

What is the biggest obstacle you have had on set and how did you navigate it?

One of my very dear, very Southern friends likes to say, “art is like pinning jello to a tree”. Oh, how true this is!

Last year, I was hired by a company out of New York to shoot a spot for Netflix. I had just finished working on a documentary (see above essay), and it was a wonderful experience which helped me grow as a storyteller, but left me hungry to get back to my true path as a narrative director. So I jumped at the chance to work on a comedic ad with a well-known meme personality named BatDad.

As soon as I was hired, there were a plethora of obstacles to face. I’ll focus on the top two, since they are directly linked: timing and talent.

First and foremost, five scenes and only seven hours to shoot. Nothing unusual about lack of time, however, the script had some inherent pacing issues, and I knew from experience that there would be no way to fit that amount of dialogue and transitions into 60 seconds. I had a good relationship with the EP from the production company and was able to talk over my concerns with him. He agreed with me, but, as I thought, the client was locked on the script and didn’t want to make any other changes. I felt that familiar little box between time and content close in around me. I knew I’d need extra time in order to shoot alternate takes.

On top of this, there were a total of 9 producers and they all had different opinions on what the shots should look like. To put the final cherry on top of this not-so-hot sundae, the talent was on the verge of pulling out of the project altogether. Protective of his family (our cast), his home (our location), and rightfully distrustful of the entire process, he was very picky about what we could and could not do.

So, obstacle number 1, timing. I wanted to get alternate takes on set, find some creative solutions that worked within the client’s script in order to deliver a story I was proud of. Due to a tight schedule and an extra tricky lighting set up in a cramped bathroom, the DP and I knew we needed a badass gaffer. But the line producer had already hired a gaffer, someone he owed a favor to. Since I had no experience with him and couldn’t be sure of his abilities, I decided to make a contingency plan. I met with my trusty DP, and we asked a longtime comrade to work as the 2nd AC, knowing he could swap into lighting if needed.

Obstacle number two, talent. I wanted and needed BatDad and his family to trust me enough to deliver stellar performances in the time frame we had. I asked if I could meet with BatDad ahead of time, and I watched all of his videos and memes one more time to dig deeper into his persona: compositionally comedic shots, with him in right foreground using his BatDad voice to proclaim his hero-ness, and action in the mid/background that usually conflicts with whatever he's trying to accomplish. This pattern creates a sort of every-man empathy for the good guy, trying to save the day, but the inevitable humanness (in himself and others) always gets in the way.

When we met, I asked him what he thought made his stories work. His assessment was similar to my own, with one key additional ingredient: he leaves room to improvise so he can react in a fresh, funny way. He worried that the script and continual client notes during the shoot would inhibit his ability to be BatDad. I assured him that I'd find a system where I could still receive the client's input, but BatDad would only take direction from me, and I'd allow him the freedom to play by shooting alternate takes. Obviously relieved, he agreed with the plan and we laughed about our crappy parenting decisions and bonded about some of our rare successes.

I put all of my research, prep, and script breakdown together, and created my own storyboards. I sent those to the client, along with my plan: stay close to the BatDad brand, emulate what is already working about his approach, and keep it intimate- not too polished. It needed to be similar to his style (shot on his phone) in order to keep the believability and every-man feel. We had initially planned to use a Red with a MOVI (I love that rig) but I suggested we use a camera that was more flexible, easier to use for fast set-ups, and produced footage that matched the BatDad look. We could put the extra money in the lighting department and give our gaffer more hands.

They loved my take on it and approved the storyboards. Which also helped me volley for my other plan - my assistant would send screenshots and video to client during rehearsals/blocking and we'd get notes/approval while we finished lighting and camera prep. This would make space for BatDad and his process, and leave room for the producer's valuable input. They agreed to all and we were on our way!

Cut to: Day of shoot. The producer switched out the camera the night before and kept the Red and MOVI rig. That's ok, I was very tight with the DP and knew she could pull the shots off. She knew my boards inside and out and was ready to rumble. Our goal was to get the gaffer into the game so we could be a well oiled machine, but the gaffer was totally flustered, over his head, and unable to work with both a female dp and female director.

My DP immediately communicated to me about this, and sure enough, when I talked to him, I could see the problem. He could hardly engage with me or the DP, only talked to the male producer or AC, and was genuinely not able or unwilling to take any direction. It is my job, as the leader, to take action and keep things positive in order to get keep the momentum. So, when we finished the first set-up on-time and the gaffer had failed to pre-light the next set-up, I went to plan B. The gaffer was simply too slow, luckily the producer agreed, so I told him to move Trevor (the 2nd AC we had planted) over to lighting to "assist". This got us back on track, and although the gaffer grumbled a bit, he slowly came around, accepted the help, and began to trust my leadership.

Despite the lack of time, the shoot was going smoothly thanks to the initial prep. I was able to keep the gaggle of producers happy by having my assistant take screenshots and videos constantly, allowing them to approve each shot. I pulled on a combination of my past theater experience and my experience working with actors on set over the years to get the performances we needed from the talent. I have a few very easy, very quick acting games that got the kids in the mood and made them enjoy my direction. BatDad started to warm up and we were able to move faster and faster as he trusted that I would adjust as needed. I was able to get alternate takes and my assistant communicated the changes to the producers so they knew ahead of time and were able to send notes and comments.

We wrapped on-time.

In terms of the final product, the client feedback was extremely positive and the production company wants to work with me again. They liked what I delivered and especially appreciated the options. Even though they used several of my set-ups, I felt mixed, there were some elements of the script I couldn't fix.

But, ultimately, this project wasn't mine. Knowing how to collaborate and how to let go is an important lesson, one I will continue to learn. The only way I can

measure my success is by asking, did I use my skills to the very best of my ability? Did I give everything, and prepare enough so that I found those important bits of gold hidden beneath the obstacles? I believe I did. I hope this program will give me more professional experience, and more professional obstacles, so I can learn new ways to bring stories to the screen and new ways to pin that dang jello to a tree.