

# TRIFLING WITH FATE

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## How to Make a Digital Video Feature Film

by Michael Bergmann



New York

# ∞ THANKS ∞

*I wish to extend my thanks to three of my artist collaborators who wrote for this book: Ardythe Ashley, Meredith Bergmann, and Doug Scofield, to Kathy Kovacic for designing it, and last and first to M. J. Rose for first suggesting and then insisting that I write it.*

*There would have been no book to write without Trifling With Fate. And there would be no Trifling With Fate without my parents, Martin and Maria Bergmann, Meredith Bergmann and my collaborators, especially, Sarah Winkler, Lexi Robertson and Ardythe Ashley whose astonishing support of my work has brought much of it into being.*

Michael Bergmann  
Spring, 2001

## PREFACE

This book emerges from my experiences making *Trifling With Fate*, a feature I made entirely on a low-cost digital video format called miniDV. My previous feature, *Milk & Money*, had a budget of \$1.5 million, a negative pickup deal with RKO Pictures, was shot on 35mm film and had many famous actors in the cast. By contrast, I made *Trifling With Fate* with no budget for paying actors up front, a small crew, a camera I could hold in one hand, and I finished it on a desktop computer in my home.

It is widely said by now that digital video is making filmmaking available to anyone who wants to make a movie, much like anyone can afford to paint a picture. But of course not everyone can paint a picture that's any good; I for one, cannot.

So the DV filmmaking questions arise: how much does all the equipment really cost and how well does it really work? Isn't the equipment the least of it? Don't we still need a union (or at least experienced) cast and crew, trucks, locations and all the rest? Are there script limitations? What about digital special effects? And what will the finished product look like and sound like? Will the finished product be something that can be shown and seen? A product "the industry" will take seriously? Is DV the wave of the future or simply a stepping stone for inexperienced filmmakers to prove themselves?

The experience of making *Trifling With Fate* has answered these questions for me in detail, so I thought it would be useful to write my

answers down. Over the years I have learned to do an assessment of each project with the people who worked on it with me. We sit in a room, usually for a whole day, and go over what went right and what went wrong with a view to making the next project come out better. The best time to do this is shortly after the project has been completed, when everyone is secure in the knowledge of a job well done, but can still remember the frustrations, problems, struggles and the strategies they used to overcome obstacles. In this tradition, I have written down my honest assessment of every judgment call I made on *Trifling With Fate*, so you can learn what worked and what didn't and why.

This book contains my notes on all the relevant production issues: the equipment, casting, shooting strategy and schedule, working with the cast and crew, editing and finishing the movie. By the time you have mined it for whatever is useful you will have watched someone very serious make a feature film on miniDV for as little money as possible. For those seeking technical information, there is a detailed how-to part of this book, in which I discuss the camera I chose and why, which sound recorder I used and why I recorded the sound the way I did, what lights I used and why...etc. The technical section is marked in gray in the table of contents and with a gray band in the outer margin of the technical pages so that the reader can go straight to—or avoid—the miniDV “nuts and bolts.” True revolutions last a long time so I suspect that in a couple of years, when none of this equipment is on the market, the issues and criteria facing the independent digital filmmaker will be the same. I hope this book will be useful, therefore, even when it's quaint.

The first time I was hired to direct a play I used Harold Clurman's book *On Directing* as a guide. I remember that it had a chart of what he accomplished during each of the four weeks of rehearsal, for example, that was enormously useful and reassuring. As I gained experience in subsequent productions—I have directed 36 plays by now—I changed it all, but that first time, it saw me through. If you are planning your first DV feature this book can help

## PREFACE

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see you through a complex and enjoyable process.

I include a complete list of the equipment and what I paid for it in Appendix A, several stills from the film throughout the book and the complete shooting schedule in Appendix B. The stills are in black and white, unfortunately, but I have posted them in color at <http://www.separate-star.com/book.html>, where you can also download the pdf version of this book with the pictures in color.

So if you happen to be planning to make a narrative feature film that you will shoot on miniDV, edit on a desktop computer and show in theaters, whether you are a newcomer set to make your first film or a seasoned actor, director, writer or producer looking to realize a favorite vision in a project that has so far eluded the green light, this book will tell you exactly, in a very few pages, how much it will cost, what you will need and what you are going to come up against.



**Your author up a tree in 1978 shooting *The Importance of Being Earnest*. On the ground (left to right) Peter Siiteri as Algernon, Lawrence Gilligan recording sound, Martha J. Meade as Cecily.**

I myself am not a newcomer. I left graduate film school in 1976 and in 1978 made my first feature length motion picture using a single-tube video camera on  $\frac{3}{4}$ " videotape. At that time cable TV was a new idea and home video was not yet an established fact of life. I remember sitting in a tree holding the camera which was connected by a thick and damnably fragile cable to a control box which was connected to a power transformer which was connected to

a car battery. As we ran the car between shots to keep the battery charged I thought something like,

- “You know, if the camera were battery powered, if it produced a professional quality image,
- if there were some way to keep track of the edits so that we wouldn’t have to re-edit the whole second half of the film if we changed something in the middle,
- if the image didn’t deteriorate every time a piece of tape is copied and if everyone had a tape deck in their homes so they could watch my movie,

...this wouldn’t be a bad way to work.”

It was an extreme wish list but everything on it came true over the next twenty years, during which time I directed three dozen plays, made short and feature films and wrote several screenplays.

Along the way, I kept revisiting the issue. In 1990, for example, I shot a sample scene for a new movie on analog component Betacam<sup>®</sup> (then the best available video technology), had it transferred to 35mm film and liked the results well enough to buy a \$75,000 camera, two Betacam<sup>®</sup> editing decks (another \$60,000) and an IBM<sup>®</sup> AT (80286) computer to control them and keep track of the edits. I shot that feature, working on alternate weekends for a year.

Neither the technology nor the market was ready for a video-originated movie and the process, though educational, was frustrating. In 1996, determined to make a feature that the market would find beyond reproach, I made *Milk & Money*, my 35mm feature that stars Calista Flockhart, Peter Boyle, Robert Vaughn, Margaret Colin, Dina Merrill and Olympia Dukakis. *Milk & Money* won prizes for both the film and the screenplay and has been sold all over the world.

In 1999, with the advent of DV cameras, Pentium III computers and a huge jump in the quality of video to film transfer technology it was time, at last, to enjoy the fact that everything I had wished for in the tree had come true. The challenge was that it had come true in fragments, and not because the industrial world decided to enable me

## PREFACE

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to make movies the way I want. All these developments are driven by different industrial breakthroughs and different marketing ideas. The independent filmmaker is such a small part of the market for any of these inventions that they were not created with us in mind and they are not guaranteed (or even designed) to serve our purposes. The success of (to name two) *The Celebration* and *Dancer in the Dark* proves that under certain conditions it is possible to adapt the equipment for feature filmmaking but anyone wanting to do it for herself or himself will want to know the details.

Even with access to good equipment, most people who are on their own make a truly dreadful first film. Many first films are abandoned before they are completed and many talented people who persevere make several films before they make one that's really good through and through. I have therefore begun this essay with the important lessons I have learned from experience over the last twenty years, things that were not taught to me in school or in books or by my elders. All of these insights apply to making a DV feature on an extremely low budget, but some of them apply to all filmmaking or even art-making of other sorts. Please email me ([michael@separate-star.com](mailto:michael@separate-star.com)) if this part of the book makes you want to share anecdotes or insights of your own. One of the major advantages of digital publishing is the ease with which I can update this book and put out a new edition.

Sharing the lessons of this most recent journey means sharing *Trifling With Fate*. Chapter 5 of this book is the screenplay of the movie annotated in the places where something in the script came out significantly differently in the finished film. I have also marked the places where the script created more problems than it solved. Those lessons are always useful and those readers who have never seen a shooting script go through the Cuisinart<sup>®</sup> of production should take a good look and compare the edited film to the script. I hope you will enjoy the script.

# CONTENTS

Preface .....	i
1. Starting Out .....	1
A Word to First-Time Directors .....	2
Professionalism .....	3
2. Preproduction .....	6
Script Considerations .....	6
Casting .....	24
Locations .....	26
Budgeting .....	26
3. Production .....	29
Working with the Cast .....	29
Working with the Crew .....	32
Changing Your Mind .....	38
A Word from the Production Designer by Meredith Bergmann .....	40
Shooting Schedule .....	45
Insurance .....	47
Unions .....	47
<b>MiniDV Technical Information</b>	
The Camera .....	49
PAL vs. NTSC .....	53
Choosing a Specific Camera .....	56
Sound Recording .....	57
Lights and Accessories .....	60
4. Postproduction .....	64
<b>MiniDV Technical Information</b>	
Editing Movies on a Computer .....	66
How it Works .....	67
Why it Doesn't Quite Work Yet .....	68
How DV is Different from Editing Film or Other Kinds of Videotape on a Computer .....	69



Hardware . . . . .	71
The Editing Computer . . . . .	71
Hard Drive Storage . . . . .	73
Previews and Real-Time Effects . . . . .	73
DV Interface Card . . . . .	77
DV Device . . . . .	82
Monitor . . . . .	85
Sound Card . . . . .	86
Software . . . . .	88
Operating System . . . . .	88
Editing Software . . . . .	88
Special Effects Software . . . . .	90
Titling Software . . . . .	91
Audio Processing Software . . . . .	92
The Revolution and Before . . . . .	93
Logging . . . . .	96
Video . . . . .	96
Audio . . . . .	96
Synchronizing Audio and Video . . . . .	97
Dialogue Editing . . . . .	101
Sound Mixing . . . . .	103
Final Output Considerations . . . . .	104
Transfer to Film . . . . .	104
Artistic Considerations in Editing . . . . .	108
A Word from the Editor by Ardythe Ashley . . . . .	111
Working with an Editor . . . . .	113
Music . . . . .	114
A Word from the Composer by Doug Scofield . . . . .	116
When you don't have Final Cut . . . . .	118
5. The Annotated Screenplay . . . . .	124
6. Alfred Hitchcock Puts it All in Perspective . . . . .	238

## Appendix

A. Complete List of Equipment with Prices . . . . .	240
B. Shooting Schedule . . . . .	243
C. <u>Variety's</u> Review of <i>Trifling With Fate</i> . . . . .	259
D. Further Reading . . . . .	262