

Big Productions, Small Format

by Dan Frazier

A year ago, Michael Paul Girard knew almost nothing about filmmaking. He had never made any kind of film. Nonetheless, Girard has just finished shooting his first feature film based on his own screenplay. Girard is now concentrating on cutting and splicing together his raw strands of film to form his finished feature film. With his editing nearing completion, Girard has joined a growing number of people who have discovered a shortcut to making their first feature films.

Traditionally, students of film have learned to make films by making several short films. If such films showed promising talent, a student might land a job of some sort in the film industry. At best, a short film led to directing an episode of a TV show, as in the case of Steven Spielberg. At worst, a short film led a film student to change his or her major. Some students have realized that even with an outstanding short film on one's demo reel, the competition is so stiff that an opportunity to shoot a feature could remain elusive for years.

However, all this may soon be changing. These days, the average feature film is budgeted at over \$10 million. Some young filmmakers are raising the eyebrows of Hollywood production accountants by making their own feature films with budgets averaging a mere \$10,000. In 1985, Mark Pirro made a feature film for \$2500 called *A Polish Vampire in Burbank*. So far the film has grossed well over \$500,000 in videocassette sales. Pirro's secret: The film was shot and edited entirely on Super 8 film.

Although Pirro was able to save thousands of dollars by enlisting volunteer actors, scabbing locations without permission, and playing the part of writer, director and editor, Pirro's most important cost-cutting measure was to shoot the project in Super 8. Pirro found that Super 8 film was at least three times less expensive than 16mm reversal film stocks. Despite the relatively low cost, Pirro could not afford to waste film. He managed to keep his shooting ratio down to about four to one on the 84 minute picture. By carefully cutting his camera original footage himself, Pirro also avoided



Jet Benny cinematographer Audi Fernandez and director Roger Evans prepare "Maxwell" for a Super 8 shot.

the costs involved in making a workprint and conforming a negative, as is normally done in 16mm. There are no negative camera stocks in Super 8.

Pirro's feature led directly to an offer to write, direct, and produce a 35mm feature called *Death Row Game Show*. With these features under his belt, and others in various stages of pre-production, Pirro has a good chance for a successful filmmaking career.

Pirro may have been the first to successfully sell a feature film shot in Super 8 to the home video market, but even before he finished editing, other filmmakers were realizing that new technology had finally

made it possible to use Super 8 film to originate a feature film and release it on videotape. By 1986, Roger Evans had completed *Jet Benny*, a 77 minute sci-fi comedy. Like Pirro, Evans shot and edited his project entirely on Super 8 and thus managed to finish the film for less than \$6000. Already, the film has grossed more than \$130,000 in videocassette sales. Following the success of *Jet Benny*, many doors were opened for Evans. For instance, Evans accepted an offer from United Entertainment to direct the feature film *Forever Evil*. Thanks to the cost-cutting lessons learned by working in Super 8, Evans managed to deliver a finished film for under \$120,000. Shot on 16mm and

distributed on home video, *Forever Evil* grossed over a million dollars in its first 90 days of release. For Evans, the future of his career in film looks bright.

While Evans appears to have graduated to working as a professional in larger formats, he continues to have a special fondness for Super 8 as the one format that allows the individual to create his or her own feature film without the constraints associated with outside funding, usually required when working in a larger format. Evans also points out that the chances of recouping one's personal financial investment on a Super 8 feature film are far greater than they are on a good short film made in any format. This is because there is an overabundance of short films in a market that has little need for them. It is estimated that in the U.S. alone, over 15,000 short films are produced by students and independents each year. Though some shorts are shown as fillers between longer programs on television, filmmakers rarely receive more than an ego-boost if their short film is shown on TV. Furthermore, videotape distributors are generally not interested in looking at films that run less than feature length. Although a few film festivals award cash prizes to exceptional short films, the money is rarely sufficient to cover the cost of a single print of the film. Thus, the short film that eventually manages to recoup any of its production costs is considered to have done very well.

Meanwhile, the market for feature length films continues to grow rapidly. The most obvious reason for this is the overnight proliferation of videotape rental outlets around the world. In the U.S., the number of outlets eagerly looking for new titles to rent already totals more than 100,000. Furthermore, television, particularly cable television, has an insatiable need for feature films. Though hundreds of feature films are released every year, the demand continues to far exceed the present supply.

Confronted by these obvious economic realities, the student, amateur, and independent filmmaker is increasingly likely to consider investing the thousands of dollars he or she originally intended to spend on a short 16mm project in a feature length Super 8 film.

"Though the possibility of cutting together 90 minutes of Super 8 film and calling it a feature has been around since the introduction of the format in 1965, only during the last few years has the idea appealed to anyone besides a handful of hard-core enthusiasts," notes Phil Vigeant,

President of Super 8 Sound in Burbank, the largest supplier of Super 8 equipment. According to Vigeant, only one or two Super 8 feature films were made in any given year before 1985. "This year," says Vigeant, "we've already seen over 30 feature films go into production." He expects the number of Super 8 feature films to triple by 1990.

So far, the budgets for these features continue to fall into the no-budget category. Mark Swetland, producer and director of *Blood and Steel*, a Gold Award winner at this year's Houston International Film Festival, confesses that his film had a "runaway budget" eventually costing about \$20,000 to finish. In the world of Super 8, such a budget is considered astronomical. In larger formats, such budgets would be described as unbelievably low.

Though Super 8 was long regarded as a cheap amateur format unsuitable for professional use, technological breakthroughs in all areas now allow professionals to present images on television that often look as if they were recorded with a fine 16mm camera. In fact, on seeing a tape of a Super 8 feature, most distributors don't ask what format the film was shot on; they assume it to be 16mm. TV watchers have seen Super 8 originated material without even knowing it. A flood of Super 8 originated music videos for such artists as Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, and George Benson have appeared recently, as have commercials for Honda scooters, Nike shoes, and Surf laundry detergent. Even such television programs as *The Gary Shandling Show*, *America's Most Wanted* and *The Tracey Ullman Show* have used Super 8 segments recently.

Ironically, the technology most responsible for Super 8's present appeal was not developed with that in mind. Since Rank Cintel introduced its flying spot scanner film-to-tape transfer system in the late 70's, it has been used primarily to transfer Hollywood's finest 35mm films to tape. Few people anticipated that such high-tech transfer equipment would allow Super 8 to compete successfully with 16mm in applications where the end product is to be shown on a television. Costing well over a quarter of a million dollars apiece, today's Rank Cintel flying-spot transfer systems are on the cutting edge of telecine technology.

Though it may take a grey haired broadcast engineer to fully explain how a flying spot scanner works, it doesn't take a PhD to see how much better film looks when transferred on a Rank instead of a traditional telecine. Thanks to the flying-spot scanning method, transfers are no longer

plagued by problems of noise in shadow areas, lag in highlight areas, poor vertical and horizontal registration, low resolution, and inadequate contrast reproduction. Zooming and cropping of filmed images can also be introduced during a transfer on the Rank.

While the Rank system ensures that the maximum information contained in a film frame is encoded on videotape, other accessory image control devices like the Dubner color correction console enable the telecine operator to selectively alter the hue and saturation of any color recorded on film. Vigeant explains that because the amount of picture information found in a Super 8 film frame far exceeds the amount of picture information that can be stored in a frame of 1" videotape, improvements in videotape technology such as the proposed high definition television systems will only help to bring out all the richness that Super 8 film has to offer.

While film-to-tape transfer technology has been progressing rapidly, Super 8 technology has also advanced. In the beginning, there was just one Super 8 film stock. Today numerous stocks are available from Eastman, Agfa and Fuji. In America, Kodachrome 40 is by far the most popular. It is a very fine grain color stock noted for its bright colors. Ektachrome 160 (type A) is a high speed color stock used when light levels cannot be boosted enough to shoot with Kodachrome 40. Although Ektachrome 160 is slightly grainier than Kodachrome 40, it can sometimes be intercut with scenes shot with Kodachrome 40 without an objectionable increase in grain. While these two stocks are used most commonly, five other stocks are available from Kodak, including three black and white films. These have daylight ASA ratings ranging from 25 to 400 and can be pushed or pulled during processing up to two stops. Labs like Film Service in Cambridge, Maryland, cater solely to the professional Super 8 filmmaker by offering such services as same day or special run processing, workprinting, A & B rolling, and preparing footage for transfer to videotape.

The first Kodak Super 8 camera was about as sophisticated as a Cracker Jack box with a lens on it. However, today's feature filmmaker can work with cameras that are in some respects more sophisticated than even the best 16mm cameras. For instant, the Nizo 6000 series boasts a microprocessor that governs all electronic functions. These functions include a push button fade/lap dissolve feature, automatic and manual exposure system, built in inter-

valometer for time-lapse, and frame rates of 9, 16, 24, and 54 fps. This camera can record sound on the film or is available in a crystal-controlled version allowing sync sound filmmaking with a separate sound recorder. Last but not least, these cameras are equipped with 11 to 1 Schneider f1.4 zoom lenses (with macro), and dual speed zoom motors.

Another camera that has every function required to shoot a feature film is the Beaulieu 7008 series. While the Beaulieu 7008 cameras have capabilities similar to the Nizo cameras, they also offer some operational characteristics cinematographers have come to expect in a camera. For example, a Beaulieu 7008 can be fitted with a wide assortment of lenses including any standard C-mount lens. Furthermore, Beaulieu has equipped their cameras with a shutter system akin to those found in 35mm cameras. With a variable mirrored guillotine type shutter, the 7008 alternately diverts 100% of the light to either the film or the viewfinder. There is no light lost to a beam-splitter. The camera, unlike most Super 8 cameras, has a ground glass focusing system. Any description of the Beaulieu would be incomplete if it failed to mention taking speeds ranging from 4 to 80 fps, a digital frame and centimeter counter, and an awesome Angenieux 15 to 1 zoom lens designed especially for this camera. The lens features a continuously variable zoom motor and built in macro capability. Like the Nizo 6000 series, the Beaulieu 7008 is available in a crystal controlled version. Beaulieu is also developing a video assist unit for the 7008 but has yet to make the unit available. Starting at \$1500, new crystal controlled Super 8 camera packages complete with a lens and power supply are available at a fraction of the cost of most used 16mm cameras.

No longer is the Super 8 filmmaker limited to one soundtrack. Crystal controlled fullcoat recorders, which are as portable as Nagra location recorders but cost a fraction as much, are often used. This sprocketed fullcoat matches the width of Super 8 film. Later it can be cut together freely on a sync block to form the dialogue track just as is done in conventional 16mm and 35mm editing. Additional fullcoat tracks with music and sound effects can also be cut together creatively. Then, even with the simplest of 4-track cassette recorders, as many as 11 tracks can be mixed down to form the master audio track.

Though a Super 8 feature could be edited successfully on videotape, most independents can't afford to transfer all their

raw footage to tape and then pay for hundreds of hours of videotape editing time. Instead, most invest in a Super 8 editing bench and very carefully edit their original footage in their own homes, unhurried by hourly rates. There is a widespread misconception that once the film is cut apart and spliced back together, it will invariably be so scratched and dirty that it will be unwatchable. One look at tapes of films like the clean and scratch-free *Jet Benny* proves that this simply is not true.

The biggest news in the area of editing is the Wurker tape splicer which was introduced in 1981. Howard Sisko, who has transferred hundreds of Super 8 projects to tape on the Rank Cintel at The Post Group, explains the reason for the appeal of the Wurker splicer: "Not only is it the simplest Super 8 splicer I've ever used, it is the only splicer I know of that creates splices that are strong enough to hold under the tension of the Rank, yet are virtually invisible. The [Wurker splice] tapes don't distort the image of frames adjacent to the splice and the soundtracks aren't interrupted."

John Boehm, a film instructor at UCLA, has been teaching with Super 8 equipment for more than 15 years. He continues to support the format as the only practical and affordable way to introduce students to the fundamental techniques of filmmaking. While many film professors agree with Boehm that Super 8 will continue to be the best choice for introductory film production courses, some even question the wisdom of requiring students to "step up" to 16mm for more advanced classes. Finding that students can produce a Super 8 feature film for less money than most short 16mm films, and realizing that making a feature film significantly raises a student's career prospects and self confidence, some film schools are altering their programs to encourage (or require) students to produce a feature film during their course of study. Many students are excited about such changes, knowing that they'll learn more about making feature films by doing one than by shooting several shorts. As Jon Teboe, a recent graduate of the film program at the University of Miami remarked, "Who wants to make short films when you could be making a feature?" △

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