

FILM R6034.001, Fall 2005
PRE-PRODUCTION OF A MOTION PICTURE

PROF. RICHARD BRICK
Wednesdays 6:30-9:30 PM
DODGE 507

PREFACE:

This course is for all MFA degree candidates who have chosen the producing track, or for anyone interested in exploring how feature films are prepared. It will also give writers and directors an appreciation of the line producer's functions. In the past, space permitting, I have welcomed law and business students to the class, although registration priority remains with MFA film degree candidates, with students who have declared a producing concentration having first priority. *This term's enrollment is strictly limited to 12.*

I have been teaching this course for twenty years, since 1984, immediately after completing my work on Robert Benton's *PLACES IN THE HEART*. I have always used the "case history" approach to illustrate and give form to much of the material covered during the short arc of approximately fourteen class meetings. In the past I have used *PLACES IN THE HEART*, Mike Nichols' *SILKWOOD*, and a \$2 million Panavision feature I produced for New Line Cinema in 1990, *HANGIN' WITH THE HOMEBOYS*. This year we will study *ARIZONA DREAM*, directed by Emir Kusturica, distinguished European director and former Visiting Professor in our Film Division, 1988-89. The screenplay was written by David Atkins, Columbia Film Division graduate and former adjunct faculty member, who directed his first feature, *NOVOCAINE*, released in 2001 by Artisan.

ARIZONA DREAM was released in Europe, played particularly strongly in France, and won two prizes at the 1993 Berlin Film Festival. Warner Brothers acquired US domestic rights prior to production for something in excess of \$2 million. After taking delivery of the picture, Warners sat on the picture for a year and a half during which they conducted abortive negotiations with a more specialized distributor, Miramax, to handle the domestic release. Warners opened *ARIZONA DREAM* in Seattle on September 9th, 1994 for a "test weekend", for which they did no publicity to speak of and reported no grosses. Shortly thereafter, the picture went to video release. In July 1995, Karen Cooper exhibited *ARIZONA DREAM* for two weeks at Film Forum in New York. Kit Carson Films subsequently released the film on a limited basis around the US.

In my opinion, *ARIZONA DREAM*, starring Faye Dunaway, Jerry Lewis, Johnny Depp, Lili Taylor, Vincent Gallo and Paulina Porizkova, is an unusual, if faulted, picture. Mr. Kusturica has enjoyed an extraordinary track record at the Cannes Film Festival: he won the Palme d'Or twice, in 1995 for *THE UNDERGROUND*, in 1985 for *WHEN FATHER WAS AWAY ON BUSINESS*, and in 1989 he was cited for Best Direction for *IN THE TIME OF THE GYPSIES*. In 1991, at age 36, with French financing, Mr. Kusturica went to the American southwest to make *ARIZONA DREAM* (then titled *ARROWTOOTH WALTZ*), his first film in English and his first film shot in the USA.

It is my conviction that the pre-production phase of making a motion picture is critical. In the case of ARIZONA DREAM, pre-production was flawed, an inadequate budget and an unrealistic shooting schedule were developed and a line producer was chosen who was not supportive of the director. In the course we will examine each of these factors, as well as the choice of a non-union LA-based crew, the source of the rented camera, lighting and grip equipment, and other critical decisions which, in my judgement, collectively led to the worst kind of production problems. Our analysis of this picture will demonstrate the importance of informed and meticulous pre-production preparation. We will discuss two fundamental questions, among others: Did the artistic goals of the director suffer? How did the shooting hiatus and the budget overage affect the commercial outlook of the picture?

COURSE MATERIALS:

At the first class, the instructor will give each registered student a copy of the shooting script and selected materials from the line producer's notebooks, including a script breakdown, a complete Movie Magic computer-generated production budget, a photocopy of the production strip board, location contracts, crew and cast deal memos, insurance documents, rights clearance memoranda, a weekly cost report and other examples of organizing the pre-production of a feature film. It is *strongly* suggested that each student come to the first class with ten three-ring dividers for these materials, which will be supplied to you in a three ring binder, which must be brought to all subsequent classes, as we will refer to the material constantly.

In addition, later in the semester, each student will receive a production board and colored-coded strips that they will use in one of the class exercises. At the conclusion of the course, the board itself must be returned to the Film Division. Students keep the strips and all other materials.

REGISTRATION AND ATTENDANCE:

There are 12 places in the class. If you are not duly registered, PLEASE do not show up and try to talk your way into the class. *You will be sent away.* If you think you have a compelling case to make please write to me. Such petitions will only be read if received at r.brick@att.net before the first class.

To help the instructor evaluate the level of experience of the class, students are asked to bring a resume detailing their film experience to our first meeting. Also, bring a simple photograph of yourself or be prepared to have a quick Polaroid portrait taken.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMS:

This is not a class in screenwriting. However, for the class exercises each student is required to bring to class a 30 page screenplay, written by them or somebody else, (it can even be the first 30 pages of a produced feature's screenplay), with at least four speaking roles, day and night scenes, a minimum of five locations, some background extras, either some special effects or music or video playback. Based on the instructor's system, all students will complete a one-line breakdown of their script. They will then learn to construct a production strip board, the main tool used to make a shooting schedule, and then schedule their project's shooting. Finally, each student will produce professional call sheets for their first two days of shooting. There will also be a take home exam based on the class lectures, the two books, the production materials in the notebooks, and what has been learned by the three class exercises.

READINGS:

The texts on order at Labyrinth Books, 536 West 112th Street: for historical overview of the role of the producer and the evolution of the studio system, THE GENIUS OF THE SYSTEM: HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING IN THE STUDIO ERA by Thomas Schatz (Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 1996). Another excellent book deals with the independent film industry, which many of you hope to join, Peter Biskind's DOWN AND DIRTY PICTURES: MIRAMAX, SUNDANCE AND THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT FILM (Simon & Schuster, 2004). Finally, a good nuts and bolts paperback: FILM PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT by Bastian Cleve (Focal Press, 1999).

GRADES:

Grades will be either Honors, Pass, Low Pass or Fail. CP (credit pending) grades will only be given in extreme circumstances. If you do not complete the assignments, do not expect a CP grade without a medical or other compelling explanation. To earn an Honors grades a student must demonstrate an excellent command of the course material, their work must demonstrate the same level of attention to detail and zero tolerance of errors that is expected from production workers on feature films, and they need to attend and participate in all classes.

OFFICE HOURS:

To help students with problems they may be having with their work, appointments may be made with the instructor either before or after class. These appointments will be held either at the Film Division before or after class, or at my office in Soho at a time mutually convenient to the student and the instructor. Routine questions about assignments or class topics should be asked during class. Instructor is also available by e-mail: r.brick@att.net