



Film Producing - An Entrepreneurial Approach with Jason Berman

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FROM JASON BERMAN

Books

- *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*, by Ed Catmull
- *The Mailroom: Hollywood History from the Bottom Up*, by David Rensin
- *So You Want to Be a Producer*, by Lawrence Turman

Industry Publications to Follow

- [The Hollywood Reporter](#)
- [Variety](#)
- [Deadline Hollywood](#)
- [IndieWire](#)
- [Filmmaker Magazine](#)
- [Techcrunch](#)
- [Advertising Age](#)
- [New York Times](#)
- [Los Angeles Times](#)
- [Wall Street Journal](#)
- [Wired](#)

MORE PRODUCING RESOURCES

- [Dear Producer](#)
- Sundance Institute Creative Distribution Fellowship Case Studies:
 - [Columbus](#)
 - [Unrest](#)
- [We Spoke to Dozens of Distributors; This is What They Want in a Film](#)
- [Film Financing 101](#)
- [What is Producing? A Group of Sundance Producers Share Insights on Financing, Selecting Projects and Making a Career out of Making Movies](#)
- [So You Want to Be a Producer? Catching Up with 5 Creative Producing Alumni](#)
- [On what it takes to sustain a creative life financially](#)
- [Principles of Pitching](#)



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CO//AB PRODUCING RESOURCES

- [Producing Change with Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson](#)
- [Creative Producing with Stephanie Allain: Indies, Studios, Networks](#)
- [How to Become a Creative Producer](#)
- [Creative Producers: Best Practices for Pitching](#)
- [Pitching Your Project, Funding Your Work](#)
- [Creative Producing with Mary Jane Skalski & Natalie Qasabian](#)



Case Study – *LUV*

Dramatic Feature

Director: Sheldon Candis

Writers: Sheldon Candis, Justin Wilson

Producers: Jason Michael Berman, Gordon Bijelonic, Common, Derek Dudley, W. Michael Jenson, Joel Newton, Datari Turner

Budget: Under \$1 million

Financing: Private Equity

Production: 19.5 days, April – May 2011

Shooting Format: RED camera

Screening Format: DCP

World Premiere: 2012 Sundance Film Festival

Website: <http://luvthefilm.com>

Synopsis

An 11-year-old boy gets a crash course in what it means to be a man when he spends a day with the uncle he idolizes in *LUV*, a poignant and gritty coming-of-age story featuring standout performances by Common, Danny Glover, Dennis Haysbert, Charles S. Dutton and newcomer Michael Rainey Jr. With his mother in rehab and his father out of the picture, young Woody Watson (Michael Rainey Jr.) lives with his grandmother (Lonette McKee) in suburban Baltimore and longs for his family to be reunited.

His charismatic Uncle Vincent (Common) has recently returned home after eight years in prison, determined to straighten out his life by opening a high-end crab shack that will establish him as a solid citizen with a legitimate future. Soon Vincent finds himself pulled back into the violent world he is trying to escape- and Woody has to decide whether to follow his hero- or become his own man.

Development and Financing

Inspired by his relationship with his own uncle during his childhood in Baltimore, writer/director Sheldon Candis began writing the screenplay for *LUV* in 2004 with his writing partner Justin Wilson. The deeply personal theme of the long-term impact of a child's first encounter with violence motivated Candis to devote several years – three years writing and another five to finance/produce the film – to the project in hopes of bringing the story to life.

Candis gained momentum during his participation in the Film Independent Directors Lab in 2009, encouraged by the sense of camaraderie and hands-on knowledge he gained over the course of the intensive ten-week program. This process also fostered relationships with producers and built connections with peers, who continued to support Candis's work beyond the labs. This was solidified in the Film Independent Fast Track program, three days of intensive meetings with industry professionals during the 2009 Los Angeles Film Festival; while the labs enabled him to grow as a filmmaker, Fast Track drew specific attention to the project, which aided in financing later down the line.

Although none of these contacts developed into actual producers or investors on the film, Film Independent's endorsement of the project built the cachet he needed to attract the interest of agencies and financiers.

William Morris Endeavor began supporting the project directly after Fast Track in 2010, and Queen Latifah's production company, Flavor Unit Studios, also aided in the development process. It was during this time that Candis and his producer, Jason Berman, were really able to hone in on the budget. Berman recruited line producer Mark Mathis (*Conversations with Other Women*, *Precious*) to break down the script and provide the initial budget.

The biggest challenge that Candis faced in the development phase was that "no one is giving you a fair shot if you don't have financing in place or actors attached." In Candis's case, the catalyst that enabled him to overcome the catch-22 that filmmakers can't attract investors without actors attached and vice versa, was the early attachment of Charles Dutton. Berman convinced Dutton to take a meeting with Candis by first mentioning his interest in casting Dutton in a larger, green-lit film, which successfully captured his attention. At the meeting, it emerged that Dutton had grown up with Candis's uncle in Baltimore, and with a personal connection to the project, Dutton immediately agreed to the role. Candis also learned that with a compelling story, it is possible to appeal to name actors by granting them the opportunity to play a nuanced character that varies from the types of roles they have played in the past. This was the case for Dennis Haysbert, who also committed early to the project.

With actors attached and a budget established, in addition to further credentials gained from his participation in Project: Involve, Candis had a nearly complete package to present to investors. He emphasizes that it is essential to approach potential financiers with a fully fleshed-out plan, including a budget, a "lookbook," (a scrapbook that contains photographs and other visual aids that give an overview of the director's vision for a project) and a schedule. Ultimately five individuals invested in the project, including two professional athletes. Maryland also has an instant tax rebate; in order to secure these funds before production, they appealed to a family member to lend the projected credit. The terms of the deal with the investors were 100% plus 20% back of their initial investment and a close to standard profit share if the film crossed that threshold.

When Candis initially approached Common a few years before to play Uncle Vincent, the actor/singer turned down the role. As it turns out, one of the producers who came on board later in the process, Gordon Bijelonic, had a relationship with Common's producing partner, Derek Dudley, granting Candis another shot at a pitch. After a nerve-racking two hour meeting just weeks before the start date, Common agreed to the starring role, which just left them with casting Woody, the young lead. This ended up to be the biggest challenge of all; at no disservice to the casting director, none of the child actors felt right to Candis and his team, and they were without a lead two weeks before the shoot. Candis was ready to delay the shoot, rather than cast an actor who didn't feel right for the role of Woody, but in a fortuitous encounter with New York celebrity photographer Johnny Nunez, LUV's co-producer Sean Banks was told of a young actor, Michael Rainey Jr., who might be right for the role. Rainey was exactly the actor Candis

was looking for, and the last casting piece fell into place, days before their start date.

Candis explains that given the difficulty of casting a child in a leading role in a film, that often “you have to pound the pavement, knock on doors – you have to go with your gut, your instincts,” and never settle. Otherwise all of your hard work on the other aspects of the film will all be for naught.

Production

In terms of setting the start date, Candis asserts that you are “never supposed to plan independent films around actor availability, but around location availability.” However, with big name actors, this became a different story and assistant director Tobijah Tyler had a very tough time juggling actor and location availability into a manageable schedule. Nevertheless, they pulled it off and shot for 19.5 days at the end of April/early May of 2011.

The film was shot entirely on location in Baltimore – because of the personal nature of the story, Candis knew from the outset that there was no other option. He was so adamant to adhere to this vision that he even turned down an investor willing to finance the film on condition that it was shot in New Orleans. There were many challenges of shooting in the middle of the city, including a suicide attempt on set one day and a homicide right before call time on another. In terms of saving time and money during production, Candis asserts, “You may have shots list, you may have story boards, but you have to be thinking of how can I keep telling the story with the least amount of shots possible – and many times the least amount of shots possible is one shot.” It is also essential to find locations that can serve as multiple locations in order to cut down on costly and time-consuming company moves.

Festival Preparation and Strategy

As Candis completed post on LUV he submitted a cut of the film to Sundance. The film was selected and from there, Candis stresses the importance of hiring a producer’s rep and publicist. Out of long-time admiration, he hired John Sloss as his producer’s rep and additionally brought on ICM Partners, who would split a standard percentage of the sale (undisclosed). They chose mPRm Communications to handle publicity, which pre-screened the film for press with the right to hold review if the criticism was not favorable. The general goal was to build awareness, but not overhype the film for fear of disappointing the Sundance audiences. The expenses for Sundance were very high, given the stars attached to the film, but luckily one of the investors covered these costs (added to his initial investment and promised return).

The Sale

Candis received several offers but he ended up choosing Indomina Releasing. He was most impressed by Indomina’s enthusiasm for the film, especially the way they described it as a film with a universal message rather than one with a closed target audience and they finalized the deal two weeks after Sundance. Indomina bought North American theatrical and digital rights and BET acquired TV rights. The advances from this deal reimbursed their investors plus the promised percentage.

The producers are currently in negotiations with foreign sales agents. Candis is well aware of the challenging prospects for the film internationally, as many American urban dramas are considered tough sells abroad.

The Release

The film is scheduled for limited release in NYC and LA December 2012, expanding wider on January 11, 2013. They chose the cities based on demographics and will screen in 50-100 theaters. In terms of marketing strategies for the release, Candis is focused on aggregating an audience through social media. Indomina hired Cimarron Entertainment, Common's PR company 42 West, and kept mPRm on after Sundance to publicize the film. The film has had a vibrant festival life, screening at Sundance London, Paris, San Francisco, Seattle, Dallas and Nashville, among others.

Candis admits he is suffering from "Sundance post-traumatic stress" —the festival is one of the greatest opportunities for an indie filmmaker, and the experience is very special and hard to replicate.

Candis did receive a director/writer's fee, but this does not even come close to covering all of the time and energy he put into the film. As for returns from distributors, "you have to prepare yourself for the long haul," since distributors must cover their expenses before sharing profit. In the meantime, while developing his next project, he must seek out other kinds of work, such as shooting public service announcements or music videos. That is the life of the independent filmmaker.

Advice from the Filmmaker

Paraphrasing Winston Churchill, Candis avows, "a successful person is a person who fails time and time again, but does not blink." Reiterating the advice he was given several years ago when he first began at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, he counsels, "no matter how hard the horse bucks, don't let go...even if that means hanging Christmas lights in a mall, or being a PA for over a decade. If you really want it, don't ever give up."