

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Paerangi | Video 6 – Being a Director

[intro music]

What is the role of the Director?

[0:00:06 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] Directing is a really wonderful job and it's a really rewarding job as well, but I think it's also really important to remember that it's not a solitary job. I think that idea of getting your vision on screen, that's important, but you can't ever forget that filmmaking is a collective affair, it's a team job, you've got to ensure that you don't place your vision in front of the people. So, I think there's two key roles for a director: one of them is to be connected to the people around you; and the next one is to be able to get your vision across in a clear way so that the story that was in your head, those many years or many months ago, is able to be put on screen.

[0:01:01 Robyn Grace, Director] A long time ago I was told in very simple terms that the role of the director is to tell a compelling story. You have to keep thinking about that, and sometimes that's really tough in the throes of shooting because things will happen and mistakes happen, or you run out of time, or the day changes, but you have to keep going back to the fact that you are telling the story, which means being really clear about every single department and knowing what you want to see from production design, how the camera is going to move, your cinematic choices. So, you have to have an overview of all of those things but, on the ground, standing there, you're telling a great story, so working with the cast, staying true to the scripts, making sure that if you have to change your mind in a hurry on set because something terrible has happened, that you still are getting the meaning that you want to portray across to the audience.

[0:02:02 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] The role of a director in my mind on a web series, is two things: Firstly, there's a director's role in the preparation of the project or the development of the work, and we could call that 'in-prep' role, and then there's a role for the director during the shooting or the filming of the work, and we can call that the 'onset' role. Firstly, the in-prep role involves you being across all elements of the preparation of the project, almost assuming the role of a producer as well—which, trust me, is a really positive thing because you also gain the skill of producing the content *as well* as directing the content. Mixing those two things together as a director–producer, you end up writing or guiding the writing of the project, you're involved in the research and planning the ways you can bring it to life, you're also building a team of creatives to help you make it, and you're planning the shoot; all of which I myself did on *Auckland Love*.

[0:08:01 Hamish Bennett, Screenwriter/Director] Yeah, so as much as being a writer or being a director of a film, there's importance in that role, *please* don't ever think that you're the most important person on the set. Films are dependent on the skills and the creativity and the goodwill of the people around you and you've got to be grateful for that every day. I think whoever it is that you're making a film with, just make sure that at the start of every day you go and say hello to everyone, catch up with everyone, you thank everyone at the end of the day; they sound like pretty kind of basic things but they're important. Don't underestimate the importance of trying to establish a culture that's kind and caring and allowing everyone to thrive and feel valued, it's just as important as being able to tell the story that you want to tell, and in many ways you won't be able to tell the story that you want to tell if you don't have the support or the buy-in of those people around you.

When we made *Bellbird* a couple of years ago, me and Orlando Stewart who was one of the producers alongside Catherine Fitzgerald, we were just so conscious every day of how lucky we were—not just to be making the film that we'd been developing for a long time, but to be surrounded by so many amazing people, so we tried to do everything we could: Orlando was doing dishes every night, he was vacuuming up after people, and, as much as that may not necessarily be the traditional role of a producer, he recognised that these people are giving us so much, we need to do the same thing back to them.

At the heart of it all directing is about relationships, it's about people, and in as much as we all have different strengths that we lean on as writers or directors, every person is unique and every person is different, and just don't underestimate putting in that time and effort to get to know people and to get to understand how people tick.

[0:05:27 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] So, when I didn't know how to do something I sought the advice from others in the industry that I'd met as an actor, to understand the thing a little bit better. I would Google or YouTube to understand, or I would sort of do what I thought seemed logical in that scenario, and before I knew it my skillset was increased and the project itself was starting to snowball into being something that was about to be brought to life. As I mentioned, producer–director, you will find that you are gaining skills that will crossover into so many elements of the work, but when it comes to the filming of it you may find you need a production coordinator or a person to fulfil the role of producer, because when you're on set as a director it's a pretty big job.

Which brings us to your on set role as a director. So, the director's role on set to me is integral in the cohesion of all the departments onset. You are the one who sets up the tone for which people work at, the energy that people work with, the behaviour of or the rules of which people abide by, and the attitudes towards the work, of all the people around you, and the way that you lead, and something that we've had drilled into us for a long time, particularly in my world, is 'lead by example', and it's no more apparent than when you're on set.

It's very easy to be a little too stressed or let the stress hit you, which will affect other people around you and you find that they're stressed, or you can also go the other way and be too relaxed, and being too relaxed tells other people that they're allowed to be relaxed as well, and they are not fulfilling their job to the full potential and so the story isn't being told to its maximum potential. And when I say don't be stressed, don't be relaxed, of course allowing some of that is part of the process, that's always an element that will be present for you, but being able to keep a clear focused head as a director from the moment you get there till the moment you leave, *and* the night's you can't sleep, will give you a much stronger product at the other end of it, so it's really, really worth trying to take on that role as a director considering it as a leader.

[music]

Preparing a Director's Treatment

[0:08:01 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] So, what is a director's treatment? Often director's treatments can be seen as something complicated or scary, but at its simplest a director's treatment is a tool you will use to convey your vision to others, simple as that. This can be anyone from sharing your idea with a flatmate to seeking sponsorship or funding from a potential sponsor or funding body, or it can be used to try to bring a crew member onboard—particularly in my own experience is bringing my director of photography, Nina Wells, onboard with our projects. In all the scenarios I mentioned you will need to be clear in what your content is.

[0:08:47 Robyn Grace, Director] The director's treatment is to tell a funding body or a producer (or you can use any of your HODs really: cinematographer, production designer...) a director's treatment is something that you're required to do for a funding body but you should actually do for yourself because, through the process of writing a director's treatment, you actually are able to put into words exactly how you see your film and what you want to achieve.

[0:09:17 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] We can approach this director's treatment with a bit of common sense: what do you need to say to someone or show them for them to understand your project? There are certain elements that we can ensure that we have in a director's treatment and they are: what is my story, what will it look like, what will it feel like, why are you making it, and who are you making it for? Let's look at these one at a time. So, what is my story? This includes the little story, what happens and who it happens to, as well as the themes that you're exploring in that story and the genre your story sits in. So, for *Auckland Love* for example, not only did we talk about the plot, but we also had themes of sexuality and bodies, relationships and ambition for our third

season—so in the director's treatment I ensured that I was speaking to those themes as I was telling the story to our reader.

What will it look like? This is a visually driven element of your director's treatment so will often require images or, if you're doing something digitally, it will require a video to encourage your reader to understand it. This can be anything from reference images from other TV shows, it can be colour swatches to show what the costumes might look like, or it could even involve some of your favourite content from a TV show that you're hoping it could be similar to. So, this is the element where you speak about the mood or the tone of your work, and you can use text or image to convey this, looking more clearly to capture what you have in mind for this work.

One great thing that we have is a thousand, if not a million pieces of content that's already made before us, and you can use these as a reference point to help your reader understand what you're going for. For example, is your show like *Friends* meets *Outrageous Fortune*, or is it something darker like *Ozark*? By putting these in there it makes them immediately relatable to our audience, but we also want to go the next step further which is, what elements of that will inform your work and how will those be shown on screen? So, you can't just go 'it's gonna be like *Ozark*'; you've got to go 'it's going to have the comedic elements of Jason Bateman in *Ozark*, with the rawness and family status of *Outrageous Fortune*' for example, and immediately you go, 'oh yeah. okay cool, so I'm taking that element there, putting those together', and you've got a slightly weird show but that is what it is.

You find that a treatment also encourages you as the creator or director, or whatever role you've taken, to be clear in your own thinking and your own approach to your work. This scenario happened to me countless times with *Awkward Love*. As I would approach someone, I would have a conversation with them and I would find that there were new questions that would arise that I didn't have full clarity on, so over that time I developed the need to always be as clear and concise as I could at any stage, and always have the focus of trying to make it understandable for whoever I was speaking to.

[0:12:54 Robyn Grace, Director] I think for a director's treatment, one of the things that I learnt is that every different funding body has a different idea of what a director's treatment is, and I let that confuse me for a really long time. But an important thing to do is find out who's gonna be reading them, and get examples of things that they've funded recently, or even if they're filmmakers, of director's treatments that they wrote in the past. That sounds like a crazy thing to do but everyone has a different language and a different style, and I found even in New Zealand through the funding bodies, they expect different things to be in the director's treatment, so that's a really great place to start.

For me, what I would do is I decide, okay, I'm going to talk about the cinematography and how I want the film to look. If you decide you're shooting in black and white, or you're gonna be handheld, those are really important devices to discuss through your director's treatment and why that is gonna help your story. You've chosen those things because it's going to help you tell the story in a certain way. The production design is the same. I'm obsessed with colours in my films so I find a colour or a "feel" a colour when I'm writing my scripts, that suddenly becomes like a theme. Explain those things in your director's treatment, why this colour evokes this feeling, how you want it to seep through the whole film, how you're going to tie it all together. Then talk about the casting, the way that you cast and the way that you work with the cast as well, discuss techniques that you're gonna use to bring out performances, but all of these things need to be tied and related to how this is gonna help your film and bring it all together and tell a complete story.

None of these things happen separately; all of these things are what creates a film and it's just about in the director's treatment, discussing each of those points and departments and how it's gonna help your story. For a funding body it's just actually explaining that you know that all of these different things work and all of these separate pieces come together to make a whole film, and that you know how you're going to use them and that you know what you're doing really. They need to know that you know what you're doing and that you have a clear vision, and the vision needs to be yours as well, don't let it be anyone else's. Even if you've taken examples of other people's treatments, be true to yourself, be really clear about who you are as a filmmaker and put that down in your treatment on paper—I think that that's a really important thing for them to learn as well.

In my short film *Oranges and Lemons*, because it was set in the early '70s I became obsessed with the world that it was in and worked really hard to ... Obviously colour was important to me and I made a conscious decision that there was gonna be lots of oranges and yellow tones through the whole film, and sort of finding props and dressing to create this world was really important to me. But also, the tone of the '70s, I started looking at a lot of '70's films and the old sort of Kodak film tones through it as well, and tried to bring filmmaking concepts back into that as well, so that even the camera moved to sort of reiterate the time and place that it was. So there was no handheld, which is a modern thing, very traditional tracking shots, cinematic frames (because that's what everyone did in the '70s), and my tone of the film had to creep into every single aspect of the filmmaking and I was really active in that. Finding other films that also spoke in the same way was really important to me and I could use them as examples for other people, and not everyone likes to do that but I do like to find other films that are creating or saying the same thing that I want to portray, and that's an easy way for you to explain to other people that that's how you want it to look and feel.

For me, tone isn't a colour tone, tone is a feeling, and you create the tone of the film through every single medium that you're using: through the set, through the shots you choose, through the colours that are there, the dialogue, the spaces between people, the air that there is in the film is the tone of it. And talking about that, with production designers and cinematographers is it's a difficult thing to portray, but it's a really important thing to get across to them, and you have to be clear about what that is for yourself before you can tell anyone else. I think that's where writing your vision and gathering visual references actually helps, because you bring it in and then can explain it a bit better.

The costuming, obviously it was a period piece so that actually meant that we knew exactly where we were going. It was the early '70s and I had strong ideas about what people would wear on their feet (potentially not much) and we had visual references of what costumes looked like at that time, so for the treatment we gathered a lot of those images and so we knew where it was going. The reality of finding period costumes is potentially a little more difficult because you sort of go with whatever's left. Costume hire places have period costumes but they potentially don't have the ones that you're going to have in your head, so you have to just take what they have and what you can get, and put together the best of the bunch. We spent a lot of time going through outfits for the girls and putting days together, so on this day this is what all three of them would be wearing and sort of matching them together, and I found that process quite interesting. I'd never been through that before, but matching people together as a ... and like mum and dad are gonna be wearing this on that day that the girls are gonna be wearing this in the kitchen, that was an interesting way to create a bigger picture through the costume.

Once you start to gather your information, and if you've got a treatment that you've written that you've been really clear about how you feel about what the film's gonna look like and sound like and create feelings inside you, finding visual references is a really great way to very quickly be able to tell other people about things like that. A DOP said to me once that paintings are a fantastic way of finding visual references because you're not stealing someone else's shot, it's not cinematic, but there's this amazing mergence of colour in artwork that speaks to visual creatives' like DOPs and production designers (so that's just an aside).

If you're asked to put a treatment together they will ask to have a section of visual references. Often in different parts of the world, commercials etc. people call them 'mood boards'. Costume department always put together a mood board, production designers will put together a mood board, and they're all things that relate specifically to their departments, but it's just a great collection of images that you can all work back to, and colour pallets as well, like getting a collection of images that have all the different colours that you're interested in.

So, in this visual image reference, for *Oranges and Lemons* it was about a girl walking to school, it was about country life, it was about summer, and I loved this grouping of images because I got a sense of the wide open spaces, the heat, the colours that I wanted to portray, but also the travel—there's roads, she's alone... This group of images for me says many, many, many things about the film, and when I put it together it made sense to me and it was a really easy thing to then show my DOP or my production designer of the look I was going for, the feeling I was going for as well. Any images that you find you should *feel* something for them as well, you should love the shape of it, the

composition, you should love the colours, it should create an emotion for you as well, and if you get a collection of images like that that do all of those things, that's a fantastic thing to show your director of photography and your production designer, so that they understand what you want, because they're creative people who work in images and that's a quick shortcut to get them into your world.

Google is a fantastic thing and just keeping changing the words you use in your search engine to find them. It's not a quick process, it's a really long process. We should all be watching as many films as we possibly can as filmmakers, and I keep a journal of fantastic images that I've seen in films and write it down because you'll never remember later. That's really great, all crazy things, I've got images that you see as you're driving to work going, 'oh that was a cool thing!' Just get to work and write it down, or go to school or wherever you're going, just the moment you see something that you think was really interesting, write it down, keep a journal, but yeah go to galleries, wander around, look at things, just soak yourself in a visual world. Don't live too much in your head, use your eyes always, look for beautiful things every day.

[0:23:51 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] So, why are you making it? I consider this element to be the director's vision of your director's treatment, and it's a really, really integral element of your project because this answers the big question of 'why *this* project?' This should be about this particular story and why it resonates with you, why you think it will appeal to audiences, and, in some cases, why you're the right person to tell that story. So, for example, for *Auckland Love* our 'why' was always very, very clear: it was female representation on screen. It was not only about getting female faces on screen, but also representing the characters, the stories, the scenarios they were in more accurately, which myself and the team thought was really lacking at the time.

The goal of female representation also bled out into how we assembled our team and how we told our story, so we had predominantly female writers, female actresses, and a female DOP on board with that, and having that 'why' really helped us to drive the project forward at each point, because we were always coming back to that overall goal.

So, who are you making it for? One element I find really important because it informs a lot of the choices that you make, is identifying who this project is targeting—your audience—and an audience of 15 year old boys is going to be very different from an audience of 40 year old females, so identifying them is a very important element when it comes to constructing your entire director's treatment. *Auckland Love* was about representing women accurately on screen and, in doing so, it was also to empower women. We already knew that our audience were women the same age as the creatives that I was working with and myself, so that was females 18–34, and what we then did is took that and broke it down even further into what our target audience's habits are. For example we found that the people we wanted to watch it are binge watchers and they use multiple devices at any one time. We also looked at how their worlds were constructed, finding that predominantly they'll be sexually active and they also would be people who are open to bigger conversations around sexuality, around relationships, around female representation. So, we already knew that we could take bigger risks because they were willing for us to share that with them.

[music]

Homework

The homework for this video tutorial is to prepare your director's treatment. A list of what we'd like you to include in the director's treatment is in the homework PDF.