

LEARNING FROM LOW BUDGETS

Peter Broderick on the next generation of guerrilla filmmakers

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Includes case-studies on:

Clerks

Grief

Clean, Shaven

Welcome to Off Off Hollywood - the bustling boomtown on the frontier of independent filmmaking. The territory was first explored years ago by a series of intrepid filmmakers, and a few even settled there temporarily. Then in 1992, three writer-directors (Gregg Araki, Robert Rodriguez, and Nick Gomez) struck gold (festival play, press raves, distribution) with inexpensively produced films, and soon the rush was on.

Last year *Filmmaker* published detailed production histories and budgets for *The Living End*, *El Mariachi*, and *Laws of Gravity*. During the following twelve months Off Off Hollywood became a thriving center of creative energy and activity. But almost no one was aware of how many filmmakers had begun working there until the selections for the 1994 Sundance Film Festival were announced in November, 1993.

Of the 16 films selected from hundreds of entries for the dramatic competition at Sundance, half were made for extremely low-budgets. In fact, \$500,000 was the combined total of the cash budgets (not including deferments) of seven of these features, the lowest budget being \$27,575 for *Clerks*. Two budget categories - \$1.5 to \$3.5 million, and \$500,000 to \$ 1.5 million - that were very significant in previous Sundance dramatic competitions, are barely represented in 1994. This year there is just one film in the first category and only two or three in the second. Never before has the festival competition included so many films made for so little.

The Sundance selections (including a number of very low-budget features being shown out of competition) signal a radical shift in independent production. This marks a dramatic departure from the previous era in which higher-budgeted Off Hollywood films were dominant. Despite a few very low-budget successes, the conventional wisdom was that at least \$250,000 was needed to make a feature. The influential book *Off Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films* (published by the Sundance Institute and the IFP) included case studies of nine fiction features made in the late '70s and early '80s. Their cash budgets ranged from \$250,000 to \$1.2 million (with the sole exception being the \$60,000 *Return of the Seacacus Seven*).

Now that a new era of ultra- low-budgeters has dawned, budgets seem to "have dropped a zero" as Islet president John Pierson puts it. \$250,000 features have been replaced by \$25,000 features, and \$1,000,000 budgets are rarer than \$100,000 budgets, as Off Off Hollywood films eclipse Off Hollywood films.

In the previous era, the conventional wisdom held that there were two primary paths for emerging filmmakers: the well produced resume short, and the well funded independent feature. The short was designed to demonstrate a level of competence that would give the filmmaker an opportunity to direct a feature. These shorts were often shot in 35mm with good production values and were usually relatively expensive. A typical 30 minute short which might have cost \$30,000-50,000 in the mid-'80s could cost as much as \$ 100,000 or more today. There were also a number of other problems with this route - funding sources were scarce, distribution possibilities were very limited and the chances of recouping financing were quite slim. To make matters worse, many executives felt that a competent short wasn't enough to prove that a director could work successfully at feature length.

The second route was to make a feature that was well funded by independent standards. Financing was the problem. Even in the best of time, money was scarce and filmmakers often wasted years attempting to raise money. When funding dried up at Columbia TriStar Home Video, the struggle for financing became much more difficult.

The success of *El Mariachi*, *The Living End*, and *Laws of Gravity* proved that there was a third viable alternative. Determined filmmakers could avoid financing hell by making features for less than the cost of glossy resume shorts. This could enable them to put more of their energy into production, get into production sooner, and demonstrate their ability to tell a story at feature length. It could also improve their chances of festival exposure, critical attention, and national distribution. And ultra- low-budget production made it much easier for filmmakers to make the films they were passionate about making.

A tiny budget is much less difficult to raise for several reasons - less money is needed in total; there is less at stake; the chances of recoupment are greater; and there are many more places to go (friends, relatives, and a filmmaker's own bank account) for money since the amounts involved are so much smaller. The smaller the budget, the greater a filmmaker's creative freedom.

There are also a number of disadvantages to ultra- low-budget production. Production values may suffer because of lack of time and money. Shooting in 35mm (or even Super 16) may be unaffordable. Little or no money may be available to pay cast and crew, which precludes the use of many talented people. Experienced crew members who do agree to work for love or deferments may be lost in midstream to paying jobs. Each of these disadvantages could limit distribution possibilities. In addition, ultra-low-budget production often takes a very long time. It requires an unwavering commitment to will the film into existence. Because the filmmakers are doing what many production veterans consider impossible - making features for less than the cost of a well-financed music video - each ultra-low budget film is a miracle of tenacity and ingenuity. Methods for finding and utilizing the necessary resources vary far more than for

features with higher budgets. Ultra-low-budget filmmakers have to be creative at every stage of production - from writing the script and finding the money through post-production.

While there is remarkable diversity among ultra- low-budget productions, there is a basic framework within which such production takes place.

- **Hell or High Water Commitment:** A core group (usually one or two people, sometimes as many as three or four) decides to make a movie come hell or high water.

- **No Nonsense Resource Assessment:** The filmmakers assess both the resources available to them (money, equipment, locations, crew; office space. etc.) and the resources they are sure they can find.

- **Realistic Scripting:** The script is usually written within the parameters of the resources expected to be at the production's disposal. The script is frequently written quickly, sometimes within one or two weeks.

- **Imaginative Financing:** Cash is raised in a variety of ways from hitting up friends and relatives to finding investors who expect a return on their money. Much more common than utilizing limited partnerships (which require time and money to set up) is self-financing where the filmmakers clean out their bank accounts and/or fully stretch their credit cards to their limits. Frequently financing is done in stages - shooting often begins when there is only enough money to get the film in the can, and money continues to be raised to finance post production. Every conceivable method is used to minimize and postpone expenditures.

- **Recruiting Cast and Crew:** It is essential to find the right combination of cast and crew members who can do their jobs satisfactorily while enduring the hardships of ultra-low-budget production for little or no immediate compensation. Actors and crew members anxious to advance in their careers may see the film as a unique opportunity. Deferments and barter arrangements are often used in lieu of cash. Casts are usually small. Where possible, key personnel are drawn from a group or collective of filmmakers who have worked together previously.

-- **Pragmatic Planning:** Budgeting, scheduling, and other planning must be done carefully to maximize the use of limited resources and minimize problems. Rehearsals and run-throughs are very important.

- **Guerrilla Production:** Production is usually short and intense. Crews are often very small, with individuals often doing more than one job. When circumstances permit, there may be a second period of production to shoot additional scenes and re-shoot others.

- **Extended Postproduction:** As short as scripting and shooting often are, post usually takes place over a long period of time. This phase requires cash to be spent for lab and sound work and sometimes equipment and editors. This money may be raised in bits and pieces. There may be turnover in personnel when they are offered paying jobs.

- **Boundless Opportunism:** At every stage, ultra-low-budget filmmakers have to be able to create and take advantage of opportunities. They need to plan carefully and improvise frequently to find resources and make the best use of them. When problems arise, they must be solved in creative ways. Optimism and opportunism are both essential.

These rules-of-thumb are illustrated by a number of the 1994 Sundance films. Each film illustrates unique ways to persevere and ultimately prevail.

CLERKS

Low Budgets: The feature with the lowest budget in competition at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival is *Clerks*, which was made for- \$27,575 by its 23-year-old director- Kevin Smith. It is the comic tale of a day in the life of Dante Hicks, a clerk at a Quick Stop convenience store. Along with friends and associates, who are also full-fledged members of the X generation, Hicks encounters the extraordinary in the midst of his ordinary McJob. Inspired by such films as *Slacker* and *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Clerks* gives us a deadpan, twenty-something view of sex, drugs, and retail.

For Kevin Smith, *Clerks* is not only a "first feature, it is a first anything." After four months of frustration at Vancouver Film School, he decided to quit and spend the rest of the money he had saved for his tuition making a feature.

Background: Before film school, Smith had been interested in writing studio films. "I was a whore for Hollywood." The turning point came when he saw *Slacker* on his 21st birthday. "It was an epiphany." He decided he wanted to become an independent filmmaker. Smith was also inspired by the films of Spike Lee and Hal Hartley.

Script: Smith had worked for two or three years at a New Jersey convenience store and realized "there had never been a convenience store movie." During November and December 1992, he wrote a script that could be shot at the store where he was working when it was closed (as Tony Chan did with his family's Chinese restaurant in *Combination Platter*).

The first draft was 164 pages. "I hacked and hacked at it to get the shooting script down to 136 pages," he explained. This is what he shot even though he was worried that the film would be too long. He was relieved that the film came in at 105 minutes because it is so dialogue heavy,

Crew: The crew was four primary people: Kevin Smith (writer, director, co-producer); Scott Mosier (co-producer, co-editor); David Klein (director of photography), and Ed Hapstack (camera assistant and "troubleshooter"). There were also two helpers - Vinnie Pereira and Walter Flanagan (who did the title animation and played five parts). Smith refers to Mosier as his "partner in crime" and notes that "the most important thing he did was introduce me to his sister," with whom Smith is now living. Smith noted that "next time I'd get more help. A four man crew benefits nobody."

Cast: The five principals included two actors who had had experience doing theater, a person who had never acted before and never wants to act again (Jeff Anderson who plays Randall) and an acting student (Lisa Spoonauer who plays Caitlin). Smith found Lisa by sitting in on an acting class at a local college. "After class I followed her to her car and told her I was putting together a small movie and asked if she wanted to be in it. I felt like a porn auteur but somehow she agreed to do it." (Lisa later got engaged to Jeff.)

Financing: Smith used the \$2,000 he had left over from film school and as much credit as he could secure. "I built up a supply of eight or ten credit cards with \$2,000 limits. Scott's parents put in some cash for the final print. I was stone poor by the end, a condition I still sit in."

Smith's budget was heavily influenced by *Slacker*. "I knew they made it for \$27,000 and was sure we could make *Clerks* for the same amount. For a budget breakdown, I used the *Laws of Gravity* budget from *Filmmaker*."

Stock and Camera: "We were originally lined up to get the Kodak discount for independent filmmakers, but I learned that the student discount was bigger. So I went to the New School, enrolled in a course ('Roast Suckling Pig'), got a student ID, and went to Kodak." Smith then dropped the course before learning how to prepare a roast suckling pig.

He rented an Arri SR camera which was "very noisy" so "we barnied it with a couple thousand leather jackets." The film was shot in 16mm black and white. "We had wanted to use Super 16, but we didn't have the money to do a 35mm blow-up."

Production: Beginning on April 1, 1993, the film was shot over 21 days without a break, with two additional days for pick-ups. Because they could only work when the convenience store was closed, they had to shoot from 10:30 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. every day. This was tough on the actors who worked all night, and then went to day jobs. It was even harder on Smith, who was working full-time at the convenience store during production. On a typical day he slept an hour or less after shooting, ended. Then he had to open the convenience store at 6 a.m. where his first shift lasted until 11 a.m. or noon. He usually spent the next few hours doing things related to the film, before working a second shift from 4 to 10:30 p.m. when production began. While he occasionally got some sleep in the afternoon between shifts, he usually had to function on no more than one hour of sleep a day. Eventually sleep deprivation caught up with him; he was too tired to stay awake when the climactic scene was filmed. "I slept through the fight sequence and didn't see it until the workprint."

Lab and Post: They used *The Motion Picture, TV, and Theatre Directory* as their bible to find the best deals on equipment and processing. Given the budget constraints, they couldn't afford to have dailies. "We went with the cheapest price we could find which was 25c a foot for workprint at Jan Lab. It was on the third floor and looked like a drop-off for heroin," but Smith was satisfied with their work.

The film was cut in two months on a Steenbeck from May to July; the sound mix was done on video at Aquarius: they didn't have a final print until just before the IFFM in September.

IFFM and After: The first time Smith screened the film publicly or privately was at the IFFM. "It was very disheartening. There were no more than 18 people at the screening. Everyone who walked out was a woman. I thought, my God, it's not a chick film. I said 'cum' too much. Why did I spend \$27,000 on a filthy movie? After the screening, the only person that came up to me was a psychotic who told me all the Nazis had been reincarnated and are living in New Jersey. After criticizing the film, she gave me her acting resume. I was despondent after the screening."

However, Bob Hawk, a consultant to independent filmmakers who is an advisor to Sundance, was at the screening and liked the film. Village Voice critic Amy Taubin soon heard about the film and called Smith to ask for a cassette. "I nearly passed out. I had the piece Taubin had written on *Slacker* at the 1991 IFFM framed on my wall." Taubin wrote about *Clerks* in the Voice, and Smith began to hear from the distributors and festival programmers who had completely overlooked his film at the IFFM.

Perspectives: "Everyone who wants to go into filmmaking doesn't have to go to film school. As my friend Scott says, 'Film school is just a cheap rental house.'" However, Smith does recommend getting a student ID (even if you have to enroll in a course) to be eligible for a "world of discounts." He also recommends reading Rick Schmidt's *Feature Filmmaking at Used-Car Prices*, John Russo's *Making Movies*, and Spike Lee's books. Noting that *Clerks* will definitely make its budget back, he is ready to make another ultra-low budget film. "There is so little risk involved. You don't have to please anybody but yourself."

CLERKS BUDGET:

STOCK

37 400ft rolls Kodak Double X Negative	\$1600.00
Nagra tapes	\$200.00
Camera expendables	\$125.00

EQUIPMENT RENTALS

Insurance	\$730.00
Camera	\$3400.00
Sound and three lights	\$1165.00

PROCESSING

Negative and work print	\$3295.00
Nagra rolls to mag stock transfers	\$980.00

EDITING

Steenbeck/guillotine rental (3 months)	\$940.00
Editing expendables	\$220.00
Negative cut	\$1830.00

MIXING

Slop print for mix	\$900.00
Sound mix and all sound related services	\$7280.00

PRINT

Titles and animation	\$800.00
Optical	\$990.00
Screening print	\$3120.00

Grand Total:	\$27,575
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GRIEF

Like some of the best low budget features, *Grief* is a film that grows out of the writer-director's personal experience. Richard Glatzer spent five years producing *Divorce Court*, and *Grief* takes place over five days in the production office of a "sleazy day-time courtroom drama" called *The Love Judge*. It is a comedy that chronicles the friendly and romantic relationships of its colorful staff. "But I wanted to do more than that explains Glatzer. "I wanted to make a film for my lover, Donald Berry, who died five years ago. And I wanted to use the concept of a week in an office to examine my feelings about surviving him." The main character in *Grief* is a story editor who is trying to come to terms with the first Anniversary of his lover's death from AIDS.

Script: Producer Ruth Charny (*Mistress*) suggested that Glatzer write a script based on his *Divorce Court* experience. "Richard used to tell me the most hilarious stories when he was working in day-time television," she commented. Glatzer remembers the parameters for his script "It had to take place in one location, and be as cheap as possible."

Cast: After writing the script in late 1991, Glatzer, Charny, and executive producer Marcus Hu attended the Sundance Film Festival in January, 1992. Glatzer connected with two actors who had films at the festival - Alexis Arquette (*Jumping At The Boneyard*) and Craig Chester, who played Nathan Leopold in *Swoon*. Glatzer knew Jackie Beat/Kent Fuher from his days running the underground club Trade, where Kent performed in drag. One month after Sundance, Glatzer had cast all the principal parts but one.

Financing: A reading was held with all of these cast members in early March. Although it failed to generate any of the money it was designed to raise, it did attract producer Yoram Mandel (*Parting Glances*, *Johnny Suede*) to the project.

An effort to sell shares to investors was only partially successful, but Glatzer had a growing sense of urgency. "I felt my cast was being discovered, and that I would lose them." Ileana Douglas played the female lead in *Alive*, and Arquette was also busy acting in films. So Glatzer provided half of the production funding, which combined with the money from the investors and Charny, was enough to shoot the movie.

Production: There was a short window when all the actors would be available in Los Angeles. Preparation included one week of rehearsal, which was almost as long as production. The film was shot over ten intense days (with one Sunday off) in late June and early July 1992. Everything was filmed in one location with the exception of the courtroom and the rooftop scenes which were done elsewhere.

The film was shot in 16mm because there wasn't enough money for a 35mm blowup. "I don't think the film ever would have gotten finished if we had shot in Super 16," observed Glatzer.

Post: Selected scenes were transferred to video in July for fundraising purposes and a little more money was raised here and there. Glatzer was surprised by the expense of postproduction. "I had been a naively optimistic writer. I didn't have any idea how much more post would cost than production."

Postproduction lasted almost a year. At a critical point, Glatzer realized the film might never be finished if he didn't invest more of his own money. "I had no choice if it was to get done. How much can you ask of people without putting yourself on the line? So I cleaned out my bank accounts."

In December 1992, he was able to do an additional day of shooting. "We used a completely different location. I was worried scenes wouldn't cut but ultimately nobody noticed, even though almost all of the scenes we shot ended up in the movie."

Unlike the ten original days of production which were tightly organized by Yoram Mandel, the additional day of shooting "felt very chaotic because there was minimal crew and prep time." Early in the day, Craig Chester got hit in the head by some barbed wire and was bleeding. "We worried whether to take him to the emergency room, whether he would get lock-jaw." But Chester survived, and Glatzer ended up with almost two hours of dailies.

Festivals: The first public screening was in June, 1993, at the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival where *Grief* won the audience award for Best Feature. Next, *Grief* was a hit at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival where it was the closing night film and an extra screening had to be added. Then it went to the Toronto International Festival of Festivals where it was enthusiastically received by audiences of straight and gay viewers.

Perspectives: For Glatzer, directing a low budget independent feature marked a radical shift in his career. He had written a number of screenplays which Hollywood had

optioned or purchased but not produced. "I spent a long time trying to be a Hollywood commodity but it didn't work. I was always looking for someone else to give me a pat on the head and tell me my work was ready to make." The turning point came when he personally "decided to take responsibility for making a film. I said to myself, "Okay, if we are going to do it, let's be real about it. " His goal was to make a film that was uncompromised. He fully committed himself to the project - writing, directing, and investing his own money. He discovered that on a low-budget film "you are never done working - there are always other things you can be doing." And he learned how draining low-budget production can be. "Now I'm completely broke, and I know that it will be at least two and a half years from starting the project until seeing any money." Despite the toll it took, he is now writing the next script he wants to direct, and still "believes in making a movie for as little as possible."

Another perspective was provided by Yoram Mandel, an experienced producer who had never worked with such a small budget before. He said that the "raise a little, do a little approach" required "asking for every favor in the world to get the film done." For him, two lessons emerged from the experience: "If you really want to make a film badly enough, you can do it somehow." And secondly, "If you don't have enough money up front, you risk having to constantly compromise your vision."

CLEAN, SHAVEN

Clean, Shaven is an intense and "disturbing portrayal of a schizophrenic's tormented search for his daughter and their short-lived reunion." A tight and compelling 80 minute feature, it took 29-year old Lodge Kerrigan (writer, director, producer) two years to shoot, and another year to complete.

Background: "I decided I really wanted to do a feature for little or no money," explained Kerrigan, so he chose a subject that could work in a "no budget framework." After making a series of shorts at film school (including one titled *Boy Meets Girl, So What?*) Kerrigan decided to make *Clean, Shaven*. He hoped *Clean, Shaven* would then enable him to make another film. "I never thought it would get distribution."

Script: "My friend Steve who suffers from schizophrenia was a major influence and inspiration. I had always had an interest in mental illness - it is fascinating and really sad. I was tired of the way mental illness has been portrayed in the movies, which have by and large been so inaccurate." He wanted to portray in a more realistic way the kind of breakdowns schizophrenics go through and "the kind of anxiety they live with on a day-today basis."

The subject "allowed me as a writer to cross certain lines - between reality and delusion, fantasy and psychosis." Instead of writing a "traditional linear narrative," he was able to take a different approach to telling a story. His subject was also well suited to the constraints of an ultra-low-budget - the film's "extremely minimal style" is perfect for a schizophrenic character who functions for the most part outside society. This spare

style is exemplified by the film's compelling first 10 minutes during which there is no dialogue. Kerrigan spent six to twelve months researching and thinking about his subject, and then wrote the script in two months during the spring of 1990.

Piecemeal Filmmaking: He allied himself with J. Dixon Byrne, who became the film's executive producer and they began raising money in July 1990 - a process that continued almost three years. This piecemeal financing resulted in piecemeal production over a two-year period. Such a noncontinuous approach to production has certain advantages and disadvantages when compared with the short, continuous shooting schedules of most ultra-low-budget films. For Kerrigan, the biggest advantage of piecemeal production is that it allows you "to see where the film is going." This gives the film a chance to evolve while it is in production, maximizing its strengths and minimizing its weaknesses - something usually only possible during postproduction. This method also allows re-shoots to correct errors or improve performances.

But Kerrigan also noted the disadvantages of piecemeal production. "Starting up and shutting down is more expensive. Shooting it all at once is significantly cheaper." A piecemeal approach also "takes more energy, which is the most valuable commodity you have. You need a lot of stamina to continue over three years." And sometimes you "feel really alone. You have to believe in the film above anything else." He kept running into friends explaining that he was still working on *Clean, Shaven*. After telling people this for a few years "they think you are a bum and should get a life."

Casting: "I spent six solid weeks casting by myself. I put ads in Backstage and saw every actor I could get hold of ten hours a day. The minute I saw Peter Greene (who plays the lead) I knew I was going to cast him." His decision was confirmed when Greene came back for the casting finals. Kerrigan asked a psychiatrist who worked with schizophrenics to attend and she agreed Greene could convey the tormenting anxiety a schizophrenic must live with.

Crew: During the two major periods of production, the crew ranged from seven to 15 people. On weekend shoots Kerrigan worked crews of three to ten. He used crew members he had worked with before on documentaries, music videos, and commercials. He worked on their films, they worked on his. "Most of the people are very good friends." He benefited from a very supportive independent filmmaking community which time and again provided vital assistance. "People were really giving and generous."

Production: The majority of the exteriors were shot during the first production period - 19 days during August, 1990, on Miscou Island in New Brunswick. Kerrigan is half-Canadian, and much of his family lives on the Island. He needed and got his family's support - they put cast and crew members up, and fed them well. "The food was not what you would expect on a low-budget film. My relatives are fishermen, so we would have lobster." His relatives (including his mother and various cousins) also played a number of parts, and provided several locations.

Kerrigan's approach to shooting- was to begin with "with everything down on paper, but on the set kind of throw that out and address the energy that was there. A fair amount was rewritten or improvised on the spot." He thinks it is important to perceive "where the life of a shoot is to follow to and capture the energy that is there, instead of trying to redirect it."

After returning from production on Miscou Island. Kerrigan decided not to spend the money to shoot a trailer, but to cut a five-minute sample of the footage that had already been shot. "People-were impressed that we were making a film. They believed the film would get made when they heard me talk about it." During the next year, he shot on and off. "Whenever money came in, I would take it and shoot." This required Peter Greene to resume the demanding part of the schizophrenic on the occasional weekend. During this period Greene also started rehearsals for *Laws of Gravity*. "And when *Laws of Gravity* came out, I still wasn't done shooting, remembered Kerrigan.

In November 1991, Kerrigan did his second major shoot, filming most of the interiors over a ten-day period in New York. At the very end of the shoot he narrowly averted disaster. "On a no budget film, the police aren't going to deal with you," explains Kerrigan. For three grueling days, he had been shooting from 5 a.m. through the afternoon in the Night Cafe at 100th Street and Columbus Avenue, a neighborhood plagued by drugs. Thinking the robbery scene being shot was real, neighbors called the police. When Kerrigan (whose head was completely shaven) heard there was trouble, he rushed outside. The police had the actor who had been using a shotgun in the scene, down on the ground with five guns pointed at him. "When a cop put a gun in my face, the gaffer laughed. The cop asked, 'What's so funny?' The gaffer replied, 'The gun's not real.' Then the cop said, 'But mine is!'" Finally, they were able to show the cops the prop gun license, and they said "Okay," and left immediately.

Clean, Shaven was shot in 16mm, primarily using Kodak 7245 and 7248. Equipment was rented or borrowed. "I always tried to get really good camera equipment." Because of the noncontinuous shooting schedule -it was a challenge to keep visual continuity."

Postproduction: This was also somewhat piecemeal since money had to continually be raised, and Kerrigan was also working as a DP to pay the rent. It took five months on and off to get an assembly, which was used to raise more money. The final editing took five weeks, and then picture was locked in September 1992. Kerrigan placed great emphasis on the sound design. From the beginning he felt that sound was critically important since auditory hallucinations are a primary symptom of schizophrenia. He wanted sound to be as essential as picture, and wrote much of the sound into the script. He mixed down 52 tracks to create a sound design far more complex than that of most low-budget films. After an intense scratch mix, he transferred the film to video to raise the money needed to complete the film. The final mix was done in May 1993 and he had a print by July.

Festivals: He sent cassettes to the Toronto and Telluride film festivals. Because he is half-Canadian, he was especially disappointed to be turned down by the Toronto programmers. *Clean, Shaven* was accepted by Telluride where it "got a phenomenal

reaction. It was really a shock. I didn't know what festivals I would get into." The film received raves from such critics as Roger Ebert and Todd McCarthy and audiences were deeply affected. "A woman whose brother is schizophrenic told me it was the most realistic portrait of schizophrenia she had seen."

Clean, Shaven subsequently won the Silver Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival for the best first feature, and was very well received at the IFFM. Kerrigan still seems amazed by the response since he feels he "made a marginal film with a very specific point of view. It deals with a mental breakdown and doesn't really adhere to the formulaic reasons audiences embrace certain films."

Perspectives: Kerrigan has a number of strong beliefs about ultra-low-budget production. He thinks that it is crucial to write a script within the parameters of your financial resources. He believes that it is important to use supportive networks of family, friends, and independent filmmakers. He also feels that his filmmaking experience, and his ability to make a living in film while he was making *Clean, Shaven* were very helpful.

In particular, Kerrigan stressed the necessity of getting along with labs and post-production facilities, rather than having fights with them as so many people do." His attitude toward his colleagues was expressed by his statement that every independent filmmaker who turns out a film that is successful strengthens the position of every other independent filmmaker. It shows that there is an alternative to the studio system that is accepted by the public." Kerrigan, also developed a perspective that enabled him to endure the extended and fragmented production of *Clean, Shaven*. "I didn't expect it to be piecemeal originally. But I refused to let myself be disappointed. I learned to accept filmmaking as a process, rather than just being goal oriented." Instead of worrying about when the film would be finished, he allowed himself to enjoy making the film. If there was a problem he relished the opportunity to solve it - whether it meant going out for another day of shooting, or trying a new approach during post-production.

Because he succeeded in being so process oriented, he can now look back on the making of *Clean, Shaven* and say, "I was happy for three years of my life."

BENEATH THE VALLEY OF THE ULTRA-LOW BUDGETERS

In addition to these three films, a number of other low budget films that will be at Sundance – *River of Grass*, *Go Fish*, *Fun*, and *Aswang* – used noteworthy techniques.

River of Grass: After spending a year-and-a-half writing the script for her first feature, Kelly Reichardt went to the 1993 Sundance Film Festival hoping to raise \$500,000. She "came home really depressed. It had been so discouraging." Then she and three other filmmakers involved with the project decided, "Let's go to Plan B." Reichardt, Jesse

Hartman (who had collaborated on the concept for the film, Phil Hartman, and Larry Fessenden formed Plan B Pictures – an alliance of filmmakers who “share a vision of high quality low-fat filmmaking.” Phil Hartman (*No Picnic*) functioned as the group’s godfather, allowing them to use his Lower East Side writing space as a production office. Jesse Hartman produced *River of Grass*, and Larry Fessenden played one of the leads and edited the film. Reichardt was the writer-director. They were able to raise the money for production from other filmmakers and independent rock people. They shot the film in Miami (Reichardt’s hometown) over 19 days, and then cut it on video using a Sony 3/4” offline system. Post was done on Fessenden’s equipment in New York City. Plan B intends to continue to provide resources, contacts, and an occasional kick in the ass” to help projects on the journey from conception to completion.

Tips:

- If Plan A doesn’t work, go to Plan B.
- If possible, use a collective of filmmakers for mutual aid and support.

Go Fish: Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner made this feature in Chicago, utilizing a diversity of local resources. They used equipment at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Northwestern, and the University of Illinois (which allowed them to do all their video transfers). “A lot of other filmmakers worked on the film – we hoped to create a small collective of filmmakers,” noted Troche. “The cast and crew worked for free. It’s a love-hate thing – they love you when they do it and then they hate you afterwards.”

Troche and Turner co-wrote and co-produced the film. Troche also directed, edited, and did the opticals, while Turner played one of the principals. Initially the film was self-financed by Troche and Turner. “We put everything we had into the movie,” explained Troche. A videotape was made after the initial shooting to raise money. It was shown at a benefit, and then sent to Tom Kalin (director of *Swoon*) and Christine Vachon (producer of *Swoon* and *Poison*), who became involved as executive producers. Vachon and Kalin approached John Pierson at Islet who agreed to fund more shooting and post. While initial shooting was done on weekends in 1991 and 1992, the Islet funding made possible an additional 15-day shoot in March 1993. “We ate a bit better, but still no one was being paid. Eventually the film was completed in late 1993.

Tips:

- Fully utilize local resources, including film schools and other filmmakers.
- Self-financing may be essential, at least initially.
- Noncontinuous shooting can work if a sample reel attracts more resources.

Fun: An experienced director (more than ten previous films), Rafal Zielinski spent two years trying to raise \$1.5 to 2 million to make *Fun*. After the financing kept falling through, “I realized it would never happen at this level.” As a director for hire, he had just done National Lampoon’s *Last Resort* and with the money from that decided to go ahead. He started calling potential investors and telling them, “I’m shooting in three days – are you in or out?” He was able to raise enough when combined with his own money to get the film in the can.

One particularly innovative step helped him raise the money. He videotaped the whole script on Hi-8 using his actors but no crew. This allowed him to set up the test the script, the actors, and the cinema verite style he intended to use, and enabled him to “rediscover the script.” He then was able to use the tape to persuade his key investor to get involved. “I now want to do this on every movie.”

He then shot the film mixing 35mm color and Super-16 black and white. Production lasted eight days, and he had his first assembly thanks to an AVID two weeks later. Although he didn’t start production until October 13, 1993, this breathtaking schedule allowed him to show the film to Sundance in November, setting a record worthy of Ripley’s Believe It or Not.

Tips:

- The decision to start shooting can make the film a reality for potential investors.
- Videotaping the script in advance can have many advantages, including aiding fundraising.
- Non-linear editing systems can speed post-production significantly.

Aswang: (This film is being shown at Sundance out competition at midnight.) Wrye Martin and Barry Poltermann had written two “highbrow” scripts which they couldn’t get financed, so they “chose a genre that would allow us to get funded and do some of the things we wanted to do,” according to Martin. They wrote a horror film with a subtext in one week, using “sampling – shots, dialogue, characters, framing, and pacing – anything we liked from other films” (ranging from *Rosemary’s Baby* to *The Evil Dead* with a little *Scooby Doo* thrown in for good measure). Their production aesthetic – inspired by George Kuchar – was “just go out and do it.” They put together an experienced crew of people who were “on the cuspo ready to move up.” They then used their own money to shoot a trailer over a three-day weekend. Using the trailer and “begging,” they were able to finance 21 days of 16mm production in Wisconsin. “We made it through principal photography by the hair of our chinny chin chins,” remembered Martin. They were then able to raise more money for post, but not enough for a print, so they made a video master, which could be submitted to Sundance, and shown at the IFFM. Through various stages of production, they managed to attract a diverse group of investors, from cousins to local businessmen in the Twin Cities, to a professional oddsmaker in Las Vegas. They designed a compensation plan so “that first their investors would get their money back plus ten percent: then the cast and crew would get paid their agreed upon salaries: and finally any further monies would be divided up according to points.”

Tips:

- A script with genre elements can attract investors seeking a financial return, and be made for a very low budget.
- Trailers can be useful in raising production financing.
- Sequential formulas can be used for repaying investors, paying cast and crew, and rewarding individuals with points.