

Before we start the interview, could you please share a little bit about your background and the career path to date?

I guess I've always been a movie buff, but it wasn't until my third year of high school (an amazing art-enriched school here in Toronto, called Wexford C.I.) that I got the opportunity to make a short film as part of a film arts class. The experience of actually making a film was incredibly frustrating, exciting and rewarding all at the same time. The fact that it incorporated so many different disciplines fascinated me, and I knew right there I wanted to do that for the rest of my life. Incidentally, I happened to have a few good friends at the time who were also into filmmaking and very talented in their own right, so making short films was a common thing among us.

After graduating from high school, I was turned down by every film school I applied to. I took it as a huge blow at the time, but luckily, with some outside help I was able to land my first job on a film set very early on. At that time, I worked mostly as a lighting technician, but also dabbled as a grip, set dresser and set painter. I spent about 10 years learning to “wax on and wax off,” not really realizing that I was building a varied and broad set of skills that would eventually make me the type of DIY filmmaker I am today. While I made a lot of great friends and was privileged to work with some truly talented people, I don't want to sugar coat the experience either, because I was also very frustrated throughout those years. The whole point of getting into the industry was to direct my own films and I was doing anything but. Looking back on it now, I'm incredibly thankful for all of the practical skills that I've learned, but for a young impatient wannabe director, there were many times when I wondered if I had made the right career choice.

After 10 years on set in the industry, I needed a change. Because I was already a self-taught editor, I thought, “I know! I'll be an editor now!” which, along with compositing, is what I've been doing for the last six years. Directorially speaking, the past several years have been very generative, with my shorts “Happenstance,” “Ri-sip-ruh-keyt,” “Worked For Me,” “The Fall and Rise of Mickey,” “Birthday Girl Blues,” and culminating in my \$50,000 debut feature film, “Headcase,” which is currently being submitted to film festivals internationally.

How do you achieve high quality at such a low price? Any secret strategies?

Well, first you have to understand that for the short films at least, everyone is working for free, or near free. I work with a very small group of actors, and the crew generally consists of just myself and my DOP, Alex Dacev. Everyone is working on these films because they want to be there. I respect that everyone has something else they could be doing, so I really appreciate their willingness to commit their time and participate in a meaningful way. Speaking of time, we generally do very short days (as far as film sets are concerned), usually in the area of 4-6 hours a day, but we have been known to do an occasional 8 to 12 hour day. As a result, we probably shoot more days overall than necessary, but the days themselves are more relaxed. There's very little stress because our day is scheduled very light and I shot list heavily. Seriously, I do everything I can to make sure no set-up is wasted. A wasted set-up is a waste of (everyone's) time and (my) money so I try to edit the film in my head and on paper as much as possible before stepping onto set. Generally I offer to pay for cast/crew parking, transit fare, gas fare and coffees and lunches. Most of the props, locations and wardrobe are begged for, borrowed and yes, sometimes possibly stolen. So that's where the majority of the expenses come from.

However, production values aren't necessarily linked to expenses. Many filmmakers have been duped into thinking that spending more money will result in a better looking film. Another falsehood that a

lot of filmmakers literally buy into is “the more resolution my camera is capable of, the more production value I'll get”—but they're wrong. When I tell some young film student where I really believe production value comes from, they generally seem dubious and let down. I get the feeling that they want me to show them some secret piece of gear that only I've discovered, and if I'd just tell them what it is they could run out and buy it and have that same level of production value for their films, too.

So where do I think production value comes from then? It's rather simple, actually: the director either chooses to have production value, or the director chooses not to. That choice is predicated on A) having a reasonable understanding of aesthetics (lighting, design, colour, composition, motion, depth, etc) and B) the willingness and the creative clout to employ that understanding. *How* you compose your shots, *where* you put your lights and *how* you block your actors gives you way more return for your investment when it comes to production value. The camera model, the gear and the budget are largely inconsequential compared to what I've just outlined. So there it is: as a filmmaker you can choose to believe that production value is derived from your talent and artistic merit or you can choose to believe that it's only possible when attached to bloated budgets and high end cameras. The second you stop worrying about what you don't have and start embracing what you do, your films will instantly increase in their production value. I'm always surprised when young filmmakers choose ignore this little piece of advice, considering how much cheaper it is to the alternative.

For my feature film “Headcase,” everyone was still working for free, but we had a larger crew of anywhere from 4-18 people, depending on their daily availability. We also had a slew of really awesome producers led by Alex Jordan along with Lara Amersey, Tony Pacella, Anthony Wong and Anthony Costa. They kept us on schedule, on budget and were incredibly supportive. The financing for that film came from the writer and star of “Headcase,” Anthony Greene. He basically took out a bank loan and combined that with a few of his credit cards, which was a bold decision to say the least. Even though we had \$50,000 behind us, our philosophy remained the same in terms of trying to get as much of that money up onto the screen as possible.

### In order to make a low-budget film, what care should be taken at the scripting stage?

Though I don't consider myself a screenwriter per se, as that would be an insult to the actually talented screenwriters out there, I do have a few simple edicts when breaking down scripts.

#1. Show don't tell. The director has many more tools for conveying information to the audience than the screenwriter does to the reader. Use your camera, the blocking of the actors, the uniqueness of your sets and your sound design (including deliberate silence) to progress the narrative and underscore emotional beats. Don't just resort to wall to wall dialogue. Engage the audience more in the process of the storytelling, don't make it a ping pong match between two talking heads.

#2. Less is more. When breaking down a script, try this little experiment: start stripping the dialogue out of a scene to see how much you can afford to lose while still getting across the key information of that scene. If you can get the main point(s) of that scene across after cutting out half of the dialogue than you're probably going to cut it out when you're in the editing suite anyway. Make sure every line counts and remember that decent actors are able to convey emotion and information with very subtle nuances with their entire body... not just with the muscles in their mouth.

As an independent filmmaker, how do you handle the challenges of financing, marketing & distribution of your films? Would you recommend some DIY tactics to fellow filmmakers?

I'll be honest, it's not easy. It's a rapidly changing landscape out there for creating and delivering content. Your marketing and distribution plan should begin even before you start your next project. I wouldn't advise making a film and then just hoping for the best once it's done. The other mantra you need to keep repeating to yourself is that you're in a marathon, not a sprint. It's going to take time to build up a following, an audience, a fan base. First and foremost, you do that by creating really great work, which if you remember from my answer to your first question, doesn't necessarily need to take a lot of money, just some minimal gear, a little spare time, and a great idea. I watch videos from people on Vimeo on a daily basis that blow me away with their ingenuity, creativity and ambition. I make sure to follow them, and like their videos, often I'll send along a word of encouragement because I know how difficult the struggle can be and how much a simple gesture can mean. Sometimes they even follow me back, sometimes they don't. Recently, I had business cards made that prominently feature my Vimeo and Twitter accounts, much more so than my phone number and email address! Make up some cards, keep them with you and hand them out to anyone who shows interest in what you do. Make it easy for them to find and follow you.

Which brings me to the second part: you have to proactively promote yourself and your work; you can't just post it online and hope for the best. You need to interact and engage with like-minded people via your content through various social media channels. The interaction needs to be genuine and consistent, but it's important that the content itself shouldn't always be about the direct promotion of your latest project. Your content could be a simple tutorial about how you accomplished a trick shot in your last film, or a creative and quick montage of some of your unused footage from a long abandoned project or (maybe) you write a guest blog about your secret strategies for attaining high production value? The point is: if you're a living, breathing, creative individual, the possibilities are endless.

Ok, so let's say you've created some decent content and your active in the social media circles and even picked up more than a few fans, so when does the dough start rollin' in? I wish I could give you a definitive answer. Seriously, it's a wild frontier out there for digital content distribution and while some people are choosing to circle their wagons, others more adventurous are exploring. There are promising trailblazers who are looking to help filmmakers monetize their work and track their viewership like [vimeo.com/movies](http://vimeo.com/movies), <http://vhx.tv/> and [www.yekra.com/corp/](http://www.yekra.com/corp/), but it's still anyone's guess as to how all of this is going to pan out. Personally, I'm incredibly excited about these new possibilities and I'd rather be in the camp that's exploring than the one circling wagons. I'd also encourage all independent filmmakers to read John Reiss' excellent primer for DIY distribution, "Think Outside the Box Office." That book really opened my eyes as to what others are doing and how I should be approaching my next projects. Be patient; people will eventually take notice and there is money to be made, but only after you've created a credible body of work and built a meaningful relationship with your audience.

What are some of the mistakes you see other independent filmmakers making? What are your suggestions for them?

Again, I'd have to say a lot of filmmakers putting too much emphasis on gear rather than ingenuity. I hear a lot of filmmakers obsess over one or two pieces of gear and procrastinate shooting their dream project until they've got that piece. Then when they finally get it, there's something else on the market that they just gotta have and the cycle repeats itself. They amass all this gear and never do anything

with it. Just go out and shoot already! Then shoot some more, and then some more after that. Pretty soon you'll wonder why you ever wanted that piece of gear in the first place because you've gotten by all this time without it. Keep your costs low, experiment, aim high and push yourself, but most importantly, always be practicing. Don't let any piece of gear give you an excuse not to go out and shoot.

I find a lot of filmmakers also underestimate the power and convenience afforded by a solid understanding of visual effects. Given the thousands of free tutorials out there, I'm surprised why so many filmmakers are illiterate in this field. The cost-saving potential is huge, not to mention the amount of production value that can be squeezed out of even a rudimentary understanding of compositing. I personally completed over 130 visual effects for “Headcase,” and believe me, the film looks a hell of a lot better because of it. Not only did I save the production untold thousands of dollars by doing it myself, but now I have that skill set forever and I can employ and add to those skills on my future films. That's how you empower yourself as a DIY filmmaker!

One last recommendation: if you do happen to like another filmmaker's work and are particularly interested in how they executed the visuals, you should ask the filmmaker about their overall approach and philosophy. Not only will you probably end up learning more in the long run, but you won't be negating their creative input by simply asking them, “Hey, what camera did you shoot that on?”

**Last but not the least; in your opinion, what turns low budget productions into box office gold?**

Well, I guess if I really knew the answer to that question I'd be a lot richer. I think it's important for each filmmaker to determine what their own definition of success is. Hell, just *completing* a feature film is a major triumph in itself and the significance of that should never be downplayed. What makes a modest film a mega hit is really a confluence of several factors, many of which are out of the filmmaker's hands. Knowing your content and targeting it towards your audience is a good start for cultivating success, but it has to go beyond that. You need to be relentless—not annoyingly relentless, but I don't think success favours wallflowers in this industry. Your enthusiasm for your work has to be infectious and your work itself has to be solidly entertaining. There are countless other factors outside of your dominion that may affect your success, but those are two aspects that you can definitely control.

**Ken Simpson** is a director, editor, compositor based in Toronto, Canada. According to [smartmovimaking.com](http://smartmovimaking.com), he just might be the first person ever to shoot a short film on the iphone. His DSLR short, “Worked For Me,” was a Vimeo “staff pick” and his ambitious debut feature film “Headcase” which he directed, edited and supplied over 130 visual effects for, will hit the festival circuit in 2013. In the meantime, Ken is finishing up his epic 5 hour long behind-the-scenes series that details the making of “Headcase.”

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For more info about Ken's ambitious debut feature film, “Headcase”:  
[www.facebook.com/Headcasefilm](http://www.facebook.com/Headcasefilm)

Ken also encourages you to make your own film with the fun and unique director's exercise, The

Viewpoint Film Challenge:  
[www.viewpointfilmchallenge.com](http://www.viewpointfilmchallenge.com)