Eight Hours for Hollywood
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After veteran line producer Robert Schneider budgeted a $40 million below-the-line studio feature film based on the usual 12-hour shooting day, he decided to try an experiment. He re-budgeted the same film based on an eight-hour day. He was challenging the long-held assumption that movie crews must work a 12-hour minimum day to counter the high daily costs of stage, location, and equipment rentals.

He extended the 17-week shooting schedule to 20 weeks and refigured the budget based on an eight-hour camera day with one-hour prep time and one-hour wrap time.

The new budget came in one million dollars cheaper.

"I wanted to dispel the notion that working shorter, more humane hours meant increased costs," says Schneider. "I've suspected for a long time that on many films, it's cheaper and more efficient to shoot basically straight-time days than to shoot extended hours that are inefficient and paid for at premium rates."

Schneider and his wife, first assistant director Yudi Bennett, operate Budgets By Design, Glendale, California. The company creates shooting schedules and budgets for clients such as Tim Robbins, Spike Lee, and David Fincher.

The length of film production work days has been a hot topic in the Hollywood community since the March 6, 1997, death of assistant cameraman (AC) Brent Hershman. Hershman, 35, was killed when he fell asleep at the wheel and hit a utility pole driving home after a 19-hour work day on Pleasantville, a New Line film directed by Gary Ross. (Hershman had started out as a camera loader on Indecent Proposal in 1993 and was working up the AC ladder.)

A "Brent's Rule" petition asking producers to limit shooting days to 14 hours gathered more than 10,000 Hollywood signatures. All the major unions and guilds have formed committees to study the issue, but the industry has yet to adopt concrete proposals to curb excessive hours.

On March 6, 1998, the first anniversary of Hershman's death, Brent's Rule supporters asked production companies to wrap at 14 hours to honor their colleague's memory. Cinematographer Haskell Wexler took out ads in the trade papers to request the one-day memorial.

Schneider's information—if accurate—is a bombshell that spins the discussion in a radical new direction. If shorter days actually save production costs, the most widely accepted rationale for extended working days has no validity. Producers with an eye on the bottom line would be motivated to work crews far under the proposed 14-hour limit for purely fiscal reasons.

"Most budgets are broken down so that labor represents an average of 72 percent of every dollar," says Schneider. "Materials represent the other 28 percent. It's obviously weighted toward expensive labor. It's simple mathematics and a fact that many studio
people have espoused for years. Longer shooting days are more inefficient and just
don't make sense."

Schneider has considerable experience in the field. His production manager (UPM)
credits include White Fang and An Officer and A Gentleman. His proposed budget paid
the crew at straight time with a small amount of overtime-and included an overtime
allowance just in case.

Donna Smith, former senior vice-president of physical production for Universal Studios
and current president and CEO of film insurance and completion bond company
Entertainment Coalition, Universal City, says: "My first reaction was, 'Give me a break.
We all know a 12-hour day is best.' But this information is provocative."

Does Smith believe an eight-hour shooting day to be practical? "Yes, I think it is, but I
feel 10 hours will win out. This is an original idea that would be decent, better, more
thoughtful... and economically smart."

Penelope Foster, whose co-producer credits include the feature films Rosewood,
Operation Dumbo Drop, Silent Fall, and Free Willy and the NBC MOW Five Desperate
Hours, says: "This is something that the industry should take a serious look at. I think it
may be a more viable option for in-town shooting as opposed to distant locations, but, in
my opinion, companies should start doing comparison budgets on a per-show basis,
and the proof will be in the numbers. Then companies may actually start shortening the
hours."

Tom Joyner, executive producer of That Old Feeling, former vice-president of feature
production at Warner Brothers, and current senior vice president of production for World
Wide Film Completion, Santa Monica, concurs. "Since each picture is individual and
unique, and some would lend themselves to short days more than others, it only makes
sense to look at it to see what is the most efficient way of working."

Schneider elaborates: "The economic viability is just common sense. Eight hours of
work that gets eight hours of pay is cheaper than 14 hours of work that gets 17-1/2
hours pay, and beyond that it becomes almost geometric. When you get up to 16 or 17
hours, you're paying for 22 or 23. It's nuts! And I say that having done a huge number of
budgets over the past few years. It just works that way."

Schneider revealed the results of his experiment in an October, 1997 letter to the editor
of Above & Below, the newsletter of Media Services, Los Angeles (an industry payroll
service). Editor Jette Sorensen (writing under the name B. N. Counter) responded:
"That experiment certainly shot holes in my theory about equipment cost. I don't know if
any of our readers have created similar budgets. I certainly would like to hear about it."
To date, only one response has been logged.

Sorensen, who was production accountant on An Officer and A Gentleman, 48 Hours,
Staying Alive, and Major League, elaborates: "I gave that answer to point out what most
people believe, but I have always argued with producers that shooting shorter days
would be cheaper-especially now with days getting much longer than 12 hours. It's the
salaries that are expensive. I would love to see shorter shooting days."
The questionable assumption that working extended hours is cost-effective is so widely accepted that it is routinely reported as fact. In the August 13, 1997, issue of Hollywood Reporter, an article on SAG's support of efforts to establish a 12-hour maximum work day ends, "Limiting hours worked in a day would result in longer film and TV shoots, which would cost the companies more money."

Schneider contends that axiom becomes false when the work day has an eight-hour straight-time base, rather than an overtime-heavy 12-hour base. Likewise, an article in the August 8, 1997, issue of Daily Variety on IATSE's support of efforts to cut back extended hours says: "Some industry sources say as long as it's economically advantageous to work 19-hour shifts, the long work days will continue. In short, paying an A-level actor for extra, unscheduled days is more expensive than asking cinematographers, grips, and gaffers to work into the night."

Schneider disagrees. "When a picture is scheduled and prepared properly, and A-level actor deals are made with a real understanding of what it takes to make a movie, there is enough leeway created that emergency 'unscheduled' measures don't have to trigger megabuck penalties."

Schneider goes on: "If you're going to pay somebody $20 million to be in a movie, you pay them $20 million whether it's a 20-week schedule or an 18-week schedule. Those big salaries don't get extended substantially. In fact, actors who get those kinds of salaries often have a finite number of work hours written into their personal deals."

Bennett advocates shorter hours because of the safety factors, not the financial benefits. "It is unforgivable that people have been injured and killed making movies. If working shorter hours can prevent these tragedies, then it's an idea we should all embrace regardless of cost."

Bennett's first assistant director credits include The Game, I'm Not Rappaport, The Client, and Pleasantville-the movie Hershman was working on when he died. That tragedy compelled Bennett to form the Directors Guild Safety Committee where she has met with industry leaders from all the unions and guilds to discuss ways of implementing a shorter, safer work day.

"There wasn't a person I met with who wouldn't like to work shorter hours," Bennett says. "What they're afraid of is that the studios won't extend the schedules accordingly. If you say to any producer, director, or actor, 'Would you like to have two extra weeks and work shorter days?, ' the answer is, 'Yes!' The catch is: Are you really going to get the extra time at the end? Everybody's afraid the answer's going to be 'No.'"

How would the shorter work day effect episodic TV, where air dates often add pressure to work extended hours? "Oddly enough, in episodic, you have two extremes," explains Bennett. "You have shows that have so little money, they pull the plug after 12 hours. Then you have the other extreme: shows that repeatedly work 19 and 20 hours. What this proves is that it's about style and personality and what the people in charge feel about the issue. It's not about what's possible and what's not possible."
Bennett adds: "The key to shorter working hours is changing a mind set. People are creatures of habit, and we do what we've always done until we stop and think about it and say, 'There's got to be a better way.'"

Veteran Murphy Brown producer Bob Jeffords, author of Jeffords Rules and Regulations, a widely used compendium of union rules that is organized by subject, agrees wholeheartedly with Schneider's theory. At first, Jeffords feared producers might resist working shorter days. "It removes some of the creative flexibility in their minds. But we know from various aesthetics philosophers that limitation is a great impetus for the creation of art. So if we give them good guidelines, the quality of the product might very well improve."

The logic of a shorter work day is not universally accepted, however. Kool Marder, Universal Studios' vice president of production, in consultation with studio estimator Randy Lencioni, takes a more cautious view. "This is such a general statement that it would be hard to corroborate. Each film really has its own peculiarities and restrictions. You have release dates, actor availabilities, location restrictions, and weather problems. You also have directors who don't always shoot as quickly and efficiently as we would like, so I think each film really needs to be taken on a case-by-case basis."

Changing the mind set of studios and directors may be a tall order. Leon Dudevoir, vice-president of physical production for New Line Cinema, Los Angeles, points out: "All the arithmetic here is absolutely correct, but the savings have to come from somewhere, and it's coming from the pockets of the crew members. They'd be working more days, but they'd be straight-time days. There are only 52 weeks in a year, and they'd be making less money per week. Actors that are getting paid scale like day players and stuntmen would have a big problem with it. They would be getting more time in their life, and that is important, but it is more important to some and less to others."

Pleasantville cinematographer John Lindley, whose credits also include Field of Dreams, Father of the Bride, and Sleeping with the Enemy, says: "I'm sure there are some people who want all the overtime they can get, but they're not representative of the body of people who want to work safely and reasonably. They get equal weight because people are eager to represent the other side of this issue."

Lindley continues: "Is the 16-hour shooting day a practical idea? Is there any employer in any industry who can honestly say that a worker in the 16th hour of a work shift is so productive that he or she should be paid twice their hourly wage?"

Lindley adds, "It sounds like nonsense, but it is the way a lot of film work is done every day. It defies common sense as well as financial analysis, and it threatens the safety of all involved-both on the set and on the drive home. This process also threatens people outside the industry when fatigued workers are let loose on the highway."

Michael Grillo, executive producer of The Peacemaker and head of physical feature production at Dreamworks SKG, brings up a different issue. "I think that limits are terrific. They can be very helpful to a movie, both creatively and financially. It makes filmmakers take a look at what's important and why they're making the movie. [But] I just don't believe cutting it all the way down to an eight-hour work day is feasible. I think it's
too short for what we do. You've got to give the director a good shot at getting his work done."

Grillo goes on: "I don't know any director who would support going home after eight hours. Most directors with a passion for making the movie as good as they can would not support that kind of limit."

But 38-year veteran director Alexander Singer would disagree: "Very few of us are doing our best work in the 15th or 20th hour, and all of us have sat alongside death in our cars, driving home, struggling to stay awake behind the wheel."

Singer, whose credits include five features and 286 television shows, was part of a failed effort by the Directors Guild 12 years ago to limit work days to 12 hours. He says: "Sleep deprivation is the single most pervasive damage that the industry inflicts on its talented people. Of course, some of my colleagues have no limits on the hours they want to work."

Donna Smith observes: "I think the biggest deterrent to setting this up is going to be an unprepared director. The first question of the day on set should not be, 'Where am I going to put the camera?'"

Leon Dudevoir, who was production executive in charge of Boogie Nights, Dumb and Dumber, and Dark City, says: "The opening shot of Boogie Nights took 10 hours. We couldn't have done it in an eight-hour day."

Cinematographer Lindley points out: "When a movie shoots day exteriors, the length of the shooting day is dictated by the availability of natural light. Many of those days are 12 hours or less, and the work gets accomplished. If we allow nature to limit the length of our work day, shouldn't we also allow reason to do the same?"

Titanic's brutally long hours were the subject of a story in Time magazine's April 21, 1997, issue. That article reported that a Tijuana woman was severely injured in an auto accident after working until 3 am as a script supervisor.

Titanic co-producer Sharon Mann explains: "You start out budgeting what you can predict, but when the picture turns out to be bigger than anyone had ever conceived or made before in the history of movie making, how can you say it would have been cheaper if? It was the first time any of that was ever done. In retrospect, a lot of things could have been done differently. Maybe hours could have been one of them, but that's only a piece of the pie. Safety is very important to me, and I do think a shorter work week would be healthier for everybody, but if you try to define a movie by how many hours you work a day, you're forgetting why you're working."

Mann goes on: "Shooting a movie is a world away from budgeting a movie. Making a movie is a very complex, intricate, delicate, and rough undertaking. Pulling the plug is a very tough decision. In fact, we have the power now to wrap after eight hours. Or 10. Or 12."
Meanwhile, with feature film budgets rising and production and postproduction schedules putting directors and studios at loggerheads, the average Hollywood work day grows longer and longer.

Marsha Scarbrough, who lives in Los Angeles, has been an assistant director for 17 years. Her TV credits include American Pie (NBC Productions), Teech (Columbia TV), NewsRadio (Brillstein/Grey), and Doctor, Doctor (Reeves Entertainment). Her feature film credits include Bird, Skin Deep, Hard to Kill, and Sunset. She is a graduate of the DGA, West's assistant directors training program. She also contributes to Written By: The Journal of the Writer's Guild of America.