

The Devil Made Me Do It!
The Saga of How I Recovered My Soul while Selling Soap

By Annie Spiegelman

There is a peculiar misconception about the people that work in my industry, the movie business. We, the film crew, are perceived as over-paid, superficial whiners who stand around the set and drink free coffee all day.

Of that misperception, one thing is absolutely true; we are world-class coffee connoisseurs. Some would say snobs. But the film crew, for the most part, consists of decent, creative, loyal, innovative and extremely hard working people, whose personal beliefs frequently conflict with the work they are hired to do: Hired hands of the advertising industry, corporate world and the powerful Hollywood studios.

For the last twenty years of my life I have worked as a First Assistant Director on feature films, TV movies, and television commercials. I should have suspected I was entering an unsavory world when I began my career working as a PA (production assistant) on the movie *Staying Alive*. My sole responsibility was to guard Sylvester Stallone's picture car, the one he drove in the movie, in New York's East Village. I had such a knack for safeguarding non-moving vehicles that "Double-A", a vulgar chain-smoking, gum-popping producer hired me on his next film project. The movie was called "Moscow on the Hudson" starring Robin Williams. This time I was promoted to the title of "Assistant to Craft Service".

I soon learned that "Double A" tackled every problem on the film set by screaming at the top of his lungs, "Somebody Stop The f%\$^ing Bleeding!" It was a noteworthy cry for help but his vocabulary had severely limited range. As "Assistant to Craft Service", I spent my days removing garbage from a film crew of a hundred, and taking it to various dumpsites around New York City. I rode shotgun with Jimmy, an explosive, expletive spewing teamster who felt it was his moral and civil duty to confess to me all the crooked punks he and his pals had "rubbed out" while growing up in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. I quickly mastered Garbage-Collecting 101. I tried real hard to see the good side of Jimmy, mostly out of desperate need to stay alive. But inside, I knew I had to get away from Jimmy, who each morning pathetically poured out his heart to me, and then, with a dubious wink and smile, threatened to toss me into a deserted dumpster near the East river if I ever spoke a word of it to anyone.

I was starting to get the hang of the business. It wasn't the kind of work I originally had in mind, but I was ready for more.

A week later, "Double A" saved my life by bumping me up to # 8 PA on the film. I waved goodbye to Jimmy and his garbage truck and that special time in my life. As #8 PA I would spend each day, running an obstacle course through dangerously crowded Manhattan streets. I searched frantically for a payphone that actually had a dial tone. This was nearly impossible in New York. This was way before cell phones and my main job responsibility was to call the production office every hour and write down messages to deliver back to the set. It meant that each hour, I had to find the elusive working phone

and take my place in line with a bunch of confrontational and fed up New Yorkers. When it finally came my turn to use the phone, I would inevitably reach the snippy production office assistant, someone even lower on the totem pole than me, if humanly possible. There she sat in her warm fuzzy office sipping Cappuccino while I huddled in my tattered Eddie Bauer snow parka shivering in the face of windblown snow and sleet. She'd immediately take caddy potshots at me, before I could even say a word. She'd complain effusively because I didn't call on time. She'd chastise me, explaining how the studio system on the "Coast" worked, and how they couldn't be waiting on a lowly P.A. Just as she was done with her "Hollywood-studio-rules-for-idiots" lecture, my dime would expire and I'd be disconnected. Breathing down my neck, wolves at the door, frozen miserable New Yorkers would curse me out in a half- dozen different languages and threaten me to get to the back of the line. I was starting to miss Jimmy a little bit.

A few weeks later, "Double-A" bumped me up to the prestigious position of "key" production assistant. Key PA! I had finally made it! I spent my February nights on cold, icy pavement blocking off the streets and sidewalks with barricades, orange cones and caution tape. While the main unit was filming, I would politely ask pedestrians if they could walk a different route and to please be quiet while we were filming our movie. A few were kind and interested, but most of them heatedly responded by telling me specifically where Robin Williams could "shove it." I would spend most of my days and nights avoiding fistfights with antagonistic, stressed out, and inconvenienced New Yorkers.

I continued to work for many years groveling my way up to my present title of First Assistant Director. Over the years, I have worked on some projects I am proud of and a few I have justifiably omitted from my resume. Until last week, when a long lost cousin from Belgium proudly informed me via email that he had found my film credits on an internet movie website. I went online and to my horror I found the old projects I had tried to disassociate myself from. Such C film classics as Barbara Eden's of I dream of Jeannie fame, "Tainted Blood", and Sela Ward in "The King of Love".

And worst of all, a day on the set of CHUD (Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers). My long lost 2nd cousin wrote. "I'm impressed!" Impressed? Poor guy.

After the birth of my son, I chose to work on shorter projects, doing mostly TV commercials. In the biz, we refer to it as "selling soap." I arrive on the film set at 5am to find a hot breakfast waiting for me. My PA hands me my walkie-talkie, aptly labeled "Queen Bee", and a teamster who happily parks my pick-up truck for me. Then I sip Pete's coffee with the film crew department heads. We tackle head on the days filming challenges. Review the storyboard and shot list all before sunrise. Shortly after, the egos land. The director and his/her entourage, the actors and "their people"(pets, cook, bodyguard, pilates instructor, trainer and aroma-therapist), the clients and "their people", and the ad agency staff whose job it is to suck up and laugh at the head client's jokes. Then we take over an entire city street or three with our circus of wannabes and malcontents. Lining the streets are ten-ton equipment trucks, each the length of a half city block, as well as cameras, lighting gear, picture cars, stunt drivers, and most importantly,

the catering truck. We are geared up and prepared for fourteen hours of perfectly focused insanity.

Today I worked on a commercial for a cold & flu medication. We filmed in San Francisco's dramatic North Beach. Our camera crew followed the lead actress whose job it was to cough and sneeze on her way to work, through a backdrop of beautifully photogenic and famous San Francisco streets. The actress walked and sneezed from sunrise to sunset. The day went extremely well, no injuries, no forecasted rain, no significant filming delays and no residents complaining about the loud film crew. But that was all about to change.

At 6pm, having filmed all 30 scheduled shots, I was about to call a camera wrap. The head client then decided he wanted additional shots of the sneezing lady with more product placement! "His people" all shook their heads in agreement. He is a genius! The only minor problem was that the sun had just set.

The major problem was that it was totally DARK.

A big discussion took place between the film producer and the ad agency staff. In the middle of the debate was the client. Ideas were flying from his head, his hands frantically waving in the air, the creative juices rushing out of him. "His people" were shaking their heads expeditiously in synchronized agreement, their heads all bobbing in a high-speed staccato motion. They will certainly need a chiropractor in the morning and maybe a lobotomy by noon.

The client got his way so we set up for an unplanned night shoot. We began removing every single gargantuan light off of the grip truck and began running cables from the generator truck so we could magically give it the illusion of daytime. The locals who were now returning home from their workday tired and hungry, and had nowhere to park, were unimpressed with the movie-making process. The complaints started rolling in. We had over-stayed our welcome, once again. We filmed for another two hours, shooting a variety of close ups of the sneezing lady with more and better product placement! In the shots background we had placed 30 city-type extras, still acting as if they were on their way to work at 9am in the morning.

However, it was 8pm at night and the director of photography was standing by me looking through the camera's eyepiece, mumbling to no one in particular, that the light's not matching the daytime shots and how the client can shove his pharmaceutical products up his *%\$.

I turned to him and asked, "Are you from New York?"

He nodded, of course. We bonded.

I yelled, "Roll Camera. Action! Action Background Actors, it's 9 in the morning. You're on your way to work. WAKE UP YOU SLACKERS!"

I love my work, most of the time. But ever since I became a mother, I have been asking myself, why? Why can't I do a job that really matters? Something that is helping. At home I have a note on my desk with a line that Alice Walker wrote. It says, "The world is not good enough-we must make it better." I want to make it better. I want to be part of the solution.

One afternoon last summer, while I was shopping for a bunk bed for my son, I screeched my pick-up truck to a halt. I had just witnessed a bus Kiosk with a Black & White poster

of a young boy encircled by words of verbal abuse. Underneath, it read, “What a Child Learns About Violence A Child Learns For Life. Visit ActAgainstViolence.org” ACT, Adults and Children Together Against Violence is a joint project of the American Psychological Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children designed to prevent violence by providing young children with positive role models and environments that teach nonviolent problem solving.

I stood outside the bus stop and stared at this poster for a long time. I felt a metamorphosis begin. A cacophony of conflicted emotions swirled through my head. In the background I heard Beethoven’s Symphony No.9 swelling up. I flashed on an image of my mother as a young girl defiantly standing in the way of her angry father trying to protect her smaller sisters. I flashed upon my own shadow filled memories of my sisters and I hiding to avoid our mother’s own tormented demons. I thought about generations upon generations of innocent children scarred by the shameful legacy of domestic abuse. Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” crescendoed inside my head as I ran in the pouring rain, down cobblestone alleys and back streets through the windy night. I had found a new purpose in my life. All of a sudden I had a mission, a conscience and the courage to respond.

Okay, in actuality, when the transformation occurred it wasn’t really raining and there was no windstorm. It was late afternoon and the poster was displayed at the bus stop outside a Starbucks. I scribbled down the website of ActAgainstViolence.org, put on some lipstick, bought a bunk bed, then very un-dramatically drove home in traffic. The next day I contacted to the director of ACT in Washington, DC. I told her that I was in the film business, but that I also wrote gardening books on the side. I promised that I would donate a percentage of my royalties to the Act Against Violence Project. My 2nd book was published and ACT is listed on the back cover and in the inner flap. I speak about the Act Against Violence project at all of my book signings. I want this to be part of my new life. I want my life to be about working against family violence . . . yet, part of me is still chased by the devil, and that part still longs for the unrealistic challenges, the absolute chaos and the extraordinary camaraderie of the film set.

Some enlightened individuals say if we follow our bliss, the universe will support us. Awhile back, I called my mother for some advice about changing careers. Though she has had her own complex personal struggles, she strongly believed in serving others. “But, they feed you such nice lunches on the set. Uch, stop with the nonsense. You want to save the world? Go ahead. Good luck! Why do you always call during Judge Judy?” Next, I called my dad. He was always a source of practicality and wisdom, “But they have such good, strong coffee on the set . . . And you finally have “people!”

I had hoped to get Jimmy, the teamster’s advice but I hadn’t heard from him since I saw him on the nightly news listed on the FBI’s most wanted list.

I know ultimately the answer lies within myself. But, I’m still not convinced the “follow your bliss” theory works for everyone. Once I listened to positive thinking tapes daily for

a full month and by the fourth week I received a letter stating that I had lost my health insurance, my book sales had dropped significantly, the IRS claimed I owed back taxes, and we had rats take up residence in the attic. So, I'm not sold on the follow your bliss theory.

Or maybe it just doesn't work quite so well on New Yorkers?

But, I'm willing to keep trying because deep inside I can still hear those young voices crying out for help. I plan to sell a little less soap and instead focus more energy on bringing awareness to the "Act Against Violence" project.

Stay tuned.

If it works, "my people" will get back to "your people."

And if anyone sees Jimmy . . .

send him my regards.

For more information about ACT-Adults and Children Together -Against Violence, log on to www.actagainstviolence.com
or call: 202-336-5817