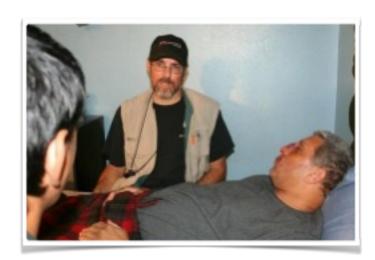# Tips for Working with Actors (especially non-professionals)
by **Tom Khazoyan**

I hope I've learned a few things in my 30+ years as a filmmaker. I have rarely had a budget that would be considered "big." But I have been privileged to work on large and small crews as a Director and in many other roles (D.P., Gaffer, Sound, etc.)

Of course, these are just my thoughts. Seek out others who can teach you things they've also learned.

For now, here's my list of tips to help you work with actors in your film productions:

1. *Be prepared*
2. *Cast the right person*
3. *Help them to understand the scene, not just their lines*
4. *Give them goals*
5. *Pick your crew well*
6. *Maintain a good atmosphere on the set*
7. *Don't overwork them*
8. *Look for moments*
9. *Be real with them*
10. *Take an acting class*

1. Be Prepared: It's your job as the Director to know what you're doing. If you have done your homework, people will give you respect. This is extremely important on a film set where there is a lot of pressure, chaos, creative people with competing egos, etc.

You should have a solid idea of what you are trying to accomplish in the overall film and in each sequence and scene. Learn to communicate that well.

One of the worst things a Director can do is get flustered and be undecided about something on the set. Maybe worse is a Director who constantly changes their mind or gives contradictory information to crew and talent.

You don't have to be perfect and a genius in everything; your team just wants to feel that you've got it together and they aren't wasting their time.

2. Cast the right person: One of the most common pieces of advice you will receive from experienced Directors is that casting is the most important key to a successful performance. The right actor makes the character come alive. The wrong one, mixed with other actors in the wrong way, can be a disaster.

This is a very subjective thing. Sometimes you will just know when you find the right person. Ideally, you should set that as your goal. However, there are usually other forces at work that preclude you searching forever for "the one." This is often the case when you are working on a budget and with non-professional actors. You can still find "the one" but it takes some deep thought and very subjective reasoning to see how you might be able to take the natural gifts and personality of someone to help them inhabit your character.

Become a student of people. Learn to appreciate and notice traits that make people unique. Learn how people respond to each other in conflict and in calm. This can help you see more in a potential actor when an audition may seem stiff or nervous.

3. Help them to understand the scene, not just their lines: Some actors, especially non-professionals, will be more obsessed with not blowing their lines than anything else.

Because you are a *prepared* Director, you can give them much more than their lines; you can give them insights into the purpose of the scene in the overall story and tell them the dynamics, conflicts, change in value, and other important sub-text to help them feel more at home with what they're doing.
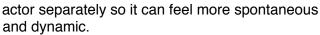

Listening to their ideas should probably be another rule in itself. Your actor is a partner in this. They bring something unique to their role. You should listen to them to understand how they see the character, motivations, and the dynamics of the scene.

This leads to…

4. Give them goals: In each scene, it may be helpful to give each actor a simple goal. Their lines are important, but making sure each actor knows what they are trying to do in relation to the other characters in the scene is often very helpful.

Good scenes have conflict and change and a kind of parrying between characters. Help your actors to understand in the simplest terms what their character wants. Some Directors tell each actor separately so it can feel more spontaneous and dynamic.

5. Pick your crew well: I have been on projects where the crew were my biggest asset in making things run smoothly and creating a set that felt safe and encouraging for the actors. I have also been on projects where just one or two crew members with the wrong attitude threatened everything.

Even the most talented person is usually not

worth the headache if you are constantly worried that they'll mess something up or if you have to constantly warn them to stay in line. Obviously, I want people who are talented, but, especially in the micro-budget world, I'll take a fast-learner who is motivated and has a great attitude over someone who is very experienced but difficult to work with.

6. Maintain a good atmosphere on the set: This is even more all-encompassing and it involves the right crew, your own attitude, and building a sense that everyone is valued.

Be encouraging to everyone. This is important for actors and everyone else. Actors, especially, are putting themselves out there, sometimes by themselves, sometimes in very emotional ways. Actors may also tend to have fragile egos and emotions and be unsure of themselves and shy.

You need to find ways to connect with them and to let them know that you are on their side, that you believe in them, and that you trust them.

Unless you're in your basement doing stop motion, you need a crew. And you want that crew to feel that this job is more than a random gig to pay their bills. Help them to feel that your project is their project - and make it so by being a good listener and collaborator yourself!

7. Don't overwork your actors: I suppose this should go for every member of the crew. However, if a grip is extra tired, you can usually get by. If your actors are burned-out, you're in trouble.

This circles back to preparation and it looks ahead to the idea of looking for moments. The bottom line is that you need to really understand what you are looking for in a performance, how editing can impact a performance, and you need to have confidence to keep moving through coverage of a scene without endless takes. If you are insecure and uncertain of things and force an actor through endless takes of multiple camera setups, you're asking for trouble.
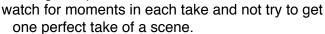
8. Look for moments: This is something that I really understood when I edited a feature film that I also Produced, called *The Enemy God*. We shot the film in the jungle in Belize. The cast was almost entirely nonprofessionals. In fact, most were indigenous actors who had never even seen a movie!

The Director of that film, Christopher Bessette, has a real gift for drawing out authentic performances from non-professional actors. He is sensitive and very observant. Others on the crew felt the film would never come together because the actors could not pull off complete scenes. However, Christopher was watching for moments in each take where the performance was true, not a whole, perfect scene. A film is not a stage play; take advantage of that.

When I pulled together all of the performances in the editing stage, I knew to look for those individual moments, sometimes spread through different takes, to create the whole scene. It's

not as easy on an editor, but it works. All the audience needs to see are those little moments, small looks, single lines, that do work.

Obviously, if you can work with experienced and gifted actors, it is much easier and you'll get more consistent performances, but if you are directing non-professional actors, it is wise to watch for moments in each take and not try to get one perfect take of a scene.

9. Be real with them: I don't think anyone should have to put up with prima donnas or dictators. This goes for actors (who may have a reputation for this) or for creative individuals like Directors. Filmmaking is collaboration and we need each other. My intention is that I will remember that when I'm interacting with my cast and crew so they know that I value their contribution to the film I'm leading.

Being real means many things, including respecting everyone and their contribution. It includes admitting mistakes when they are made and not pretending because of ego. It means lending a hand, hanging out with everyone when appropriate, and showing people that you care about them as persons, not pawns in your production.

I admit that I'm not always very good at this stuff. I get caught up in my own Director's World of cares and creative enthusiasm and I forget to check in with people to see how they are doing, how I can make their job go more smoothly, etc.

10. Take an acting class: If you want to understand what an actor goes through in preparing and performing, do it yourself. It can be a great eye opener to stress about lines, understanding a character and working out how that manifests in actions, and how it feels to feel like a little piece in a big machine of a film production where everyone expects you to just turn on and off when someone yells "Action!"

These are just a few things I've learned on my own films and from my own mistakes. Believe me; I've overworked my crew and actors. I've been a dictator. I've come to the set unprepared. It's all about learning and growing in the places where you are gifted and in the places where you are not.

Enjoy the journey.

Tom