on stage. I'm not supposed to admit to that but I was doing several plays a year. I ended up doing like 35 productions and 11 eleven seasons at Pioneer.

That’s where it really happened and that’s where I started getting confident. If you wait until you get on a film set to get some acting jobs, you’ve waited too late; you're not bringing something to process as you should be.

You’re doing what we call “showing up”; just showing up not prepared. To me it’s kind of funny. We talked about this before the interview when we have people who say, hey, can you get me on a film set? I want to just try it out.

There are a lot of people who see the force of their personality. Some are abrasive, some are wonderful but you get onto film sets and get in front of a camera and do reasonably well, if that’s what the person is needed for. Meaning, this is who I am and for lack of a better word, I’ll call it the difference between personality acting and character acting.

Personality acting, which is the majority of the acting you see in the movies and on TV, is just who I am. Throw some lines and I’ll make the lines mine because that’s who I am. I’ll give it my rhythm, my sensibility, my intellect, my timing, and you get what I give you.

That’s what I think you mean by showing up. It assumes a confidence, yeah, I can hit my lines. I can hit my marks. It assumes some business and some acumen being there's little attempt to change voice physicality, perspective, emotional, historical, whatever you are as a person.

Character acting might be taking the demands of the script and trying to augment what it is that you do to serve the story. There are many famous stories of people saying, Oh, I'm not going to do that in the script, that’s not who I am. Well, I'm sorry but who you are is who the character is written for. So, if it says you’ve got a limp or you’ve got a stutter, do the damn thing. Well, I don’t stutter. Well, you're an actor. If it says the character stutters, at least give it a try. All the egotism and the vanity that people will say you'll get what I give you and that’s it.

**How many people stay in business that long?**

Not that many and not just in acting but in any career.

**The other day I had an opportunity to speak with somebody that you worked with back in 93. I was on the set of Granite Flats and the director was Scott Swofford.**

He directed a film called “The Buttercream Gang: in the Secret of Treasure Mountain.”

**Tell me about going onto this sequel to a popular family film back in the ‘90s.**

That was a good experience because that was one of my earliest experiences of having a long shoot. I remember working with Feature Films for Families on that and it was a huge shoot but we shot that over the course of a month, I believe it was.

That was one of my first tastes of being a real working actor like showing up to work, different scene, different clothes, different day. It wasn’t a day play or anything. So, your relationship with the director, the crew, and your fellow actors is different.

So, Scott and I basically as we started working we developed more of a shorthand with each other in that process. I recognized what he was going for early on, in terms of his style of the film and I would try to anticipate his needs.

When you can solve director’s problems like that, he likes you a whole bunch more.

In general, if you want to be a working actor, learn how to make everybody else’s job easier and you'll get asked back to the party.

**What was your experience working on Rigoletto?**

That was a tough shoot. That was one of my first tastes of being, if you want to call it, on location. We shot that down in price in various locations: Castledale, and Helper.

I remember it was the first time I had stayed for an extended time as an actor at a motel. I remember living on my per diem being very frugal. I remember bringing my son down with me and I bought my son his first game system.

It was hard work and a lot of really good people made their bones through that shoot. Rigoletto is one of the most commented films to this day. People say, oh, you were in Rigoletto

Of all the films I've done, that one is somehow in people’s memory.

**You were credited in the pilot episode of the Steven King miniseries, The Stand. But I could not find you anywhere in the film.**

I've got a funny story about that. I got cut out of that. The director was Mick Garris who is now a big horror junkie. He’s done like a lot of SyFy channels and I've written him actually since I've been in LA.

I got cast to be in that and when we were going to shoot it I was going to have a scene with Rob Lowe and I got written out. So, why is that on my IMDB do you say? It’s hysterical.

The next, I think in 98, it was a few years later, I come in to audition for Mick Garris again for a movie called Virtual Obsession which I think was called the host then.

He says, “Frank, why isn’t The Stand on your resume?”

“I never was in it.”

 “Did you get a contract?”

“Yeah.”

“Did I hire you? Did I cast you?”

“Yeah, but Mick, I wasn’t in it.”

He goes, “Yes you are, you put that on your resume. I want to see that.”

Yeah, that’s a funny story so today when I coach actors I say, look, I've been told by very good authority that if you were booked in something put it on your resume.

As soon as you sign that contract, you put it down on your IMDB.

If they ask if you have any tape on that, just say I got cut out. You don’t have to tell them you got written out. I got cut out which is still cut out. If you're not in an edit of something, you're still in the film, part of the film, and you deserve credit. On IMDB they have a lot of these uncredited things.

Those generally now are reserved for people who are extras. If you put uncredited, that means you didn’t have an actual credit which probably means you didn’t act at all.

**You also did a film with Treat Williams that did a very long series in Utah called Everwood. Treat Williams was also in the Shadow of Evil. He was in this one with William H. Macy.**

That was the first of three times I worked with Treat and that was before I knew who William H. Macy was. That’s how early that was.

The thing that excited me most about that was I knew Treat Williams from like “Once Upon a Time in America”, “Prince of the City”, and “Hair.”

The scene that I'm in actually just barely touches his scene so we didn’t actually get to work together in Everwood but I did work as his psychic in Substitute 3 and we spent almost a month together; 3 ½ weeks. Now, he’s my Facebook friend.

**You’ve done so many films here in the 90s and you're doing all this at the same time you're doing all your theatrical theater things, you're adjunct teaching at two universities.**

Yes and at that time, my wife and I were actually running a non-profit program that was funded by the NEA of Utah, it’s called the Junior Shakespeare Company – which I need to put on there. That was really, really important.

We worked with junior high and high school actors in Shakespeare training. We did a touring company; we performed. There are a lot of really good actors that have come from that whether they became actors or not, it didn’t matter.

That was just a really special experience.

When I think of the industry that I had in the 90s, the stuff that I was just able to do, and then I realize I was in my 30s.

Then, I realized, well, that’s probably why, you're a young buck still. You can do this yourself.

You have a bit more energy at that time.

And you're more stupid.

You don’t realized that your life is half on yet. You don’t realize that you can fail as badly as you do in your 40s. Then you'll be alright. I've never had a fulltime, fulltime job until I was 38.

**You are talking right about the end of Touched by an Angel, at that point.**

Yeah, I'm credited for four but I did six.

**What was it like working on the series that lasted several seasons?**

The very first one we shot up on the avenues and I was with the director from “Boardwalk Empire.” I shot with Felicia Rasha. I remember talking to her about Broadway and The Cosby Show the whole time, like an idiot.

I try not to be a fan when I'm on the shoot; I try not to be that guy.

When I worked with Peter Fonda on the “Maldonado Miracle”, we spent a week and a half together. I remember saying, hey, we’re going to spend some time together, great, great, great.

He started asking me about my training.

Out of nowhere; Peter Fonda!

 Those are one of the experiences that you kind of live for in your career, where you can actually hang out and film history. You sit there and you go I am now, Kevin Bacon may talk about it, how you just jumped to the head of the class and the degrees of separation.

Wow, she’s great.

**And what was the experience like working with Salma Hayek as a director?**

Wow, she’s great.

I remember the audition, it was way down in South Polo. I remember I had one of my several Ford Taurus’ I would have in the future with no air conditioning. I remember being nervous because I was going to read for Salma Hayek and it was a call back. I got sent right to the call back. I went in and I smiled. She was wonderfully warm and I nodded. She started giving me direction in Spanish and I remember going what do I do here? Do I admit that I don’t speak Spanish? I did one of those things, nodded like you understood but not really.

She’s like “You didn’t do anything I just said.”

Here’s the thing. When I train actors, I say if you don’t understand the direction if it’s obtuse or if they're something you're told that you don’t understand just do it completely differently. Do what I call a 180. So, whatever they tell you make up a 180 degree adjustment. She loved the adjustment I made. I had no understanding of what she was telling what to do.

 I remember getting cast and we went to the Ritz in Provo, I think it’s a Marriott hotel, before the read through I pulled her aside.

“Mrs. Hayek, I have to confess to you I don’t speak any Spanish. I don’t know if there's any Spanish and I don’t know if there's any Spanish in this piece.”

She said, “I know you don’t speak Spanish.”

**Over the next few years you were cast in a variety of spiritual films. Was this by design?**

What's funny is that it’s not like you ever as an actor have the ability to make a conscious decision, at least not at my level, saying now I will concentrate on spiritual films; it’s just what comes up. The Liking the Scriptures scene sort of happened.

I got contacted and I went in because I knew one of the people working on that crew who was doing hair and makeup at the time. I think they were all ready to shoot and were going to cast. They had somebody casted as Noah and I went in and I thought I was too late. I don’t know if I replaced somebody or somebody dropped – I don’t know the story – and that turned out to be a six film little franchise which was very, very nice.

My whole family came with me to audition as a matter of fact. They ended up taking me and my son for “Baptist at out Barbecue”. My son plays my actual son in Baptist at a Barbecue; he was in 8th grade at the time. Now he’s 23 and married. We look back on that shoot and that was another tough shoot.

**We see you in several more films and in about 2013 we see you doing something’s out in LA and in Utah; you're commuting to both. What happened here? Did you move to LA?**

No, my legal address is Utah. I'm here, I'm staying at an apartment, I am paying rent. I'm doing kind of both.

**“Here” is Studio City, correct?**

Yes, I have a mailing address for Studio City and I have agency representation of commercially and, they call it, theatrical here – which that just means acting. Theatrically in New York means stage, here it means film and TV. Anything like non-commercial. There's so many new handles of names; I've never heard of half the stuff they make up here. I've never heard of it and I'm learning.

**Tell me about your transition to Hollywood.**

Right now I have incredible optimism. I'm still terrified. I remember driving out here in my Ford Taurus with everything it could hold knowing I was coming to pilot season. I found out, actually after I got here, the pilot season never ends.

So, this deadline I set for myself, there's no such thing as an ending to pilot season. It’s just a type of pilot season. Pilot season is where they create the new shows to replace the ones that are going but the process of pilot season is they cast the leads, the bankable stars, then they cast ensembles around that.

For people like me who have just got here, I'm waiting for the table scraps to come down, the roles once the show has been picked up. I'm waiting to get a day and there's a whole different terminology on TV.

There's guest star, co-star. Co-star is the same thing as day player in film, it’s like a one day shoot. They're also called under-fives on daytime TV – five lines and under.

A guest star gets a different contract and a different negotiation and also different billing.

When you have two or more scenes and usually as an extended period of time; they pay you for your time, not the amount of work you do. So, in film it’s a day player on TV it’s co-star, guest star. Depending on the thing, it could be a one day contract, a 3 day contract, or a weekly.

Let me just tell you that LA rates are way better than Utah’s rates if you can get in the front door. There are still a lot of set films that are still 1, 2, $300 films, like Utah. But the day rate for TV is just under $1000 a day.

For every co-star, which is like that two-line role – the one I had just went on – there are approximately 2500 submissions by agents and managers. Those are the people who are represented and a lot of those casting directors will only see sag actors, anyway.

If they need hardcore bikers and they can’t find a sag biker, they’ll Harley somebody or give somebody a card. But by large, if you have an agent or a manager here it’s about a 70/30 split on the submissions. But, 2500 submissions for the becoming a day player part, from there, and those are done by headshots only. The other thing is your headshot and your initial package and your headshot here are far more important than anything you could ever present to the world.

**So, these actors that are coming out with just a resume and a headshot, that’s not going to cut it?**

No. They don’t even care about these Utah credits. They care, what take do you have? What do you look like right now? They call it off the rack casting. I'm pulling you in, can I put you in the show just the way you are right not? In TV, when I read for Go On, I read on a Monday afternoon. I got put on availability or avail that evening.

My agent didn’t tell me, smartly, because I wouldn’t have slept that night. The next morning I had a contract. My agent said, you better be over at universal for a fitting Tuesday afternoon; I shot at 7 o’clock Wednesday morning. That’s how fast the TV turnaround was.

**So, you're talking like 48 hours?**

Yeah, for a part my size.

 Now for a bigger part, maybe longer but commercials have the same turnaround. I read for someone today that I believe is shooting on Friday morning.

There's not a whole lot of time there. So, if you’re trying to juggle a fulltime job and have an acting career out in LA, is that even possible?

Well, like today’s audition for the commercial was at 11 o’clock in the morning. I got the call in my inbox, I got an email in my inbox, to confirm it at 6:55 last night. So, part of your day job better be flexible.

Availability is one of the three big things. If you're not available, you could be the best actor in the world but if you're consistently not available no agent’s going to touch you. If you keep saying no to somebody in any form of your life, we talked about this before, begin told no gets old. That's a quick way to get dropped by an agent. It’s all interconnected.

Back to the 2500 submissions. Those are called “online thumbnails,” So, your headshot better look good as a thumbnail. These medium three-quarter body shots don’t work.

At least, if you belong to one of the casting sites, LA casting or casting for tour or whatever, have some that look close so they see what your ethnicity is, coloring, what’s the shape of your face. Wow, yeah. So, they judge you by that. From there they narrow it down to about from 2500 submissions to about 100 serious candidates that they casting director may thumb through and again, it’s real fast.

At that point, 100, she may click on a reel and look at 20 seconds of your reel there, look at your resume, do we want to bring this guy in or not? They end up bringing in 10 or 12 to put on tape. Of the 10 or 12, the small parts are cast off tape, usually. They may bring you back for a call back 3 or 4.

Those three or four are immediately put on availability because anything could happen with those three or four actors in LA because everybody’s busy. So, by the time you get to the 10 or 12th place, everyone is excellent, everybody can do their job, and it has nothing to do with you. Today, I saw the same five or six fat guys I've seen for the last 2 months.

 I'm at the point now where I've been here since November, I'm seeing movies come out and I'm seeing commercials and I'm seeing stuff that I've read for and I recognize the episodes and the script. I keep a log so I can watch, you know. Not to compare myself but to see how arbitrary this business is.

 You can go in and give a brilliant read, be put on availability, and when you watch the episode three weeks later you find it’s a small Asian girl that played your part. You'll go, okay, I guess I'm not offended.

They decided to go another way.

That’s about as extreme as it gets for me but that really is how arbitrary this business is. That’s really how arbitrary. So, when you get to the point your validation of courses in the booking but getting a call back in this business, is victory. That means they like you enough to ask you on a second date. I don’t think Hollywood is much unlike online dating because everything’s done online here. You flirt with somebody, you look at a profile and you go, oh, wow. He’s really cute. And then when you meet them in person they're a dog, right?

But I could have easily looked at that and let my pride say, I'm not doing a deferred job, I'm a working actor blah, blah, blah. But I saw that the casting director has cast 6 or 7 features in the last 2 years. Why wouldn’t I go for the chance to even be seen by that guy? I got called in.

Getting called in; getting chosen to dance is a victory.

**Frank, you are at the point where people in other careers are starting to look at retirement and you're starting a new career**.

You know what's really funny? I got something in the mail; I turned 50 on March 14th, I turned 50. I got an AARP card in the mail. Do you know what that feels like?

Feels like you're getting old Frank.

I'm going to use it; I'm going to get that senior discount. Don’t kid yourself. But, retirement?

 Let’s look at it this way and maybe this is a good place to wrap up here is that I am the sum total of everything I've done.

If I look at it that way, yes I've had education and I've had 80 plus IMDB credits and I've taught and I've done all of this theater and I know film history and all the stuff that sounds incredibly self-serving.

Why wouldn’t that excite me to be able to walk into a room with a script in front of a director and say watch me work, here I am?

When Eric Clapton picks up a guitar, as long as his faculty still there, he’s the sum total of every solo he’s ever played. That guys not even close to being at his end game. As long as he can draw a breath, he’s going to play a guitar.

Anybody, at this level, talk to people like Michael Flanagan, Ian Swartz who’s done this a while.

Talk to directors like Scott Swofford or even Keith Merrill.

You want me to play a two-line role in your deferred film? Fine but you get all of me. I'm not going to give you a deferred performance.

I'm giving you my “A game” because that’s what you bring.

If I'm lucky enough to get on a series somewhere or get into a film, the excitement of being here is the excitement of hope because the possibilities are endless. I couldn’t say that, necessarily, as a Utah actor.

 I've been preparing for this for so long and I don’t have the setters. I have my family support. It’s hard financially; it’s hard but it’s not impossible. You know the thing that keeps you ticking everything under what you are doing is the hope and understanding of your excellence to come.

Without that, there's no reason to go to school, there's no reason to study or train or read or better yourself. You better believe that there's excellence to come; that’s what you trained for.

You don’t train to be a star, you train to be excellent.

**Update**: Frank moved to Hollywood from Utah and has been in several TV series such as “Day Job”, “My BFF Satan”, and “Franklin & Bash”.

# Actor - Sean Astin

## Growing Up Hollywood

One of the perks of hosting a film TV show is getting the opportunity to talk to actors and directors that have been making films and TV shows for decades. So when the producer of “The Freemason” asked if I would be interested in talking to Sean Astin on set I jumped at the chance.

The plan was that we were going to show up, shoot for about 2 minutes and leave. The interview would air on our weekly TV show. But when Sean came to do his interview he offered to allow all the students to come on camera with him and ask him any questions they had.

Questions varied from his experiences on Goonies and Lord of the Rings to how he juggled his family life and career.

Sean, these are my students.

Hi, everybody. Wait, they should ask a couple of questions.

Great idea.

Come on it, come here. Come on, come ask a question.

Out of all of the films that you have done, which one has been the one that has been your favorite to do and act on it?

Lord of the Rings. When you say “act on” I mean it had the broadest spectrum of challenges. But, honestly for most actors, maybe some have a role that they love the most. But they're all like little babies.

 I have 3 daughters and I can’t tell the middle one you’re my favorite. I try to anyway even though you're not supposed to.

Yeah but Rudy, Goonies, and Lord of the Rings are the 3 movies that I'm kind of most identified for when I walk around public.

But some of my favorite ones I’ve ever done are really small and called “Bigger than the Sky” and one in Philadelphia called “Kimberly”. A movie people don’t see.

When times got hard in your career, what made you push through? What in your mind made you pursue acting and directing to the level that you did?

Well, first I've been very blessed. Incredibly blessed to start out with people who are very successful; giving me a boost. That’s…. you can’t ever take that for granted. The assets that you have when you start.

I think, Cortez – the Spanish conquistador arrived in the new world and burned his boats so that his people would fight and there's no going home. It’s like that; we realize there's no choice. You don’t have a choice, you have to survive. Survive physically. You have to make enough food to eat. You can’t be a burden to your parents. You know what I mean?

You know what? There was at one point, I rarely talked about this, I mean I talked about it but not in this way. When I was about 25, I started getting worried that I wouldn't have a place in cinema history. You know, cinema history has only been around for 110 years. It’s not like it’s that long. People have been able to really make a mark: Charlie Chaplin, Steven Spielberg, whatever… Lots of people have made their mark in different ways. I kept thinking what's my place? Where am I going to fit in? Even though I did the Goonies, even though I did Rudy,

But I felt like I didn’t know what my place was. That drove this internal drive to just keep going. Keep figuring out what my thing is; what contribution am I going to make?

I always gravitated towards excellence, wanting to work with people who are excellent, even if I didn’t have that much to do. Somewhere inside of me, my whole life up until 8 years ago was this internal metronome driving me forward. I didn’t even understand why.

Then about 8 years ago, my 3rd child was born. I started thinking I needed to relax; I'm going to have a heart attack.

How did you get started in acting?

My mom and dad.

My mom is a famous actress, Patty Duke, multi-Emmy award-winning, Oscar award winning actress for playing Helen Keller, the miracle worker.

The movie she did in the 60s, then she did TV shows. So, she literally came to me when I was 7 and put me in the movie Please Mommy Don’t Hit Me.

Please Don’t Hit Me Mommy was an after school special. Every week there was another, you know, someone had cancer or whatever.

My Mom said “Honey, do you want to be in a show with me?”

And I said, “Do they pay me money?”

She said, “Yep, they pay you money.”

I think it was like $10,000. I didn’t get it; it went into an account. I eventually got it.

So, you liked it right away or it was kind of like she made you do it?

You ever watch any animal that’s like learning how to walk or ducks?

Yeah, there are ducks everywhere.

They're just born and then they go. You start thinking about a few thousand miles later like boy, I’ve been flying for a while. So, yeah but I liked it, I loved it. It’s a part of you.

When you start getting into filmmaking and acting for as long you have been doing this, it’s pretty much in your character isn’t it?

I have to stop myself sometimes on a film like this. Everybody here is professional, smart, creative, thoughtful, and talented but my mind, I've done it so many times. Not this show or these characters but I've come to work, gone through makeup, hair, and wardrobe, get to the set, they set your marks.

I've gone through the process so much that I’m like….my brain is really fast about what's about to happen.

Sometimes I think, try not to be ahead of everyone. Try and live in the moment. It doesn’t work; I always do it anyways but anyhow, there you go. No directorial questions?

I don’t think I have enough experience to even know….

You don’t have enough experience; what was your experience like? Did you have a good time?

Yeah, I liked it. I thought it was fun.

The most important thing, better than production value, better than making sure that you get this shot or that clean, even getting these actors the ideas. If the idea is strong, you can almost do a puppet show on video and make it the most important thing in the world.

Is the story all that matters in a film?

What I find sometimes when you're learning, when you say story’s important, it’s like somebody just dropped a ton a bricks like this is all gold. Like, I can’t even stand up one of these bricks. But if we had an idea, some specific idea you could identify a good idea and just follow that all the way where it’s going to take you.

Is there a role that you have not had the opportunity to do that you really want to do?

Yeah, I want to do a western where I get to shoot somebody.

I mean a proper western .The horse is an absolute must. I've thought through 100 different plot lines but I just keep waiting for me to get a, not “Quick and the Dead.” I don’t want a stylized theme.

I want Sam Elliot.

Something with Morgan Freeman in it. That kind of thing. I don’t know what my job is but I get to shoot somebody. I might just wing him.

Do you have any good stories from when you were shooting the Goonies? I love that movie.

Lots. Lots; I'm trying to come up with one. Where are you from?

Brazil.

From Brazil, Brazil. They have treasure in Brazil, right?

Yeah.

So, there's a moment where the Goonies go down the waterslide. When we finally land in the cavern that has the pirate ship and on the pirate ship was the treasure. So, stage 20, is where they built all the water slides with the rubber pungy sticks sticking through it, you know?

They had the whole place filled, the whole floor of the stage was filled with water, then they had three stories of kind of a network of these things; it was awesome. We’d go down it and you would worry about the electricity and stuff. But, then the part where we spit out was on stage 16. So, they built at the edge of the stage. I think it still is, the Ghostbusters set and they had some of the biggest sets on there.

This was by far, I mean it was up there with the top five coolest sets ever built in Hollywood. They fill the whole thing up with water, stage, you’d have to walk in waist high water except for the middle bit where we jump off and that was like 16 feet.

Deep enough so that you guys won’t get hurt, right?

Right. And then the walls. They had the walls kind of around like this. Well, the wall that was at the front part of the studio, there wasn’t much space between the cave set wall and the actual door. But somehow there was a ladder. We crawled the ladder and then you'd go through the last two feet and land in the water.

We were desperate for them to let us do it. They were always worried that we’d get hurt. Let’s do it, let’s do it, let’s do it, let’s do it. They finally let us do it.

Well, we did it, it’s shallow. I didn’t think that as you go down, go sideways and land. I went dunk, ohhh . Hit my leg, broke my toe. I don’t think I've told that story before but I was trying to pretend I was fine. But your head is ringing and you got loss of feeling.

I have a question for you. So do you prefer working behind the camera?

Uh, I can’t act at all, not even slightly. I'm a horrible actor.

Why?

I don’t know; I get stage fright and then things just start going in my mind at 100 miles per hour, kind of like right now.

So, memorizing other lines or just?

Actually, saying the lines. When I get to it, I always think it’s wrong and it’s not going to sound good. Then I start changing it like right before.

You know who else did that? Marlon Brando. You looked pretty natural right now when he was describing that to me. All the pretense went away right there. You got any questions for me?

What is your favorite part about being on a movie set? The one thing when you're having that bad day, you're like at least there's this..

I love when it’s going properly, I love the rhythm of the day. It’s when the day has a shape that feels right. Everything from when arrive; I love you walk into the makeup room, there's the smell of makeup.

I love when the camera guys get something just right and their kind of happiness that they don’t even necessarily share with anybody else. They just got something or they didn’t think they’d be able to do something but somebody engineered a little thing, picking up that little moment.

When I have an idea or 10000 ideas and the director’s likes them; that’s a good day. I love it all.

I’ll walk over, I’ll glance, I won’t necessarily watch a whole take but I’ll glance at it and I’ll know in a split second if it’s good or not. If it’s good, I'm like yes! I love that feeling of accomplishment.

Yeah, I love all of it. I can do a gorilla movie or 100 million dollar movie, and for me they're roughly the same. I mean, there's different expectations for money and stuff like that but they're roughly the same experience.

But every now and then, sometimes things get out of rhythm; just a little dissonant. Like people aren’t honoring the nature of whatever that day is supposed to be and I can get short tempered during that.

But mostly I just love the flow of the day.

If you're trying to juggle your movie life with personal life, how difficult do you find that?

Hard man, hard. I have three daughters and I've been on a tear right now for the last four weeks; maybe a little longer. I've been in town for only a couple days at a stretch. It’s hard; it’s really, really hard.

I think what happens is you just go into a place in your mind. So, I can be simultaneously thrilled every second of my day and then as soon as I get on the phone with my wife, I'm miserable. Yeah, but you weren’t miserable all day. I'm like yeah, well that wasn’t being accessed at that moment but I really was. Then, you just have to make decisions. If you choose to do something, you have to make sure what you're risking.

I actually had a movie where everything was fine, we worked everything out. I was like you have to have me off by 5 o’clock on Friday or whatever and they were like, umm, we can’t; we’re doing a scene. If I pass them, then I’d have to pass the movie because it was the last father daughter day for my two younger kids at the same school. They had been talking about it for a year. So, if it was a movie that Spielberg was directing and if it was a massive thing but it was so close and I knew they could get it done.

So, they adjusted their schedule and I did it and I went. There's just… you find pressure points that you can push on and get it done, and other times when you just have to carry the load.

I have a 16 yr. old. I have a 10 year old and 7 year old. They get a little bored and you have to be sure when you're entertaining them for 5 or 6 hours; making sure everything is fine.

You don’t want them to have to stay but sometimes… like in lord of the rings, I had my oldest daughter and my wife. They would come to the set, then they would leave; they were as much a part of that movie making experience as anything. But it’s hard when you cant have your family with you.

Speaking of Lord of the Rings, do you still stay in close contact with those guys?

Well, I think everybody goes and they get married, they have children, they work on other jobs. I don’t like thinking of it the way you just asked and it’s the way a lot of people ask it. The way you asked it has to do with this hope, this expectation, this anticipation that the thing that was special doesn’t end.

My way of thinking, the thing that was special didn’t end. It becomes indifferent. So, if we see each other, if you put any of us in a room together for more than 10 seconds, it’s like no time passed.

What advice do you have to future filmmakers?

There's ways for you to get your short films made, if you want to get your short film made. And what I would say is there's nothing that separates anyone from the greatest filmmakers that ever lived except their own imagination.

It sounds hokey but it’s true. If you just trust it, you don’t force things. You don’t force yourself to try and do something that you didn’t do, you just breathe and let your ideas happen or go find other good ideas.

There's no impediment.

There is no impediment to becoming a filmmaker except your own energy and faith in your own imagination. That’s it.

Update: Since our interview, “The Freemason” went on to screen in theaters all over the world and Sean is scheduled to come back to Utah to film the sequel.

# Conclusion

I had a lot of great experiences after talking to all these filmmakers. Their inside knowledge of the industry I have had a crush on has led me to a career in film.

After compiling these interviews I had a TV show broadcast to over 15 million homes nationwide where I had the opportunity to talk to several indie filmmakers. This led me to be a teacher at Salt lake Community College in film and eventually to become the media production specialist for the State of Utah.

I am grateful for the experiences I have had over the past 5 years in Utah’s film industry and look forward to 50 more.