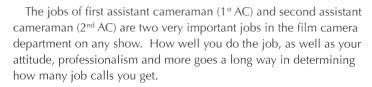
## Job Advice for Camera Assistants

## Tips for First and Second ACs

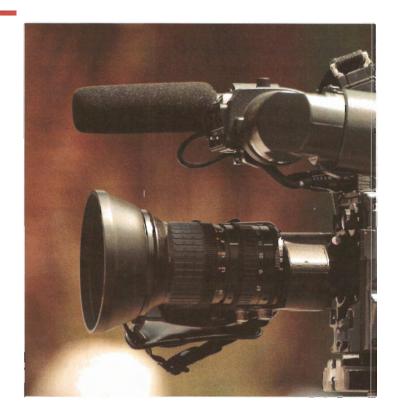
by David E. Elkins



One of the first questions that may be asked about you, when being considered for a job is, "How does he get along with others?" Or, "Does she have a good attitude?" If you are constantly complaining or whining, nobody is going to want to work with you. Have a positive attitude every day on the set. Leave your personal problems at home. Nobody wants to hear them.

As the 2<sup>nd</sup> AC you, will spend a great deal of time in the camera truck and in the darkroom. Check the darkroom regularly to be sure that it is light proof. This is especially important when working out of a darkroom on a camera truck. As the truck is driven from location to location it may be traveling over varied road surfaces. This may cause the walls, ceiling and door of the darkroom to move, creating cracks for light to leak in. I recommend checking the camera truck darkroom at the beginning of each shooting day.

Arrive on set at least 30 minutes before your call time so that you can be prepared for the day. Make sure you have everything you need for the day's shooting. Know who the lab contact is so if you need to check on the previous day's filming for the DP, you know exactly who to speak with. Have some camera reports filled out with the basic production information so you don't waste time doing this on set. Prepare some labels for the film cans and magazines ahead of time as well. Use an old slate and place a variety of colored tape marks on the back of it for the actors working on this day. The more prepared you are, the smoother the



shoot will go each day.

The smooth running of the camera department requires special attention to detail. If things are scattered around, and you can't find a particular item, it slows down the entire production. Keep the camera equipment loaded on the Magliner to make it easy to locate and move from location to location. Keeping the darkroom, changing tent or bag clean is especially important. The slightest speck of dirt or dust can get on the film, then get in the camera and cause scratches in the image, often requiring a costly re-shoot.

As the 1<sup>st</sup> AC, you will spend most of your time at the camera working closely with the cinematographer and camera operator. The area around the camera is your office. Keep it and the camera clean. Any talking around the camera should be kept to a minimum so that the cinematographer may communicate with the director, gaffer and other crew members. When a piece of equipment is needed, call it out to the 2<sup>nd</sup> AC and prepare the camera to accept the item. If it is a new lens, remove the old one and pass it off to the 2<sup>nd</sup> AC, being sure to acknowledge that you have a firm grip on it. I usually say, "Got It," so that my assistant knows it's alright to let go of the item. Failure to acknowledge this could result in an expensive lens or other piece of camera equipment being dropped on the floor.

During the course of a shoot you will discover that the DP always uses a particular lens for the close-up shots or establishing shots. He may use a certain filter when filming one of the actors or actresses. Knowing this will help you be prepared for future shots on the film. If the next shot is a close-up, have the usual lens standing by. If the lead actress is in the next shot, get the appropriate filter so when the DP requests it, you can place it on the

camera quickly. Anticipation is the key to a smooth running camera department.

When breaking for lunch, disconnect the battery, remove the lens, and secure and cover the camera. Return from lunch a few minutes early, and prepare the camera for the first shot. Place a lens back on the camera, and connect a new, freshly charged battery, placing the old battery on charge. When removing a piece of equipment from its case, be sure to close at least one of the latches on the case so that if someone else moves the case its contents will not spill out. Camera assistants have been fired from shows for failure to follow this simple procedure.

One of the key jobs of the first assistant on a film production is keeping the shot in focus during filming. If filming on a standing set or particular location for an extended period, measure the length and width of the rooms along with the diagonal measurement. If you are in a rush situation and cannot get accurate focus marks, having these measurements will help you to better guess the focus distance for a particular shot based on the position of the actors and the camera.

Know the distance between your middle fingers when you stretch your arms out to your side. This is quite often equal to your height and can help if you have to obtain a quick distance from the camera. Get in the habit of guessing distances. Before measuring the distance for a shot, guess the distance and see how good you are at estimating.

Watch and listen to the director and cinematographer between shots. They may be discussing the next shot, and you can usually tell by their conversation or position on the set where the next shot will be. This will enable you to get the equipment to that spot quickly so that the shot can be setup.

The camera department is a team that must work very closely together. Communication and professionalism is the key. If you make a mistake, admit it and don't try to cover up. You will be respected as a professional if you do this.

David E. Elkins is the Interim Dean of the North Carolina School of the Arts' School of Filmmaking. He has worked professionally as a motion picture camera assistant and camera operator for film, television ("The Wonder Years" and "Star Trek: The Next Generation"), music videos, and commercials. He is the author of "The Camera Assistant's Manual, Fourth Edition" (Focal Press) and a member of the Society of Camera Operators.

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