

# CAREER FOCUS

“I love the job for its complexities and challenges ... No other career connects you as intimately to such a vast cross section of society.”

## Chris Baugh

“I REALLY DON’T KNOW WHAT TO TELL YOU.” IT WAS JUNE 1993 AT UC IRVINE. “GOOD LUCK,” WAS THE ADVICE GIVEN TO ME AS I SAT IN THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR’S FINAL OFFICE HOURS VISIT. I WAS DESPERATE FOR AN ENTRY-LEVEL JOB IN FILM PRODUCTION.



Chris Baugh. All photos courtesy of Chris Baugh unless noted.

I stared past the spectacle-wearing academic to the manicured campus outside his window. I had just spent four years earning a bachelor’s degree in film studies ... film history, theory and criticism. And then I spent another year abroad studying critical film theory and French—at the Sorbonne - Paris III. I spoke three languages and could quote masters of cinema from Méliès and Bazin to Scorsese and Kael. I could analyze semiotic subtext in a scene and write a hell of a film review. But, I didn’t know a single person actually working in the Hollywood film industry. I had no family connections. No alumni connections. I couldn’t name a single

production department position.

Three months later, in a small apartment in Pasadena, I depleted my savings while writing a spec script, *The Blue Desert*. My former classmates were giving up on the dream ... moving to careers in insurance, cellular phones and back into academia. The situation grew dire. I got a temp delivery job that took me to all parts of the Los Angeles area. I cold-called the production lists in *Variety*. I attended IFP (Independent Feature Project) mixers. I volunteered as crew on student films. But a real industry job eluded me. For fun, while doing my deliveries, I liked to search for well-known filming locations. I tracked down the classic



Working on Steve Jobs in San Francisco

locations for *Blade Runner*, *Chinatown* and *A Touch of Evil*. This was long before the Internet. It was the closest I could get to the business. I had a good hustle, a photographic spatial memory, but no direction.

That changed after volunteering for the Telluride



Portrait of the artist as a young man ... studying abroad, Nevers, France

Film Festival. The exposure to international, independent and historic films and their makers fired up my passion to find a way in. I had lunch with Robert Rodriguez, hours before the career-launching premier of *El Mariachi*. I chatted over coffee with Wim Wenders, the prestigious German director. I bumped into producer/director Frank Marshall on Colorado Avenue and ended up spending a couple of hours talking about films, how he got where he did ... and my dilemma. He was warm and gracious. Frank’s recommendation: Become a location manager. That had been his path. He laid out the job and it sounded like a pretty good fit. That was the first real tip for me. His advice: “Find a location manager to hire you.”

So, I returned to Pasadena and square one. I knew zero

location managers. I called Ricky Frasier, then the head of the Hollywood Teamsters Local 399. He gave me the same advice Frank Marshall did. I got a list of managers from the California Film Commission and wrote about 300 personal letters which achieved a one percent response rate. Two managers were willing to meet me in person ... and one manager, Amanda Gill, passed my name on to a low-budget Sundance movie called *The Doom Generation*.

I interviewed and got the job, agreeing to do it for little money and with no assistants. I locked my office door and called Amanda. “OK, what do I do?” “Get them what they ask for ... Say ‘I’ll find out,’ not ‘I don’t know,’ and then do it. Figure it out.” She told me, “You’ll be fine.” I never worked so hard in my life. *Doom* was a road movie shot around Los Angeles ... entirely on location ... mostly at night. We shot in Pacoima gangland, heavy industrial zones, high desert and some very dumpy motels. The Northridge earthquake hit the first week, destroying a Northridge market we intended to film in that day. Multiple major freeways were destroyed. Functioning gas stations were hard to find. I worked around the clock. Those were the days of pagers and fax machines ... no cellphones or email. I slept in my car while sitting set, hand drew the maps in the back seat ... began to hear “Locations” barked on the walkie in my sleep. It was easier to buy new clothes at Target than doing laundry. I used the showers of our film locations themselves ... if they had them. Six-day weeks. It was intense. But, like I said, I had a good hustle. I did figure it out. It was the heyday of indie films back in the early ‘90s. *Doom Generation* went

to Sundance and Gregg Araki, the director, hired me to do his next feature ... which also went to Sundance. Back then, in the indie world, crew sizes were rather small ... everyone under 30. The actors, producers and crew would pile into a condo up in Park City to attend the festivals. We partied our asses off. For the next five years, I jumped from one indie film to the next, sometimes out of state ... It was a great life. But, I still couldn’t get the union to give me the time of day. At a certain point, I decided to give directing a shot. In the indie world, directing a film was a real possibility.

I dusted off *The Blue Desert*, made a short and snuck into the AFM through the loading dock. I went door-to-door until I met a shyster producer who was about to get prosecuted for stealing the money intended for a pre-sold Shannon Tweed movie. He had \$250,000 left to make a 35mm sexy thriller or go to jail. He said, “I don’t give a fu\*\* about *The Blue Desert*. Do you have any sexy thriller scripts?” I made one up, on the spot, about hustlers fighting over a suitcase of money and he bought it. I told him I needed a week to polish the script and cranked it out from scratch with an indie friend, Geri Barger. A month later, I was directing Shannon Tweed in my first feature. I pulled in all my Sundance buddies and we made a pretty good little film called *Power Play*. It made it to HBO and Blockbuster. I still get checks. The experience led to a larger directing opportunity, *Ping!*, with Shirley Jones, Judge Reinhold and Lou Ferrigno. It was a kid’s movie, about a Chihuahua who protects a home from burglars ... kind of a *Home Alone* ripoff with a Chihuahua instead of



Sundance days: *The Desert Blue in Goldfield, NV, with Chris Larsen.*

a kid. It was distributed by Twentieth Century Fox. But, being released a week before 9/11, the film made very little money. And that was the end of my directing career. Then, three guys named John launched me into the world of big-time location management.

After *Ping!* flopped, it took me about a year to burn through the money. My next on-set job, after directing a studio feature, was picking up trash on *Donnie Darko*. It was humiliating. The grip department had worked on *Ping!*. Just brutal. It turned out the location department was short handed and location manager John Agolia pulled me in. I had never been an assistant before. John championed me into 399, just like that. I will always be grateful. I worked hard. I knew how to do things for less. I could solve problems quickly and independently. They told me that I had “an eye.” I found that my skill set was in demand. I owe a lot to John Grant and John Panzarella, who introduced me to the world of the Hollywood blockbuster. Both *The Majestic* and *The Italian Job* had me helping to close

huge sections of Hollywood Boulevard for extended time periods. Panzarella carried me on a number of his projects and graciously taught me the ropes of navigating the quagmire of studio politics.

So after all of the twists and turns, I looked in the mirror and I finally saw a location manager. I love the job for its complexity and challenges. I’m fascinated by the evolving magic of the production designer’s work. The conversations you overhear in the scout van are the best graduate film studies on the planet. I’ve worked with 40-plus directors and creative teams. Every time, every show, I learn something new. A perspective ... a style, strength, a weakness. But probably, what keeps me coming back the most is the job’s exposure to humanity. No other career connects you as intimately to such a vast cross section of society. It’s an education on the world that only we know. Cutting a deal at a billionaire’s kitchen table in San Marino and then an hour later, making arrangements with a neighborhood gang leader in Pico-Union to film on their turf. Understanding the parameters of military bases, airports, seaports,



Baugh scouting with Ben Affleck and team on Argo. Photo by Lori Balton/LMGI

redwood forests, glaciers or just doing a light study on top of a skyscraper. Learning to respect tribal etiquette, Chinese business practice and Third World village life, helping a middle-class homeowner through an unexpected death of a child ... Negotiating with those struggling with drug abuse, mental illness, narcissism, anger issues, loneliness ... It's our job to find common ground with anyone, anywhere, anytime and I'm fascinated by it. With mass media, I found a way to be intimately involved with a very complex, very powerful form of art that reaches an incredible amount of people around the world and remains a permanent record of our culture forever. I think that's pretty cool.

I've developed a few philosophical ideals that seem

to continually help my career. The film school background was not the wasted time I once thought it was. In fact, semiotics, the study of signs and meaning, is exactly what we do as we scout for locations. Film history comes up on almost every show. International cinema is a surprisingly useful reference tool when fishing for elusive concepts. I think one thing I do well as a location scout is the ability to think deeply and abstractly about what I'm looking for and why its particular role is important. Given the opportunity, I will meditate a bit not just on what the scene is going to look like, but what it is going to feel like, as well.

Locations ... places, emote a subliminal layer, as well as the obvious. Once you tune in to it, your suggestions carry more weight with the creative

team. If a strong rapport exists, I will often suggest something unscripted out of left field. If the tone is right, they'll likely go for it. It's nice to make those kinds of contributions. I think my one-man-department days from independent film has given me an edge in that I'm not so much hung up on how things have been done in the past. Whether it's fleecing money out of the budget, finding fresh locations or a logistics goal with no obvious solution, I try to evaluate problems with an open, creative mind. That means when the roadblocks land in front of you, take a step back, reflect, empathize with your challengers, create a two-sided solution and push as hard as you can. I care a lot about how the final product turns out and make an effort to put the needs of a show in front of the personal agendas. If you're lucky enough to find the types of projects you feel a passion for, it makes it a lot easier to make choices that are best for the film despite whatever coals you have to walk over to get there. Finally, I recognize that we are in a business that must fit within certain monetary parameters to sustain itself. With advance warning and good, assertive communication, budget challenges are not

scary. Respect the budget parameters laid in front of you and don't take the producer-director money battle personally. It's part of the process. Location managers are often just simply information conduits. Finally, if you are feeling truly mistreated by your superiors and repeated efforts to address concerns have not been fruitful, find a qualified replacement and leave the show in a professional



With location scout Lori Balton, for an NPR interview on the set of We Bought a Zoo.

manner. Your sanity is necessary to succeed in the long run. When you find a team with the right chemistry, do everything you can to help them succeed. It's nice to do things you can be proud of. That's how I see it, anyway.

Chris Baugh has worked with directors Ron Howard, Danny Boyle, Cameron Crowe and Ben Affleck. His credits include the feature films Steve Jobs, The Gambler, Transcendence, Argo, We Bought a Zoo, Angels & Demons, The Holiday and the TV series Arrested Development.

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On set with KALMs Mike Betz and Ryan Neary at the Ontario Airport, Argo.