

Teaching the Next Generation of Operators

By Rick Robinson SOC

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICK ROBINSON SOC

IAFT and Bigfoot Entertainment facility in Cebu, Philippines.

On the sand overlooking the water, swaying coconut filled palm trees are silhouetted against a picture postcard sunrise. This sounds like the perfect backdrop for a big Hollywood movie, but in actuality, it is the home of the International Academy of Film and Television.

Sharing a home with Bigfoot Entertainment on the Southeast Asian resort island of Cebu, Philippines, the school is a unique intertwinement of an educational facility and a state of the art production environment. On any given day you can see a student production shooting in one corner of the compound and a feature motion picture shooting on one of two NC-17 sound rated stages.

I was one of three Hollywood mentors who started teaching at the school when it opened in 2004. This is an extraordinary opportunity for students who want a career in camera to learn and absorb as much as possible in one of the most unique learning/production environments in the world.

The capabilities to shoot almost any kind of production you can think of are here. There are four 35mm Arriflex motion picture camera packages, three Sony F-900 CineAlta camera packages, one RED camera package, a telescopic crane, state of the art Dolby mix theater, full foley and ADR studio, and several edit bays—the works.

Since my start with IAFT, I have come back to Cebu three times as a Mentor and Bigfoot Entertainment consultant. I

have taught courses in cinematography, high definition, and camera operating. In 2004 I helped train over 200 cameramen at ABSCBN, the largest television network in the Philippines.

Passing the Torch

There is an old saying, “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.”

In today’s entertainment industry, nothing could be further from the truth. Anyone teaching the next generation of Camera Operators needs to be on the cusp of ever-changing technology. They need to be at the top of their field.

Here at IAFT, all of our mentors are working professionals. This is the experience that today’s students are looking for. They want to be taught by people with real world experience.

To further this experience, the IAFT has a close relationship with Bigfoot Entertainment. Learning and teaching at our facility can often result in production opportunities. For example, I am currently the Director of Photography on Bigfoot Entertainment’s latest feature film, *Deep Gold*.

In many cases, students right out of film school seek to fill the ranks of what they feel is their rightful place behind the camera. The simple fact is that the person whose eye covers the viewfinder has one of the most trusted positions on set



Working with state of the art equipment is important to students today.

and that position is an honor that needs to be earned.

When I was a second assistant cameraman, I used to admire the prestige of the Camera Operator. Within the camera department, the Camera Operator was a position of honor and respect. Teaching cinematography and camera operating is something very important. I am working to preserve a breed that often seems on the edge of extinction.

Teaching Camera Operating is a passion. Most people think operating is an easy gig until I get their eye in the viewfinder and put them on a geared head.

As I teach our succeeding generations of filmmakers, I constantly fight their urge to be a one-man show. With an HDV camera in one hand and a virtual post-production house on their laptop, they do not initially think of film as a collaborative art. Because of this, we work hard to instill a collaborative spirit in our young filmmakers.

This is particularly important to instill in our young DPs. The importance of having an Operator is taught from Day One. I impress upon them how many more creative opportunities they will have as DPs if they have an Operator by their side.

The Role of the New Generation of Camera Operators

The business of production has changed and the next generation of Camera Operators must be versatile and flexible. The more they know and understand about High Definition and the smaller HDV formats, the more successful they will be starting out.

Even more important is that they understand a wide variety of production formats. With the increase in reality TV and YouTube, Operators must be ready to work with different video formats at a moment's notice. Additionally they need to understand the different styles of operating for varying genres.

There is a big difference between shooting a reality show compared to a dramatic feature film. But today's Operator is expected to know them both in order to survive in today's industry. As educators we try to give them as wide a foundation as possible.

Understanding the Craft of Operating

The responsibilities of operating the camera don't start when action is called nor stop when the director calls cut. A good Operator is involved in setting up the shot and the choreography of the camera and actors.

Is it the Camera Operator's job to understand the one hundred eighty degree rule or eye line? The answer is absolutely yes. I teach Camera Operating from the ground up starting at the spreaders. The more you know the more valuable you are as a Camera Operator.

Even as technologies change our craft, we always start with the basics, with the five C's of Cinematography.* A strong foundation is still the best educational base for a young filmmaker. ⇒

*See *The Five C's of Cinematography: Motion Picture Filming Techniques*, by Joseph V. Mascelli.

However, where the rubber hits the road, everything you've learned in four years of school can be erased in one day on the job. Success is being ready for the opportunity when it presents itself. Preparation is the key, but in the end, nothing takes the place of old fashioned experience! Unfortunately, experience cannot be taught in school.

Through our relationship with Bigfoot Entertainment, IAFB students are often fortunate enough to get the opportunity for actual production experience on a feature film. But like in Hollywood, they need to start at the bottom.

Our students are not always willing to do this, and many scoff at the thought of being an assistant or shooting behind the scenes footage. But this opportunity is just the first look at the harsh real world of the entertainment industry. Like school itself, it will be what they make it.

Sending Our Students into the Real World

I meet so many young students who graduate from school, have business cards made, and self-proclaim themselves a Director of Photography. Granted, they may have won several awards and making this move might get them the nod to something bigger. While this is not outside the realm of



Rick readyes a shot.

possibility, the chances of that happening are very slim. Pounding the pavement to make little headway is the more likely route.

I am reminded of my first months landing in Los Angeles knowing nobody. "How do I get in the mainstream?" I remember finding all the major rental houses in Los Angeles. I would make my rounds visiting Panavision, Clairmont Camera, and all the others and meeting what I refer to as the super assistants like Kenny Nishino. These were the real deal assistants who worked on huge blockbuster feature films. More importantly, these super assistants represented the top



Rick teaches the basics of film loading.



Rick Robinson location shooting *Deep Gold*.

of the line, the best in their craft, and they helped teach me the simple things like prepping a camera package.

Some would consider starting as an assistant or prep tech as starting at the bottom. I don't discourage any student from following a different path, but they need to understand the importance of learning the language of the business and who the players are before jumping in head first. I remind them in order to take one step forward, you must often take two steps back. A lot can be gained first working in a lower capacity on big projects than taking a larger project in a higher capacity for which you're not prepared.

Recent graduates will rarely enter the industry and do things like they did in film school or even the way I did it. Setting reasonable expectations is especially difficult with

our eager, idealistic young filmmakers.

As an instructor, I ride the fine line between healthy encouragement and the reality of the industry.

Like all teachers, I try to impart my experiences to the students in hopes they will learn through my

successes and failures. But the answers to the tough questions often need to be learned through tough experiences. These lessons are rarely teachable to students.

As a teacher, it is my duty to prepare them the best I can. But like all of us who came before them, my students must make their own journey to a career. And each of their paths will be different. I just hope that I have given them the tools they need to succeed.



Emmy Award winner Rick Robinson SOC is a former U.S. Marine

Combat Cameraman and was part of singer Michael Jackson's famed documentary film unit. He has served as a faculty member of Columbia College Hollywood and UCLA Extension, and has taught at the Los Angeles Film School and at the International Academy of Film and Television in Cebu, Philippines. He is currently the DP on the feature film Deep Gold.



Rick gives instruction to a young student.