Chapter 1

So You Want to Be a Filmmaker

In This Chapter

▶ Recognizing how independent films differ from studio pictures

▶ Getting an overview of the filmmaking process

*F*ilm is a powerful medium. With the right script under your arm and a staff of eager team players, you're about to begin an exciting ride. The single most important thing that goes into making a successful film is the passion to tell a story. And the best way to tell your stories is with pictures. Filmmaking is visual storytelling in the form of shots that make up scenes and scenes that eventually make up a complete film.

As a filmmaker, you have the power to affect people's emotions, make them see things differently, help them discover new ideas, or just create an escape for them. In a darkened theater, you have an audience's undivided attention. They're yours — entertain them, move them, make them laugh, make them cry. You can't find a more powerful medium to express yourself.

Independents Day versus the Hollywood Way

There are three types of full length films made to be distributed (hopefully) for a paying audience:

✔ **Studio films:** A studio film is usually green lit by the head of a major studio, has a healthy budget averaging $60 million and up (some go as high as $150 million or more), has major star names intended to guarantee some kind of box office success (as if such a guarantee were possible). Nowadays many studio films are based on comic book super-heroes (*Hulk, Batman, Spiderman*), popular TV shows (*Get Smart, Sex in the City*), best selling books (the *Harry Potter* series), high concept (unique ideas that have commercial appeal like *Jurassic Park*, or *Journey to the Center of the Earth*), and/or big name stars (*Brad Pitt, Tom Hanks,*

Angelina Jolie). If a major film studio puts up the money for a film, the studio — not the filmmaker — ultimately ends up calling the shots.

✔ **Independent films:** A true independent film is often a low-budget film (costing anywhere from $5,000 to $1 million) because the filmmaker has to raise money to make the film on his or her own, independent of a studio for the financing. Many films circulating the film-festival circuit are independent films, produced independently of the studios.

✔ **Independent studio films:** A studio's independent division is really a smaller "boutique" division of the big company, with smaller budgets and possibly fewer black suits deciding how to make and distribute the films that come from these divisions. *Sideways*, *Little Miss Sunshine,* and *Juno* are perfect examples of independent studio films — they were all distributed by Twentieth Century Fox' independent division, Fox Searchlight — but all received the exposure that a big studio picture expects, including studio marketing dollars when they are nominated during the major awards season.

The term "independent studio films" is actually oxymoronic because a film produced by a studio is not truly independent. A film made by a studio's "independent" division is a studio film, in disguise.

You can find both advantages and disadvantages to making a studio picture or an independent film. On an independent production, your film ends up on the screen the way you envisioned it, but you don't have much of a budget. A studio picture has larger financial backing and can afford to pay the astronomical salaries that actors demand, as well as pay for seamless special effects and longer shooting schedules, but the film ends up the way the studio envisions it — and in the most commercial way. The studio looks at dollars first and creativity second. Many independent filmmakers discover that, although having and making money is nice, being independent allows them to tell a story in the most creative way.

An independent film doesn't always have to be a low-budget or no-budget film, however. George Lucas is the ultimate independent filmmaker. He's independent of the studios and makes his own decisions on his films without the politics or red tape of a studio looking over his shoulder. *Star Wars* may not seem like an independent film, but that's exactly what it is — even though you may have difficulty seeing yourself as one of Lucas's peers.

Filmmaking: Traditional or Digital?

Today, you can shoot your movie in several different formats. You can choose *analog* video or *digital* video, high definition (HD) digital files, or a traditional film camera using super-8 or 16mm film, or — the choice of studio productions — 35mm motion-picture film stock.

REMEMBER

The medium on which you set your story — whether it be actual film celluloid on which the images are developed, videotape, or digital (standard or high definition) with a film-style look — engender specific feelings and reactions from your audience. A movie shot on film stock tends to have a nostalgic feeling, like you're watching something that has already happened. Something shot on video elicits the feeling that it's happening right now — unfolding before your eyes, like the evening news. You can use this knowledge to enhance the emotional response your audience has to your film. Steven Spielberg, for example, made *Schindler's List* in black and white to help convey both the film as a past event and the dreariness of the era.

Traditional: Super-8, 16mm, or 35mm

Super-8 is an affordable introductory format for the beginning filmmaker, allowing the user to use celluloid film stock, develop it, and even physically cut it. Super-8 is half the width of 16mm, and less than $1/5$ the width of 35mm and thus is grainier and not a professional medium — unless you're going for this type of picture quality. Gritty music videos, documentaries, and home movies are suitable for Super-8.

16mm can produce adequate picture quality if your final product is going to television. If projected in a theater, 16mm produces a grainier image. Some TV shows like *Tales from the Darkside* were shot on 16mm; TV series like *Monk* (starring Tony Shalhoub) shoot on Super 16mm, a format that exposes a larger frame on existing 16mm film stock to create an even better image, with more detail and less grain.

The professional format of choice for most television shows and feature films is 35mm, which projects extremely well when blown up onto a theatre screen and exhibits pristine picture quality when transferred to the smaller television screen.

Going digital: Standard or high-def

In this age of digital technology, almost anyone with a computer and video camera can make a film. You can purchase (for around $2,600) or rent a 24-frame progressive digital camcorder (like the Panasonic AG-DVX-100B) that emulates the look of motion picture film, without incurring the cost of expensive film stock and an expensive motion-picture camera. For a little more money, you can shoot your movie using an HD (high definition) digital camera (like the Panasonic AG-HVX200, or Sony's PMW-EX1) that uses memory cards to store your footage.

If you can't afford one of these digital cameras, you can purchase computer software called Magic Bullet Frames (`www.redgiantsoftware.com`) that takes a harsh video image shot with an inexpensive home camcorder and transforms it to look more like it was shot with a motion-picture film camera. Many new computers come preloaded with free editing software. In Chapter 16, I give you tips on starting your very own digital-editing studio. You can also find out more information on the technical aspects of capturing digital footage to your computer, then editing and sharing your work in *Digital Video For Dummies* by Keith Underdahl (published by Wiley). You can uncover more camera information in Chapter 10.

High definition (HD) is the new-age technology that takes the camera image one step farther. The picture is much sharper, richer, and closer to what the human eye sees as opposed to what a standard definition (SD) video camera shows you. Watching HD is like looking through a window — the picture seems to breathe. The new HD digital cinema cameras combine HD technology with the 24-frame progressive technology to emulate a unique film-like picture quality in an electronic file format, without the use of physical film.

Developing Your Sense of Story

Because you can't possibly make a great film without having a great story, choosing the right material is more important than anything else. Great film careers have been built on making the right decisions about a story more than having the right talent and skills. So where do you find the good ideas to turn into films? An idea starts in your head like a tiny seed, and then it sprouts and begins to grow, eventually blossoming into an original screenplay. Don't have that tiny seed of an idea just yet?

Turn to Chapter 3, where I tell you how to find ideas and give you tips on turning your idea into a feature-length script. In that chapter, I also show you how to *option* (have temporary ownership of) existing material, whether it's someone's personal story or a published novel.

Financing Your Film: Where's the Money?

To get your film made, you have to have financing. Raising money isn't as difficult as it sounds if you have a great story and an organized business plan. You can find investors who are looking to put their money into a movie for the excitement of being involved with a film and/or the possibility of making a profit. Even friends and family are potential investors for your film — especially if your budget is in the low-numbers range.

In Chapter 5, I give you some great tips on how to find investors and how to put together a *prospectus* to attract them to fund your film. You also find out about other money-saving ideas like bartering and product placement. I even show you how to set up your own Web site to help raise awareness for your film, attract investors, and eventually serve as a promotional site for your completed film.

On a Budget: Scheduling Your Shoot

Budgeting your film is a delicate process. Often, you budget your film first (this is usually the case with independent low-budget films) by breaking down elements into categories, such as crew, props, equipment, and so on — the total amount you have to spend. Your costs are determined by how long you need to shoot your film (scheduling determines how many shoot days you have) because the length of your shoot tells you how long you need to have people on salary, how long you need to rent equipment and locations, and so on.

When you know you can only afford to pay salaries for a three-week shoot, you then have to schedule your film so that it can be shot in three weeks. You schedule your film's shoot by breaking down the script into separate elements (see Chapter 4) and deciding how many scenes and shots you can shoot each day, so that everything is completed in the three weeks you have to work with. An independent filmmaker doesn't usually have the luxury of scheduling the film first (breaking it down into how many days it will take to shoot) and then seeing how much it will cost.

Have a budget (and even a possible schedule) ready when you talk to a potential investor. It serves as ammunition to show that you didn't just draw a number out of a hat and that you did your homework and know where every dollar will go and to which category.

Planning Your Shoot, Shooting Your Plan

Planning your film includes envisioning your shots through *storyboarding,* the technique of sketching out rough diagrams of what your shots and angles will look like (see Chapter 9). You can storyboard your films even if you don't consider yourself an artist: Draw stick characters or use storyboard software, like Storyboard Quick (www.storyboardartist.com) or Frame Forge 3D (www.frameforge3d.com). Each comes with an eclectic cast of characters along with libraries of props and locations.

Surfing sites for filmmakers

Becoming a filmmaker includes plugging your-self into informative outlets that help you be more aware of the filmmaker's world. Here I list websites that may be helpful to you as a low-budget filmmaker:

✔ **The Internet Movie Database (`www.imdb.com` and `www.imdbPro.com`)** lists the credits of film and TV professionals and anyone who has made any type of mark in the entertainment industry. It's helpful for doing research or a background check on an actor, writer, or filmmaker. The difference between the two? `Imdb.com` is free, and `imdbPro.com` costs $12.95 but lists contact information and pertinent details not found on the free version.

✔ **The Independent Feature Project (`www.ifp.org`)** is an effective way to get connected right away to the world of independent filmmaking.

✔ **Storylink (`www.storylink.com`)** is a great site to network with other filmmakers and writers. You'll find discussion boards,

blogs, upcoming events, and profiles. It's jam-packed with great resources.

✔ **Film Independent (`www.filmindependent.org`)** offers assistance to its members in helping get their movies made and seen. They also produce the Los Angeles Film Festival and the Independent Spirit Awards.

✔ **The Independent (`www.aivf.org`)** is an organization that supports independent filmmakers. At the Web site, you can find festival updates, along with what's happening in the Independent scene.

✔ **IndieTalk (`www.indietalk.com`)** is a discussion forum for filmmakers where you can post and read messages about screenwriting, finding distribution, financing, and lots of other topics. It's a great site for communicating with other independent filmmakers.

✔ **Hollywood Wiretap (`www.hollywoodwiretap.com`)** offers up to the minute news on the Hollywood scene and the independent film world.

REMEMBER

You also need to plan where you to shoot your film. You research where you're going to film much as you would plan a trip and then you make all the appropriate arrangements, like figuring out how you're going to get there and the type of accommodations, if your shoot is out of town. As you plan where to shoot your film, keep these points in mind (and head to Chapter 6 for more detailed information):

✔ You have to choose whether to film at a real location, on a sound stage, or in a virtual location that you conjure up inside your computer.

✔ Regardless of where you're shooting, you need to sign an agreement with the location owner to make sure you have it reserved for your shoot dates.

Hiring Your Cast and Crewing Up

Your film crew becomes your extended family (although maybe a dysfunctional one). You spend many days and nights together — through good and bad times — so hiring people who are passionate about your project and willing to put their all into it is important. You may have to defer salary to your crew if you're working on a tight budget. (Find out how to do that and more in Chapter 7.)

Acting is not as difficult as you may think. People are born natural actors and play many parts on the stage of life. Everyone is constantly in front of an audience — or performing monologues when alone. In Chapter 8, I lead you step by step through the process of finding a great cast to bring your screenplay to life. I also fill you in on acting secrets so that you can direct your actors and get the best performances.

Shooting in the Right Direction

Making a film requires special equipment, like *cranes* (tall apparatuses on which you place the camera for high shots), *dollies* (which are like giant skateboards that you put the camera on for movement), camera systems, and so on. It also involves lighting, sound, performances and more, all explained in the following sections.

Seeing the light

Lighting, which can set a mood and enhance the entire look of your film, is important. Without it, you'll leave your actors in the dark — literally.

The eye of the camera needs adequate light to "see" a proper image. What's adequate light? Whatever produces appropriate exposure for a film camera or gives enough light to get a proper light reading for a video or digital camera. Chapter 11 gives you the lowdown on lighting.

REMEMBER

Lighting can be very powerful and can affect the mood and tone of every scene in your film. A great cinematographer combined with an efficient gaffer (see Chapter 7) will ensure that your film has a great look.

Being heard and scene

In addition to seeing your actors, you need to be able to hear them. This is where the art of sound comes in. You need to place microphones close enough to the actor to get a good sound recording, but not so close that the microphone creeps into the shot. The skill of recording great sound comes from the production sound mixer.

Production sound is extremely important because your actors must be heard correctly. Your sound mixer, who's primarily in charge of recording your actors dialogue on set, needs to know which microphones and sound-mixing equipment to use. Chapter 12 shares all the necessary details.

Actors taking your direction

If you're taking on the task of directing, you'll become a leader to your actors and crew. You'll need to know how to give your actors direction because it's the director's job to help the actors create believable performances that lure the audience into your story and make them care about your characters. Directing also involves guiding your actors to move effectively within the confines of the camera frame. Chapter 13 guides you in the right direction with some great secrets on how to warm up your actors and prepare them to give their best on the set.

Directing through the camera

In terms of telling your story visually, you'll need to understand a little about the camera (whether a film camera or a digital one). Much like driving a car, you don't need to understand how it works, but you need to know how to drive it (your cinematographer should be the expert with the camera and its internal operations).

Directing the camera requires some technical knowledge of how the camera works (film, video, or digital, including high definition) and what each lens and filter does, which I explain in Chapter 10. Chapter 14 addresses how to frame your shots and when to move the camera. In that chapter, you also discover the skills that make a successful director and how to run a smooth, organized set.

Cut It Out! Editing Your Film

During the editing phase, the film is finally assembled. Editing your film gives you a chance to step back and look at the sequence of events and all the available shot angles in order to shape and mold them into the most effective production. You can even repair a bad film (or at least make it better) during the editing process. During editing, you really see your film coming together.

Nonlinear editing software is now available for virtually any computer at affordable prices (many computers come with free editing software). With it, you can edit anything from a home movie to a professional theatrical-length piece (90 to 120 minutes). The technology of nonlinear editing allows you to cut your shots together in virtually any order. You can easily see different variations of cutting different shots together, rearrange them, and move or delete in between scenes in a concise and easy-to-understand manner. Chapter 15 tells you what the new-age digital technology makes available to you for editing your film on your desktop.

Listening to your film

Contrary to what most people think — that the sound they hear in the movie is the natural sound — the entire soundtrack must be built just as the visual elements of the film are built. At the editing stage, you add and create the audio, dialogue, sound effects, and music (Chapter 16 has the details). Titles and credits are important, too, and I discuss them in Chapter 18.

Simulating film with software

If you can't afford to shoot your movie on film or buy a digital 24 frame camera (standard or high definition), there are software programs that can make your video footage look more like film. These programs emulate grain, softness, subtle flutter, and so on. Magic Bullet Frames software, available at `www.redgiantsoftware.com,` can convert your harsh video footage and soften it to look like it was shot on film. The video-to-film software converts 30-frame video to a 24-frame pulldown, adding elements to create the illusion that your images were photographed on film as opposed to being shot on video.

The natural frame rate of video is equivalent to 30 frames per second (technically 29.97). Motion picture film operates at 24 frames or images per second. Converting video to mimic 24 frames (technically 23.97 in video) makes the image to look more film-like.

Gearing up for Cine Gear

Cine Gear is one of my favorite expos. Every June in Los Angeles, thousands of people flock to the outdoor Cine Gear expo to schmooze with fellow filmmakers, network, and see the latest developments in equipment technology (and in some cases, even experiment with the technology, hands-on). It's like a giant toy store for filmmakers. The expo runs for two days of exhibits and seminars, and you can get a free pass by pre-registering at the expo Web site (or pay $20 at the door). For information, go to `www.cinegearexpo.com`.

If you can't afford to shoot in high definition, Red Giant Software (`www.red giantsoftware.com`) makes a product called *Instant HD*. The software converts your standard definition image to look more like it was shot in high definition.

Distributing Your Film and Finding an Audience

The final, and probably most important, stage of making a film is distribution. Without the proper distribution, your film may sit on a shelf and never be experienced by an audience. Distribution can make the difference between your film making $10 (the ticket your mother buys) or $100 million at the box office. *The Blair Witch Project* may never have generated a dime if it hadn't been discovered at the Sundance Film Festival by a distributor. Even mediocre films have done well commercially because of successful distribution tactics. And great films have flopped at the box office because the distributor didn't carry out a successful distribution plan. Chapter 19 offers a slew of tips and secrets for finding a distributor.