

Fast, Cheap Movie Thoughts

Short tidbits from top filmmakers on the art of their craft



Thursday, July 18, 2013

Donna Smith on Production Management

Let's start with a clarification to make sure I have this right: In the history of Hollywood, you are the only woman to run physical production at a studio. Is that right?

DONNA: Can you imagine? Over a hundred years in Hollywood there had never been a woman in charge of physical production at a studio. A distressing fact.

You're a Minnesotan like myself. What brought you to Hollywood and to the movies?

DONNA: You know what the answer is? The weather. And that's the absolute truth.

I had been very fortunate in my Minneapolis working days, because I worked for five years at the Walker Art Center and I worked for five years at The Guthrie Theater. So how much more blessed can anybody be if you're interested in working in the performing arts or in culture in general? It was like freeloading two educations, one in modern art and then one in classical theater. And I worked directly with Tyrone Guthrie; I was his assistant for three years.

So the weather drove you out of Minnesota?

DONNA: Yes. I met my husband, Gordon, at The Guthrie. I remember this: It was May and Gordon came home from the theater and he walked in and he said, "If one more fucking snowflake falls on me in the month of May, I'm going to lose my mind!" It was May and it

was snowing. And he just couldn't believe it; he was so insulted by that. I remembering looking at him and saying, "You're not emotionally fit to live here anymore."

And we actually moved within that year. We both had very nice employment and beautiful jobs at the Guthrie Theater -- he'd been there since the inception. He was the very first employee; he was a stage manager who came from New York.

So we did move. Gordon said to me, "Do you want to move to New York or Los Angeles?" And my answer was, "Not New York." I never had a heartbeat for New York. Every time I go to New York, even now, I want to stay five days and get out of there. I don't like the energy, I don't like the noise, I don't like the pollution.

So we went on what we called our Odyssey and when we left Minneapolis we took a year to get to California, until our money ran out. We traveled with the sun and went all around the U.S., Canada and Mexico to get here.

I remember we were in Seattle and I said, "We have \$11.00 left. We have to get to Los Angeles." And it was true, we only had \$11.00.

And along the way we had picked up a cat in Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico, I found a little baby cat. So here was the cat traveling in the van with us with a litter box. It was kind of a hoot. I didn't mind but Gordon objected. Carl was my cat, he lived with us for 12 years.

So we arrived here in Los Angeles with a van we'd been traveling in and Carl the cat and Gordon and Donna. Total unemployment. We didn't know anybody in Los Angeles. And we had eleven bucks.

So you'd landed in Los Angeles ... how did you find work?

DONNA: I went to an employment agency and said, "I'm kind of smart and know how to do things, and I've got a very organized mind. I have a great sense of detail. And I come from the theater!" I was so proud of that, and they said, "Go fish. We couldn't care less. Theater doesn't mean anything in this town."

It was so awful. But this lady said, "I don't care how good you are. We have one thing here, for an assistant filing clerk." And I remember saying, "Assistant filing clerk? That's a little beneath what I had in mind. I worked with Sir Tyrone Guthrie and all."

Not even a filing clerk, but an assistant filing clerk.

DONNA: And only for two weeks. Some lady was behind in her filing and she needed someone for two weeks. So I said, "Oh, good grief. All right, I'll take it." I didn't know anybody, I didn't know what else to do.

So she handed me a card and said "Go to this address tomorrow." And that's all that I had. It could have been a company that sold tires, I had no idea, the name meant nothing to me. So I went to the address, it was in Culver City, and I checked in. I worked for this really mean lady. She said, "Sit down over there and get this stuff filed!" She just had the personality of a snake; she was so abrupt, yelling and not nice.

So I sat down and she gave me this big stack of purchase orders. It meant nothing to me, they were just purchase orders and all I was doing was filing them by number. I didn't read them or anything.

But it was serendipity, really.

On about the fourth day, I looked up because I heard this voice, and I thought, "Oh my god, there's Rocky. What's Rocky doing here?" It's a very distinctive voice. And I looked up and there was Sylvester Stallone on the other side of the office. And I thought, "What's he doing here? This is so exciting," because the movie Rocky had recently come out and he was on the cover of Time magazine.

It was pretty exciting to see him. I didn't say anything to the mean lady, I just told Gordon on the phone that night, "Guess what, I saw Rocky today!" I didn't know his real name, by the way, he was just Rocky.

And then two days later, there was Travis Bickle. And I thought, "There's Travis Bickle, what's going on here?"

So it's Robert DeNiro.

DONNA: It's Robert DeNiro. So I told Gordon that night on the phone, "I saw Travis Bickle today, he was in this office." And Gordon said, "What is this place," and I said, "I don't know."

But the next day I had the guts finally to ask the mean lady, "What does this company do?" And she turned around with her hands on her hips and said, "We make movies."

And I sat down and thought, "They make movies? How do you make a movie?" I couldn't ask her anything because she was so mean and nasty, so I just pondered that all day. And at least I realized, then, why Travis and Rocky were there.

Well the name of the company on the card just simply said Chartoff-Winkler. It meant nothing to me. Like I said, they could have sold tires instead.

This was the company that made Rocky. That's why Sly was there, working on Rocky II. And that's why Bobby was there, because he had just finished Taxi Driver with them. It was amazing.

Then on about day eight of my ten days, the man who the mean lady reported to (she turned out to be the Production Coordinator, working for the Production Manager), he came by me and said, "You. Come in. Take notes. I'm going to have a meeting." So I was just sort of wide-eyed, but I went into the meeting -- I had never been at a meeting in this place, I was just doing purchase orders -- and I wrote down every word he said.

His name was Jim Brubaker, he was the Production Manager. He said, "We've already shot Rocky II, but Sly hates the ending and we're going to re-do it. So we need to get 3,000 extras, we need to get the sports arena back, we need to have all the principles ..." and he just rattled all this stuff off.

And I'm writing notes like crazy. And he pointed at me and said, "This is Donna Smith, she'll be the Production Coordinator. And this is Benjy Rosenberg, he's the first A.D. Coordinate everything with them. This fucking meeting's over."

And I remember writing down that word, "fucking," and I just couldn't believe it because we don't talk that way in Minnesota. And I was just so alarmed and I wrote that word down and I actually missed the part where he said "This is Donna Smith, she'll be the Production Coordinator."

I went up to Brubaker after and I tugged on his sleeve like a four-year old and I said, "Mr. Brubaker, you said my name, I think you made a mistake." He said, "No, I haven't made a mistake. I've been watching you. You can do it, but if you don't want to do it, I'll get someone else."

And I said, "No, no, no, I can do it. I just didn't understand."

Then Mean Lady came up to me and said, "You just took my job!" And I looked at her and said, "Oh my god, if that's what happened, I'm not aware of it." And she honestly cut me a break. She said, "I'm not going to hold it against you, because you're so green. I know you didn't go after it." And it was true, I really didn't go after it.

The next day I came back to that company and I was sitting there at her desk, looking at the Production Coordinator placard she had on the desk, thinking, "Yep, it says Production Coordinator. Yep, that's what it says." I didn't know diddly. I didn't know one thing about what to do.

Then people started coming up to me, asking questions. And I wrote everything down. I'd just sit there and say, "I'll get back to you on that." And that was okay, nobody seemed to mind if I said that.

What did you do then?

DONNA: Well, then you start trying to find out what the answers are.

There was a pivotal moment. A guy came up to me, I didn't know who it was, and he said, "Hey, toots, what emulsion are we on?" So I said, "I'll get back to you on that." And he said, "Okay" and just walked away.

So I called the drugstore, because I remembered that the word "emulsion" was on the can of film that you brought into the drugstore at that time. It had that word on it. So I called the drugstore and I said, "Hello, this is Donna Smith, I'm the Production Coordinator on the Rocky II re-shoots. Do you know what 'emulsion' means?" And the guy said, "Lady, who do you think I am? Kodak?" And he hung up on me.

And I thought, "Oh. Interesting." So I got the Yellow Pages out and I looked it up and there was a Kodak in Los Angeles, and I thought, "I'll call them up and see if they know something."

So I called Kodak and said, "Hello, this is Donna Smith, I'm the Production Coordinator on the Rocky II re-shoots. Do you know what emulsion we're on?" The guy said, "Hold on a moment," and then he came back and he said, "5247."

I thought, "Well, I can do this job. It's just reasoning. It's sense of detail. I'll just teach myself, because this Brubaker guy isn't going to tell me anything and the Mean Lady is gone."

I would never have called Kodak if the drugstore guy hadn't hung up on me.

And then when I saw the man who asked me about the emulsion again, I said, "Sir, it's 5247." And he said, "Okay," and he walked away. And as he walked away, I said, "Sir, sir!" And he turned around, and I said, "Don't ever call me 'toots' again." And he looked at me and said, "Fuckin' A."

And I was just thrilled but also stymied, thinking, "Oh my god, how am I going to handle these people. These people are horrible."

But unbeknownst to me, he went to the crew (I found out later) and told them, "Don't mess with the new Production Coordinator. She's really tough and she knows what she's doing." What a snow job that was.

At the end of the Rocky II re-shoots, Brubaker came up to me and said, "You're really good. I want you to work with me on my next film." And I said, "A whole movie?" And he said,

"Well of course it's a whole movie! For god's sake!" He thought it was so stupid on my part, to talk about a whole movie.

So he said, "Yes, it's a whole movie." And he gave me this script and said, "Read this." And guess what it was? Raging Bull. That's why Bobby was there, getting ready for Raging Bull with Chartoff-Winkler. So Brubaker was the Production Manager and I was the Production Coordinator on Raging Bull.

That's how it all started, kiddo. In great detail, that's how it all started.

So you were self taught?

DONNA: Oh yeah. No college degree on that.

Was your theater background any help?

DONNA: Very little, kiddo. I'm sure it did more than I remember now, but in many ways not really. Because now I'm working with things called Call Sheets and Production Reports and Film Reports and Footage Shot and all these forms that a Coordinator gets handed to do. And all the SAG rules, and I'm walking around saying to myself, "What doe SAG mean, everybody's talking about SAG. I have to post a SAG bond, what the heck does that mean?"

I was in so over my head at that time, but I retained every single thing I learned. And I brought everything home. I think to this day Brubaker has no idea, but I brought everything home at night and Gordon, God love him, was a real good sport. We would sit at the dining room table and I remember going over all these forms -- because it's all forms -- and trying to figure it out.

And then I started reading all those purchase orders I had been filing. I'm reading about Baby Ks and a 5K, and I'm thinking, "What's a 5K?" I didn't know any of it and none of it came from theater, none of the lingo or the language came from theater.

So, in reality, the employment people could have sent you to a tire company and you would now be an expert in the tire business.

DONNA: This is true. I would know tire measurements.

It really worked out. Raging Bull, of all movies to land on for the first one, I just learned and learned and learned. And I was good at it. I could really keep up with it, I understood it, the flow of it.

It was such a huge, huge film shoot to be on, and then it won the Academy Award and turned out to be the best film of the decade, and you think, "Wow. I did that."

What happened next?

DONNA: Then Brubaker and I did True Confessions right after that. That was Robert DeNiro again and Robert Duvall. And guess what? Ulu Grosbard directed it. So I was going, "I know Ulu Grosbard! He's a theater dude. And he's married to Rose." I knew all of that.

And everyone in Hollywood was saying, "Who's this guy? What's his name? Where did he come from?" But I was one person who knew. "Ulu, how are you? And how's Rose?" And blah, blah, blah. Everyone else thought I'd walked off the moon because nobody knew him.

So I did True Confessions with Brubaker and I just never stopped working. I somehow just landed on one picture after the other.

The phone kept ringing.

DONNA: The phone honestly kept ringing. I never went to unemployment. I learned on the first movie that during the last week of employment everybody goes to the unemployment office and signs up. And that was my measure of success.

Then I had a call from a Canadian, a guy who called and said, "I hear you're good." I remember I had a smart mouth, and I said, "Is this a sexual call?" Isn't that awful?

But his name was Lou Lehman and he was the president of the DGC, the Directors Guild of Canada. And Lou knew my husband, Gordon. Lou called and said that he was directing a movie and they were filming -- you're going to love this -- in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. And I said, "I know where that is."

He said, "I want you to come and be the Production Manager. We've already started filming. We've got a Production Manager, but I've got to fire him, he's no damn good. And I want you to be my Production Manager."

And I remember thinking, "Wow. Production Manager. I've only done three movies, how can I be a Production Manager already?" But I thought, if I do this for a Canadian shoot, in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, maybe nobody in Hollywood will know if I fall on my face.

So I took the job. And I remember flying to Beaver Dam, Wisconsin on a Sunday. I was reading the script and I told him, "I just have to be off limits for a couple of days, so I can read the paperwork and find out what's going on." That's when I found it was Canadian Union, and I didn't know any of the Canadian Union rules. And if you're a Production Manager and you don't know the rules, the crew can just gobble you up and spit you out.

So I knew I had to learn the rules. I was trying so hard to absorb all those rules, and then there was a knock at the door. I answered the door and there was a guy who just took up the entire doorframe. He stood there and he said, "So, are you Miss Hollywood?" And I looked at him and I said, "No, I don't think yeah, yeah I am. What do you want?"

And he said, "All I want to know, lady, is -- it's Sunday, it's my day off. The truck's not working. Do I go fix the fuckin' truck or do I go bowling with the boys?"

I knew this was a huge test. So I said to this guy, "You must be a grip. You go bowling with the boys. I'll fix the fuckin' truck." And I slammed the door in his face.

That was the best thing to do. The word got around to that crew was I pretty severe. But I still had to get the truck fixed!

It was really tough, but it made me have to be, well, I guess tough is the word. But still I never wanted to lose my femininity. That was so important to me to not start saying that word and talking like the boys and scratching my balls. I just absolutely didn't want to be that way.

I'm five-four, just a normal-sized girl, and most Production Managers are tall and have booming voices. I didn't have that going for me. So I tried to figure out what am I going to do to just have a little distinction? So I decided on wearing suspenders. And I wore suspenders every day on every shoot after that. I bought a bunch of them.

A ball cap -- everybody's got a ball cap on. That didn't stand out. But if you wear suspenders, then you stand out. It was a very subtle thing for me, but that became my signature piece.

A good theatrical choice.

DONNA: Yes, you're right. A very theatrical choice.

So you never made a resume and never went to unemployment.

DONNA: I never made a resume. I remember after Beaver Dam I came back to town and I had three scripts to read, which was a blessing. I turned out to be a really good Production Manager, but all of a sudden I'm back in Los Angeles after that and nobody knows me. I'm not union. And I had the best attitude in town, because I said, "I guess I'm a Production Coordinator again." And I was.

I just went right back into being Production Coordinator and got instant work with three scripts from three different production managers who knew about my earlier work.

So, is it safe to say that if you're good at what you do in Hollywood, eventually the work will come to you?

DONNA: I'm an absolute product of that. I never, ever wrote a resume. I never had to shop shows. And I never went to unemployment. I always had another movie lined up after the one I was working on.

So it was more than just luck?

DONNA: I never considered myself lucky. I consider myself fortunate but not lucky, because I worked really hard. Plus I had to prove myself. I had to learn so much and I had to stay hired. That was a big deal for me, to stay hired.

So then I did three movies in a row with Scott Rudin -- later he turned out to be SCOTT RUDIN, but he wasn't so much SCOTT RUDIN then.

After that I did become Production Manager on two non-union pictures in town. Everything always went well. I never had any problems; never over budget, nothing bad.

And then I got a call from this guy in England who said he had a completion bond company and he wanted me to come head it up here in Los Angeles. And I thought, "Well, here's another piece of the business I don't know anything about."

All of a sudden a steady salary, not working picture to picture. And I don't think I considered myself a filmmaker yet. I really did become one, but I don't think I considered myself to be one then.

For the uninitiated, exactly what is a bond company?

DONNA: As the bond company, you have to make sure that each movie is finished. You promise completion. That's the biggest thing, that you're going to complete the movie and deliver it to whoever is getting it, and that it will be on-time and on-budget. And if it isn't, if there's any claim from the production company ("Sorry about that, we went \$800,000 over budget, so you have to pay it"), that's why I'm there. To make sure that never happens. And, believe me, it never happened.

But if a claim is placed, that's what's expected of you as a bond company. You have to complete it because you've got your name on it that you will promise to complete it, and then you'd put in your own money.

My first rule, which I developed on the second day at the bond company, was that we were never going to put our money into somebody else's movie. How stupid would that be? I just looked at it as a basic, maybe Minnesotan way of looking at it, as opposed to the Hollywood way of looking at it. I realized that it was our obligation, but I also knew it was something we were never going to do. I'm not going to put this company's money into somebody else's movie; to me that's just stupid.

So how do you achieve that goal?

DONNA: You become the sheriff who really watches the movie. I watched dailies. I insisted that I watch everybody's dailies.

So as a bond company, what are you watching for when you look at dailies?

DONNA: I'm watching for things that the filmmakers don't realize. I'm looking for the clapper and if I see Take 27, then I'm all over it. None of the filmmakers would ever know that, as the bond company, that's why I'm looking at dailies. They think I'm looking for artistic integrity.

Well, I want to make sure that the right words are being said and that we're completing the script pages that have to be shot, that I'm watching for very definitely. But I had also learned so much about filmmaking that I'm particularly watching for the clapper.

I would be all over them: "Right now you're getting ready to stray off the reservation, and I'm here to tell you that you're not straying off the reservation. This is what your obligation is and no more money is going to be sent to you; nobody's enhancing your movie. You do it right or I'll make sure you never work in Hollywood again." That kind of attitude -- I'd never literally say that to them. But you just have to scare them.

Nobody could start a project until me (the bond company) had read the script, critiqued it (we'd say things like, "Get this scene out of there, it's not needed and it's going to cost too much."). We look at the budget and see if they were under budget, or over budget, or we could see the pads in their budget.

And then we'd go over the schedule. I would read and sign off on all of that. Nobody got a green light until I was completely comfortable that all that had happened. And then part of my deal was that the first check you write, as soon as you get your cash flowing, is a complete check to the bond company for the fee. None of this half and half, no thirds, nothing like that. One check, your first check, to the bond company.

Hearing that, it just strikes me that someone in that position would have to have just a tremendous amount of knowledge about the film business and how movies are made to take on that role.

DONNA: You know what? I think I agree with you.

So, if I'm doing the math right here, you'd been in the film business -- from 1978 to 1982 when you started at the bond company -- for a total of only about four years at that point. That's a pretty meteoric leap to make in just four years.

DONNA: I've never thought of that. But I really did learn filmmaking in that time. And I had not one day of training for the job. You just get thrown in the deep end and you learn it while you're there.

When Tyrone Guthrie offered me the job at the Guthrie Theater, I told him, "But I don't know how to do anything." And he looked at me and said, "Well dear, don't worry about that. I do."

You two must have been quite a pair, you at 5' 4" and he was, what, 6' 6"?

DONNA: That's right, 6' 6", and he only wore his bedroom slippers.

So what made you decide to leave the bond company?

DONNA: The owner decided to sell the company. So that's what put me back on the marketplace.

The guys at Hemdale knew me from being their bond lady. So when they decided to green light *The Terminator* -- Jim Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd had had a hell of a time finding anyone to let them do that movie -- Hemdale introduced them to me.

I remember Gordon and I went to Florida that Christmas and I said, "I have three scripts to read, three different offers, but one of them is sci-fi." And he said, "Oh, honey, don't even read it," because I don't get sci-fi. My mind can just never get around sci-fi.

And later I told him, "Well, I've read all these scripts and I know which one I want to do." And he said, "Which one?" And I said, "The sci-fi." He said, "Oh, Donna, you can't do that. You don't understand it." And I said, "I know, but it's so well written."

So I decided to do The Terminator. I went back to work and I was Production Manager on The Terminator because it was non-union. I worked my butt off on that movie. And the biggest thing was that Jim Cameron wanted to be JIM CAMERON at that time.

The job in itself was huge, because of all the effects, but Jim trying to become JIM was a huge alligator to wrestle on the side.

I remember our first fight. We were shooting and finished a shot and he said, "That's perfect. Let's do it again." And I went up to him and said, "Excuse me. Come to the side, please, so I can talk to you."

And then I said, "Jim you just said 'That was perfect. Let's do it again.' It doesn't work that way. If it's perfect, we've got it. You say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we're on the wrong set. Set-up for the next one because this one is finished. We got the shot, it was perfect, we're moving on.'"

And he was ready to just sink his fangs into me. But lesson learned -- you don't say, "That was perfect, let's do it again." It doesn't work that way.

Did he stop doing that?

DONNA: Well, my stories and Jim's stories would probably be hugely different. I knew that I hadn't crossed a line with that, but it was a real dicey thing, because I have to get along with this guy for a long time, because I had also signed on as Post-Production Supervisor on that film, so I was going to have Jim in my life for a year.

I had a t-shirt made up for him the next day. On the front it said, "That was perfect." And on the back it said, "Let's do it again." I gave him the t-shirt as a sort of love offering.

So let's jump ahead: How did you go from Production Manager on The Terminator to running Universal?

DONNA: As The Terminator became a big, international hit, I went off to Europe to do my first European movie. I was in Yugoslavia and didn't really know what was going on back in

the States. But I had to leave Yugoslavia all the time to go to Zurich, to get money every week. And while I was there I'd see the ads and the billboards for The Terminator, and I'd think, "Yeah, I worked on that movie." It was just kind of fun.

And then, whoa, as you went around Europe it was all over the place. That was great fun, to have done that and to be in Europe and see the European take on it all. I missed everything in the States because I was gone.

But then I worked in Europe a lot, probably five movies in a row. And now I had other titles, like Executive in Charge of Production, and Line Producer, and Grand Fromage, and all these other titles, because I was always non-union. So even though I was working on union shoots, I couldn't get the Unit Production Manager credit, because that was dictated by the DGA. So I would be the UPM, but I'd get all these other titles because of that complication.

I had always thought that was going to be a big handicap for me, but I somehow made the list of hotshot Production Managers. Then I'd tell them that I wasn't union and that would kind of cause a problem. But if they wanted me, we always made it work out.

When I came back to the States I thought, "Oh, I'm never going to work again, because nobody's going to remember me."

And then I did what even I'll say was the most clever thing: I'd never done a resume and I was just frightened about never getting hired again.

So I had a booklet made up at the printers, a spiral notebook about three by five. On the front page I had my name and phone number, and on the cover of the booklet -- it was a black cover -- I had written in gold, "Non-Union Rules & Regulations."

I sent it to every production company in town, I sent it to everybody. I had such a great response. It would arrive on their desks, and they'd say, "Oh, man I've been waiting to get a book like this! This is fantastic!" And then they'd open it up and it was all blank pages.

If I sent it out to three hundred companies, I got phone calls from a hundred and fifty of them. "You've got to come in and meet me." "I've been hearing about you." "You're the best broad in town."

Everybody in town was buzzing about that and I had all these interviews. And I was just never without work.

Then I did the movie K9.

K9 was a full Universal movie, and here I am again, the non-union Production Manager. Actually, at that point, I was more of a Line Producer, a term we use a lot now but we weren't really using it then.

So Universal wanted me to do that movie. Larry and Chuck Gordon were the producers and I was good friends with them. I really adored them; tough to work for, but we had a very fine working relationship.

Larry really wanted me to do that movie, so he called me about it and I said "Terrific," and I was available. And then -- this is fun -- I hired Jim Brubaker as the Production Manager. Isn't that something?

So Brubaker was the Production Manager and I was the Grand Fromage and we did K9 in San Diego. And then after that, Universal said they'd never had a show run better than that and they said they wanted me to come in and head up Production.

I remember being called in for that meeting. I didn't know what the meeting was, I just knew to come in for a meeting. And I walked into the room and all of the hotshots were in the meeting. I walked in and said, "Whoa, the big kids are all here." And they thought that was cute.

But I mean, I had sweaty palms. I didn't expect to find the big kids all sitting there. And that's when they offered me the job. Terry Nelson was the gentleman who had had the position, and that was who I reported into during K9. I was very sensitive to that.

So when they said, "We want you to come head up Production," I said, "Replace Terry Nelson? No way. Not a chance."

So then I called my attorney and told him, "Guess what I just said 'no' to?" He's the one who stopped my clock. He said, "Donna, there's never been a woman who's had that job since Hollywood began. You can't say no." And I said, "Is that true?" And he said, "Absolutely it's true."

Then he said, "It's good you said no, because your price just doubled." That's the way attorneys think.

So I told them I really only wanted to do it for two years, because I'm a filmmaker now. I told them at Universal, "Guys, I don't want to wear pantyhose and work in the tower. Coming to work in an elevator and wearing pantyhose is so foreign to what I've been doing on the sets. I just can't imagine being a studio executive; I'm not interested in that at all."

Yet another job offer without writing up a resume.

DONNA: I've always been offered the job; I've never had to go interviewing for one. I always had offers, which is blessed.

This is the sad part: I only have men to thank, because there never was another woman who mentored me or promoted me or suggested me. There weren't women doing my job very much at that time, either. There were only like four and a half of us. And I'd have two of them come up to me on every job that I'd take (because I was always working) and say, "How the hell did you get this job? I was up for it too. Why are you getting all the work?" They'd be like that about it. And I'd say, "Look at your attitude. No wonder."

There was much more of a sense of wanting to push you out of your way instead of being your comrade.

But anytime I said "no" to a job, I always suggested women when I said "no" to a picture. If they got hired or not, that was up to them. That was one of my rules that I made for myself, that if I'm in a position of saying "no," I'm only going to suggest women. But it was not a long list.

But at Universal, I went there and was only going to stay two years and I was there for seven.

If you only wanted to do the job for two years, why did you stick around and do it for seven?

DONNA: I think because it was so challenging. It took me out of the 'on the set' atmosphere, but it was such a big, big, big, big job and I loved the people I was working with. The internal Universal people, I really like them a lot.

The job was so big, it kept me traveling around the world, which I had started to do with the bond company and then with the movies I made. I liked that. I liked the lifestyle. It suited me. Some people couldn't stand to travel that much, but somehow it suited me.

I didn't necessarily want to do all that traveling; I needed to stay at my desk. But you have to go to the set. That was my way; maybe some people who ran studios would say, "Oh, I never go on the set." Or, "I never travel. I leave that to all of my underlings. I wouldn't think of doing that."

And I was just the opposite. I learned it at the bond company. And when I arrived on the set, I'd say to every single filmmaker, "You don't want to ever see me get off an airplane again." I'd say it with humor but also with great intent. In other words, if you mess up, I'll be back. Just hope you never see me again, because that means you're doing things right.

I would assign one of my production executives to each show. We always had six to eight movies going at a time; it was brutal. And I had three really good production executives and a staff. So you'd split it up and everybody had like three movies going at a time. They'd take

care of them on a daily basis while I was dealing with the next batch that was coming up. And I was also Senior Vice President of Post-Production. It was such a big job.

How did you learn post-production?

DONNA: I did a movie called Reckless, with Aidan Quinn and Daryl Hannah. This was one of the movies I did with Scott Rudin. We shot it in West Virginia. I was Production Coordinator and I was wrapping things up and a guy named Bob Colesberry was the Post-Production Supervisor on it. And one day Scott said Bob Colesberry was leaving and that he wanted me to be post-production supervisor.

And I thought, "Well, I don't know post-production, but I will after doing it."

So I looked at Scott and said, "Okay, but don't even think about offering me less than what Bob Colesberry's making." And he said, "Okay, we'll talk tomorrow."

We talked the next day and he offered me less. And I remember standing there, saying to myself, "Hold or fold. Which is it going to be, hold or fold?" And I folded. I did take the job, because I knew I would learn post-production. But I signed on for less than Colesberry would have been making, totally because I was a woman.

I wanted to be so stubborn and take a hike, but I knew I'd learn post-production. So I took it.

And then it did pay off, because then on The Terminator I did post-production, and then at Universal (big as that was) I had post-production on my slate as well.

Then you got back into completion bond work, right?

DONNA: Yes. While I was at Universal, this gentleman called me from Chicago and said he'd like to fly out. "I'm going to take the company jet," is what he said, "and fly out to meet you."

He was a big muckety-muck at CNA, a big insurance company. His name was Bernie and he flew out and I met with him and just thought he was charming and wonderful. CNA had never been in the entertainment business in any way. They were frightened of it, they didn't want to do it, they had no interest in it, but they were going to join Aeon, the world's largest insurance brokerage company out of Chicago. So they said they wanted me to head up this company, a bond company and an insurance company.

So I talked to them seriously, because I was getting burned out at Universal. I had just finished Waterworld, which was a nightmare. Bernie said "You can name the company."

And so I named the company -- I loved the name -- I named it Entertainment Coalition. I thought it was a wonderful name, because it covered the fact that we would be the insurance company for all the movies that we were doing, as well as be the bond company, so it was a company with two divisions.

So I left Universal and went right into Entertainment Coalition.

Can we back up to Waterworld for just a moment? I remember you saying once that when you put the budget together for that movie, the Powers That Be said you were crazy, that it would never cost that much. And, in the end, your budget estimate was pretty close to the final cost, right?

DONNA: I was a million off. Only one million off. And I've got to tell you, on that kind of movie, that's a nickel.

Thank God I did one of those cover-your-ass memos that outlined it all. I said we're not going to have it on time, do not plan to distribute it -- because that's going to be the biggest faux pas of all, there's nothing like advertising and getting ready for a big release -- because it won't be ready. It's really going to cost this much, second unit is going to go this long and cost this much, and yada, yada, yada. My crystal ball was working on that one, it really was.

So, let me ask you this. You started in 1978, we're talking now in 2008, so you've been at this for 30 years. Looking back, how have things changed for women? Are they better, worse, or about the same?

DONNA: I think it's quite status quo.

There are more female directors now. There are more female Production Managers. There are more writers, but I really don't think writing is a gender job. They're not management.

How would you define management?

DONNA: Someone like a studio executive, managing the movie. A Production Manager managing the movie. Anyone who's in the position of physically getting the movie made. Knowing how all the nuts and bolts work to make a movie, compared to writing a movie.

You can write a movie and it can be crisp and wonderful, but somebody's got to decide, "Are we going to start shooting this on a Tuesday on the corner of Westwood and Wilshire? Or are we going to shoot it on Monday, downtown on Sixth and Spring Street?"

It's that kind of magic about making the movie that I am so enamored with, really good at, and I'm pompous enough now to say that nobody can fool me about making a movie.

I've done 157 movies. I'd never counted them, but my secretary counted them one day and listed them all. But, when you're at the bond company, you might do 58 movies. And at Universal I probably did 99 movies, I don't know. But cumulatively, it's 157.

So what advice would you give someone starting out now?

DONNA: Well, I'm of the opinion that school is not going to get you into the movie business, especially into physical production. I don't think you can learn it in school.

I do a lot of speeches and I love doing that, and I tell classrooms the same thing: "Here I am, your guest tonight, and I love talking to you. How many of you want to be a director?" And eighty percent of the hands go up. "How many of you want to be writers?" Three percent of the hands go up. "How many of you want to be Line Producers?" No hands go up.

Then I say, "Who knows what a Line Producer is?" And there's utter silence.

Then I say, "Why do you think your teacher is here teaching moviemaking? Because your teacher failed. Your teacher couldn't make it in the business."

Do you get asked back often?

DONNA: Yes. But it's true, it's just too tough.

On Raging Bull I had sixteen Production Assistants. That's a lot. And I rotated them every week. One week you're with sound, the next week you're in the office, the next week you're with transportation, the next week you're with camera. Those sixteen kids, every one of them had a career after that movie.

So that became my system after discovering it on Raging Bull. I just made it up. And I did that on every movie: I'd hire the Production Assistants and then rotate them and give them a real taste of it. And then they find out, are you good at accounting? Are you good at

camera? Most everybody wants to be on the set, and I'd keep saying, "No. You've got to be in the office. You've got to learn the paperwork first. And then you'll get on the set. But you've got to learn the paperwork."

The DGA has a training program, so you go and take the test -- because anybody can take the test -- and then it's the six people out of four thousand who get the highest marks who get the chance at being hired. It's a big long shot, but it's another way in.

It's a very hard thing to tell people how to do it, how to get in.

What's life like for you now?

DONNA: When my husband died it really changed my life and I changed, also, because of it. I just didn't want to work that hard anymore. I'm still very much a part of Hollywood, but now I have a ranch.

Two years ago I bought a ranch an hour outside of Los Angeles, in a beautiful area. It's five acres, not a big deal but just right. It's total tranquility and harmony. I have three goats, which I think is a hoot. I don't know anything about goats, but I have three of them now. It's an hour out of LA, so when I go in I never go in before ten in the morning, so there's no traffic. And I use the Peninsula Hotel as my meeting place.

I'm doing just the tasty things I want to do instead of running things. I don't want to run things anymore.

SOURCE:

<http://fastcheapmoviethoughts.blogspot.com/2013/07/donna-smith-on-production-management.html>

Posted by John Gaspard