

Matt Noonan Podcast Transcript

The interview excerpted here was conducted by Betty Belanus and Mike West on September 13, 2010.

Matt Noonan: I pretty much in high school decided I was going to work in the film industry. At no time did I even understand what the location department was or anything. I always knew I wanted to do it; originally I really wanted to do special effects. Then throughout high school I worked as a firefighter, locally as a volunteer, and I also got an internship locally at Channel Nine news. So I got to see what TV news and all of what TV was. And I learned I really didn't like it. It was really competitive and really cutthroat. I found myself more interested in problem-solving and stuff like that than sitting at a desk, so I decided not to do that and I started what's called P.A.-ing or Production Assistant. I started doing that locally on a couple commercials and stuff like that. When you're doing production assistant, you're really working with the A.D.s—those are the Assistant Directors—and managing the talent, making sure you have people there, making sure people are quiet. Just simple things like that. Making sure that the shot is clear and stuff like that. So there's a lot of very on-hands and very fast-paced atmosphere.

And the way I got into locations is I was working on a TV show and I was called in to help out a good friend of mine—now he's a good friend, this was the first time I'd met him—hired me as additional help for the locations department. And I guess I just did such a good job I ended up having to drive the guy they had hired for the whole week home that day because they wanted to replace him with me for the rest of it.

Interviewer: Wow, that's kind of awkward.

MN: Yeah, it was really awkward for that car ride back 'cause he didn't understand that the film industry is a job. And a lot of my friends when I talk with them about the movie industry and stuff they think, "Oh, you get to hang out with the stars!" and stuff. Well, you know, that's not really my job. I have to work. So there is a problem with that. You have these people that have a vision of what the industry is and what it really is are two different things.

I mean, what we do is we go out, the whole locations department. You have the scouts—and the location manager could be a scout—goes out, reads the script, finds locations that fit that. And at the same time when you look at locations you have to look at logistics. So it's all about like, yes, this location looks perfect. But if you can't get any vehicles or you can't—like, if it's on the fifth floor of a building with no elevator, and you're gonna have—the amount of logistics there....

For example, if you were to come to me and say, “I need a mansion.” So we’d go out and shoot like six or seven mansions or whatever in the logistical area, you know, show you what the options are.

Interviewer: Take photos.

MN: Absolutely. It’s really about the photos, yes.

Interviewer: So do they basically say something like that, we need a mansion or we need a house on a certain kind of street? Or do they ever give you some dialogue or something like that or character ideas?

MN: Usually the art director and them will sit down and decide what they’re looking for, you know. For example, I worked on a movie in Baltimore. And it was a dance movie, so they knew they needed spaces for dance sequences. So that was that. So you know that criteria going in. And you know if the scene’s set at night, well you have to make it interesting and make it something people will remember. So you go around and you look for spaces that would maybe work, you read the script and find spaces that work. But a lot of times you get a lot of information ahead of time, saying, “This is what we want.” They have something. And then as you go around you might creatively find stuff. But most of the times the script kind of tells the story, and so you just find things that work the best in the script.

I’ll just run you through a quick day. So for example, one of the things I had to do was I had to be out here because we were filming at the Air and Space Museum. I had to make sure that all our parking was available. So I had to make sure every sign was on every meter, and if the parking was available I had people go out and drop cones and everything like that, so securing parking. And if there was someone there, I would inform our police so they would ticket and they would tow, then I had to find out where that vehicle is. So it’s a lot of hand-holding and babysitting. Then after I’ve done that, I have to wait for the teamsters to arrive, and they’re gonna bring all the semis and everything like that, so I gotta make sure I’m there to land them where they need to be. Then you also have to land the caterer, make sure he’s set. Because a lot of our industry is union, so you really have to make sure you don’t get those union penalties, because if they’re not getting that first meal or if your whole day is off, the amount of money you just cost the production could be another day or your job. And then from there, usually you’re there to meet the location. So a lot of times what I’ll try to do is have them parking right out front so they enjoy my company right off the bat, get everyone on walkie-talkie in your department and also with the police and everything, so everyone’s communicating in the morning and everyone understands. One of the things I like to do—and I believe other location managers like to do—is the day before we’ll do maps of the area. Simple. It’s really about anticipating ahead of time where is there gonna be a problem and solving that problem ahead of time, and that makes your day go much easier.

So that's a typical day. And actually the things I don't like are, I'm not a big fan of the scouting. I actually enjoy more the logistical aspect. And it's kind of like a nice endorphin rush to actually figure everything out, to make sure everything works well. 'Cause it's nice, when everything goes well, usually you get kudos and everything like that.

Interviewer: Oh, I'm sure. People [have to] love that. So basically you're there from beginning...

MN: ...to end, easily.