

How to Find a Producer

Matchmaking tips for independent writer/directors by Scott Macaulay

"How do I find a producer?"

It's a question asked by many first-time independent writer/directors, and there's good reason this seemingly simple query is so vexing. Screenwriters selling commercial screenplays and directors seeking employment on Hollywood pictures are guided by standard, usually market-based protocols. But it's not so easy for budding independent auteurs — those without agents, managers or box-office track records. For them, partnering with a producer is as much about building a personal relationship as scoring a business transaction. At least, that's what a number of producers interviewed here likened it to. Writes in an email Mary Jane Skalski (*Very Good Girls*, *Hello I Must Be Going*), "Feeling the director is someone I can really talk to and connect

with plays a big part. I always say it's a little like falling in love — I don't always know exactly why, but when I feel it, I trust it." Writes producer Mynette Louie (*Cold Comes the Night*), "I know filmmakers will hate this answer, but I say 'yes' to projects that have a certain *je ne sais quoi*. I have to fall in love with the project, be willing to lose sleep for it, be proud to have my name stamped on it."

The romance comparison is made by directors too. Responds writer/director Ryan Koo, who met more than 50 producers before joining forces with Chip Hourihan for his first feature, *Manchild*, "Finding a producer is like dating: you need to spend some time getting to know the other person, and you're not going to like everyone you meet. Nor is everyone going to like you back."

While there is no OkCupid-like algorithm for directors seeking a producer, there are specific

steps new filmmakers can take — as well as mistakes they can avoid — in order to improve their chances of scoring the right connection.

For more established directors, those with a successful body of work, their name is their brand, and it automatically conveys value in domestic and foreign markets. Some of these directors have longstanding producer partnerships, or even their own production companies, and generate material in-house and thus can control the process to larger degrees. Sometimes established directors use their agents to make the right pairings for each individual picture, with agencies sending out projects, perhaps with actors attached, to one or sometimes multiple producers. In the latter case, individual producers are used to approach the studios or funding sources they have existing relation-



I Used to Be Darker

ships or deals with.

But independent filmmakers confront entirely different obstacles, the most daunting of which is the uncertainty of the independent film market itself. A Hollywood producer developing a mainstream action film will have from the start an understanding of the value that project will need to demonstrate in the marketplace before a frame is even shot. Depending on the budget, the producer will know that the package must attract a certain level of distributor and foreign buyers, and not only the director but also the cast and screenplay will all be calibrated toward that goal.

In today's independent world, however, directors are asking producers to envision both the best version of their films and their markets. As most producers know, works from first-time directors are seldom presellable. These projects are often what's known as "execution dependent" and their production usually relies upon equity financing, grants, crowdfunding and a small number of industry sources willing to take a gamble on a new voice. And because it's no longer responsible to think, "we'll make it and then sell it at Sundance," independent producers will be strategizing from the outset alternative and DIY distribution methods in the event the finished film fails to secure a traditional distribution deal. Indeed, producing an independent film today is often a very long haul, and it's for this reason that both filmmakers and producers must ensure their pairings are solid ones.

The first step for any aspiring director is to understand what a producer does. Traditionally, a producer is a creative collaborator who builds and oversees a film's production apparatus, secures financing for a film and rides point on its distribution and marketing. But you see so many producer credits on films today — *Lee Daniels' The Butler* has 41 — because, in most instances, these roles are divided, or shared, to some degree. Most producers are more skilled at some parts of the above equation than others and will add partners — sometimes by invitation and sometimes because they have no choice — as projects gather steam. A producer skilled at financing may partner with a producer able to actually "make the movie," while the opposite is also true. Usually a project's lead producer will manage this team-building, sometimes it happens



Amateur, Ryan Koo's short film prequel to *Manchild*

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organically, and occasionally, depending on their own connections, filmmakers will try to shape the composition of these producing collaborations themselves.

“‘Producer’ is an amorphous term that can mean so many things,” Koo explains. “Are they a physical producer, who knows how to break down a script and do a budget? Are they more of an executive producer who might have access to funding? Do they have a post house and they come on board at the end of a project in exchange for a producer credit and an equity stake? What kind of producer are you looking for, and do they fit that description?”

As Koo suggests, when embarking on a search for a producer, directors should ask themselves what specific producer skills their projects need. A director aiming to make an improvised microbudget feature with non-actors will need a different sort of producer than someone looking to attract names for a more slickly produced film bud-

geted in the seven or eight figures.

Still, writes producer Jon Kilik (*The Hunger Games*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) in an email, amidst the swirl of credits one person will be key. “You have to find that producing partner who is going to get in the trenches with you and stay there until the job is done. That’s the person who is really going to make the movie with you. I don’t mean the line producer. I’m talking about a creative person with good taste who believes in you and your story and helps you make it better everyday. That’s who you are going to be living with for the two or three or four years it might take,” he says.

As for the producing team, Kilik says, “You may also need an executive producer or two. One who could help out with some early development money and another who may have some credits and gives you and the project some early credibility and stamp of approval. Their part-time presence can help with financing and possibly some cast-



Cold Comes the Night

“To get your project out there, you have to know people who know people, and you have to know how things work. There’s no excuse for not doing your homework. Things are more democratic and open than anytime ever before.”

ing.” But, he reminds, “it’s your peer, the one who might not yet have the money or the credits, that is your day-to-day partner who is so important to your process and telling the world that you are not crazy in thinking that your movie must get made.”

Every producer interviewed here says that a director’s first step in finding such a producer involves research — and, stresses producer Andrew Corkin (*We Are What We Are*, *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty*), that

research starts at the project level. “When looking for a producer, the first piece of internal research to be done is fully understanding what your film is — genre, content, audience, tone,” he writes in an email. “Many filmmakers know the ‘whats’ but they fail to really go deeper into the ‘whys’ — i.e., why does the film need to look like this? Once you know the ‘whats’ and ‘whys’ of your film, then it comes down to figuring out what films it matches on a macro level.

Come up with a list of comparable films — films that have influenced your choices in deciding to make your film — and reach out to those filmmakers.”

Producer Tim Perrell (*Love Punch*, *A.C.O.D.*) says, “[Directors] should see who produced films they like, films they admire; they should ask friends and colleagues, particularly other directors and writers. Look for a sensibility match — is the producer making films in the world of yours, creatively as well as size/scope?”

This research might also involve identifying producers who have worked in the regions you want to shoot in, or who are familiar with your mode of production or, perhaps, who have experience attracting collaborators — from actors to key crew — from the talent pool you are seeking. “Watch the movies, read the press,” Skalski writes. “As producers, we don’t actually do that many interviews. If the producer is on Twitter, follow them. Get a sense for who that person is, and use that to form an opinion about whether the project may be a good fit.”

Just as a director will need to be introspective about a project’s deepest needs,

he or she will also need to be similarly contemplative about the motivations of potential producers. For producers, signing on to a project usually involves a combination of business and personal aspiration. A less established producer may be hungrier for the experience of producing the film and the credit and will be less concerned about fees. For a more established producer with a higher overhead, financial considerations — i.e., the size of the budget and fees the project will be able to generate — will figure more heavily in their consideration.

Just like directors, producers have tastes that can be discerned from their body of work. Writes producer Lydia Dean Pilcher (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *The Sisterhood of Night*), "I'm drawn to a good story with compelling characters and a big idea. The big idea may be one that explores the many profound realms of human nature, and it may traverse the geo-political scale of a globalized world. I'm also very drawn to stories that capture the dynamics of our ever-changing society and offer new perspectives that challenge the status quo."

Still, producers don't like to be typecast either. Interests change. "You can get an idea of a producer's aesthetic in material by looking at their track record, but knowing what their current interest is can be helpful," Pilcher adds. "A lot of producers will have specific priorities at any given time for themes or genres of material they are seeking. This can be researched by talking to the producers directly or to people who work with producers, their development and creative execs or assistants."

Skalski recommends directors look for traits in a producer's body of work beyond obvious content similarities. "I produced *The Station Agent*, and if you do some research about me, you'll probably get a sense of why I was attracted to that movie. But I get a lot of emails about films with trains, and, well, that wasn't the reason."

"I'm always flattered and excited when someone sends me something that's up my alley but unlike my prior work," writes *Drinking Buddies* producer (and *Filmmaker* Contributing Editor) Alicia Van Couvering. "I don't think anybody wants to repeat something they've already done."

"I'm not interested in making the same movie twice," echoes producer Louie, "or the same movie that someone else has already made."

Says producer Mike S. Ryan, who has pro-

duced such formally adventurous character-based films as *The Comedy* and *About Sunny*, "Sometimes directors don't realize that there are consistent themes to a producer's work. I hate when people come to me with a plot twister. Don't they know I don't like plots!" Formal considerations also hold special sway for producer Steve Holmgren (*I Used to Be Darker*, *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye*), who says he is attracted to films with "transmedia elements, alternative story possibilities and gallery components."

But how to do the most basic level of research on a producer? There's always the Hollywood Creative Directory, which lists production companies, producers and projects in development. And, a click away, writes Van Couvering, "IMDb! IMDb knows all. Doesn't it?" In addition to reaching out to fellow filmmakers, as Corkin and Perrell suggest, Ryan recommends targeting industry mentors. For example, he says, filmmakers who have connections with Sundance can find producer advice from the Institute's Michelle Satter and her team. Finally, while agents were referenced above in the context of auteur dealmaking, they can assist

younger filmmakers as well. Each agency has one or more agents covering the indie scene, and while a hit festival short may not get you a feature deal, it should attract the interest of at least one agent speculating on your future potential. Filmmakers are signed off great shorts, in which case an agent can make producer meetings happen. But even if a filmmaker isn't signed, a friendly agent may still be willing to make recommendations and introductions.

Before approaching producers, directors should develop a presentation package. Although producers may work in early development stages with a writer/director they feel offers promise, or perhaps who has secured life rights, done important research, or negotiated a book option, in most cases within the independent film world that initial approach will be driven by a completed screenplay.

But while a script used to be all that was needed, these days, as Ariston Anderson wrote about in our Summer 2012 issue, lookbooks and even mood reels are commonplace. A director's statement — one or
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