

THE NAME AND MR. NO-NAME

a sample chapter from the book

SHOOT ME: INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING FROM CREATIVE CONCEPT
TO ROUSING RELEASE

written by

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THE NAME AND MR. NO-NAME

Adapt. Improvise. Prevail.

This is what marines are trained to do in the face of adversity. How do you react when the terrain differs from what you see on the map? When the enemy (or worse, your supposed allies) behave in a way that is unexpected? When the battle plan you've laid out suddenly and simply no longer applies? You can cry and curse your luck, fold your tents and retreat. Or you can adapt, improvise and, hopefully, prevail. If you're planning on making a film independently without the safety net of a studio's money and power, you'd better adopt this mindset, or you'll never make it past the first day of production. In our case, we would never have made it to the first day of production.

When you're producing a low budget feature and trying to convince potential investors that there is a tangible possibility of their (at least) getting their money back, it helps immensely if you've got a "name" in the cast. What is a name? In this context, it's an actor or performer of some kind that people have heard of -- someone they've seen on television or in other movies. The level of the "name" will vary accordingly with the budget. If you're Joel Silver and trying to get a big studio to greenlight your 80 million dollar action picture, you need a name like Nicolas Cage or Mel Gibson. When *The Substitute* was being prepared with a budget of 11 million, Tom Berenger's was the name that got it greenlit. (This was 1995, and Berenger, coming off the modestly surprising box office success *Sniper*, was still on the "A" list

of leading men, though at the very bottom of it, as it was explained to us.) If you're Avi Lerner and you're making an exploitation crime thriller for two or three million, well, the name Eric Roberts will do just fine.

Why are names important? Because they represent brand recognition, and help to ensure cable and video sales. ("Have you got a name for the box?" -- meaning the video box -- is a question you'll be asked frequently.) To help ease our investors' anxieties, and increase our ability to market an intimate, character-driven romantic comedy, Roy felt we needed a name. Given our miniscule budget, I feared this was going to be a tough bill to fill.

We had four major roles, four "leads" -- Michael, his brother Frankie, their mutual love interest Lila, and Lila's roommate Sherry. When Roy broke down the schedule to see how many days it would take to film each role, it came out like this:

Michael - 25 days

Lila - 17 days

Frankie - 11 days

Sherry - 4 days (This would increase to 5 later on when we decided to include Sherry in the wedding reception sequence that climaxes the film.)

Clearly, if we were going to get a name, it would have to be in the role of Sherry. It was a flashy part, one that a name could jump into and be done with in less than a week, and one for which we could offer a decent daily payment amount. I asked Roy if he had someone in mind.

He did. Someone he'd often spotted shopping at Zabar's, a faded rock and roll icon from the eighties who lived in a palatial apartment complex not too far from Roy on the upper west side. (We'll call her "The Name.") We were both big fans of her music, Roy especially, and we shared the opinion that in the few movies she'd appeared in she'd never been properly utilized as an actress. We had a role she could be a hoot in, on top of which we would be shooting in New York, which meant our project might appeal in that she wouldn't have to leave home and family to do it. Even so, I didn't think we had much of a chance of getting her, but told Roy if he felt strongly about it that it couldn't hurt to try.

Now, do you remember those mistakes in judgement I spoke of making back in Chapter One? Well, this one was a biggie.

Flash forward a few weeks. Roy had gotten the script to The Name via her agent and had actually received a long phone message in response saying she loved the script and would like to do it. Nice, huh?

Ah, but there's more. Roy handed me the receiver and let me hear it for myself. The voice, instantly recognizable, began speaking

not of herself, but of...her husband. (Let's call him "Mr. No-Name.") "You know, my husband is a really good actor, and I think he'd be great in the part of Michael. He's just like this guy, he could be really funny..." I was instantly on the defensive. I hadn't even spoken to this woman yet, and she was already pressuring me into casting choices. And her husband, no less? What kind of nepotistic diva bullshit was this? Roy talked me down, reminding me as he repeatedly has over the years that in all human situations, the cooler head prevails.

Okay. I'm cool, I thought. Let me find out about this guy.

I looked him up on the Internet Movie Database, and found he possessed a solid list of acting credits. Some big Hollywood movies, some respected independent and art house films. We were sent his reel and took a look at it. Saw that he was good. Very good, in fact. His look was okay, and he could play the character's age range. I started to become more enamored of casting him than The Name. The character of Michael is in almost every scene in the picture, he's the anchor of the story, the heart of it, and if we didn't place a good actor in that role the participation of The Name or any name wouldn't matter at all, because we wouldn't have a movie. Finally, he came in and read for us. We liked what we saw, he seemed like a nice enough guy, and knowledgeable about low budget filmmaking. We explained very clearly and openly what our budget was and what we could afford to pay both him and The Name. If that wouldn't do we should just walk away from each other now without any hard feelings. He said he

understood, that the role was one he very much wanted to do, and that he and his wife had long been hoping to find a film project in which they could work together. Our script, the roles, and the fact we'd be shooting in New York added up to a perfect situation for them. The money was acceptable, in his case almost beside the point, but we would have to work out the specifics with their respective agents.

Another flash forward, to Friday, July 21st, 2001. We were set to begin shooting on Monday, the 24th, and the last week had been spent rehearsing the actors we'd cast in the major roles. In addition to The Name and Mr. No-Name as Sherry and Michael, to play Frankie we'd chosen Robert Mobley from the Actors Studio, who had played the part well in a staged reading of the script we'd done a few years earlier. As Lila we'd cast Barbara Sicuranza, whose dark and provocative look was not what I'd originally had in mind for the character. But something in her head shot spoke to me, and when she came in to read for us both Roy and I knew we'd found our Lila.

While I'd spent the last weeks storyboarding the script, scouting locations with Roy and our line producer Brian Gunther, as well as auditioning and rehearsing the actors, the negotiations with The Name's agent had dragged on without any final resolution -- though as far as I'd been made aware there were no glaring red flags to speak of, no indication that we were in any way terribly far apart. The way I saw it, we were working with a budget well under two hundred thousand. We'd be shooting on digital video with a crew of no more

than twenty. We were not flying the banner of a major studio with millions of dollars in the coffers to throw around. We were just two guys making a glorified home movie. Either you loved the script and wanted to do it for that reason, or you didn't. It had seemed like this was understood.

On this particular Friday morning, I had rehearsed The Name and Mr. No-Name in the living room of their vast apartment, I'd told them how grateful I was for their participation, that I was "humbled" that they had both been willing to throw in with an inexperienced first-time director such as myself.

Only I guess I wasn't humbled enough. Because by mid-afternoon the calls from The Name's agent started coming in, after we hadn't heard a peep from her in over a week. Suddenly there were all kinds of new demands, back-end deals that would have put our investors in even riskier positions than they were already in, and to which, in good conscience, we simply could not agree. She apparently wanted cash bonuses every time one of us sneezed. As the afternoon and the phone calls wore on, Roy and I became increasingly disgusted. We came back with a counter offer, but by this point we were in truth hoping she'd back out.

Then, contemptibly, No-Name's agent got into the act, and also started making new demands. Looking to ride on his more famous spouse's coattails, No-Name now wanted the same deal as The Name. All this just two days before we were supposed to start shooting.

Then came the final threat: if we didn't agree to The Name's terms and forced her to leave the project, No-Name would leave with her. This was particularly offensive to us, since Roy and I had gone out of our way to make it clear to No-Name that we wanted him in the role of Michael whether his wife played Sherry or not; that we'd cast him based on his own merits, apart from The Name's participation. Now he and The Name were holding us up. For money. They had waited till the eleventh hour to double-team us, believing we couldn't possibly say no to any of their demands so close to the start date. It was sleazy and it was obvious and it made no sense to me. I had been in their home only hours before, and I can assure you more money was not what these two needed. What they needed were good roles, and that's what we had to offer. It was all we had to offer, and it should have been more than enough. But they were creatures of the industry, and in the end I suppose they couldn't deny their natures. In their own minds, I'm sure, they were beyond accountability.

I called No-Name on the phone. Neither Roy nor I wanted to hear later on that we had misinterpreted the situation. I told him what had been related to me, and asked him flat out if the information was accurate: was he going to walk if we didn't come to terms with his wife?

"Rocco, I've done a number of independent films, and these kinds of back-end deals are pretty much standard. The Name is a big

international star, and we feel the only reason this project is happening is because of her, so..."

I didn't bother to tell him we hadn't raised a dime based on his wife's involvement, because we hadn't been using her name in any of our promotional material. We didn't have her signed on the dotted line, and Roy felt it wouldn't be ethical to use her name for such purposes until we did. Even if I had told him, I doubt No-Name would have believed me. One has to be capable of ethical behavior to fathom it in others.

"That's not what I asked you," I said, cutting him off. "Are you going to walk if she doesn't do the picture?"

He sighed heavily. "Rocco, I've gotta live with this woman, you know?"

And there it was. "I have my answer then. I was looking forward to working with you, but I guess it's not going to happen. Have a nice life."

I hung up the phone, shaking. I then called Roy and recounted to him my exchange with No-Name. They were out, both of them. Two days till principal photography, and we'd lost half our cast. What in the name of all that is cinematically holy were we going to do?

Adapt. Improvise. And, godfuckingdamnit, Prevail.

I rushed over to Roy's apartment to discuss our options. There weren't many. One was that we acquiesce to The Name's and No-Name's demands. I'm certain they were expecting us to do just that before the weekend was out. But neither Roy nor myself could live with that option. The other, obviously, was to recast. We had a full week before any of the scenes involving the character of Sherry were to be shot, so we still had time to approach another name if we so desired. If we didn't, or if we did and failed, well, it was a city full of actresses, and we had seen a number of good ones who could step into the role and give us a performance. We attempted to comfort ourselves with the knowledge that *The Blair Witch Project* had done reasonably well in the marketplace without any names among its cast, as had *The Brothers McMullen*, and *Pi*, and any number of other independently produced films going back to *Night of the Living Dead*. Rather than be extorted into submission, we would just have to go forward without a name and let the chips fall where they may.

For the role of Michael, I couldn't think of anything else to do other than call on a friend. If we were going to begin shooting without any time for rehearsal or prep work, I needed someone who could not only play the part but with whom I already had a relationship -- with whom I shared some common frame of reference. Someone I could communicate with right from the get-go. I turned to Roy and said "We've gotta find Jimmy Lorinz".

I'd gone to film school with Jimmy, had known him for close to twenty years. Roy had given him his first big break as an actor in a movie Roy wrote and produced in 1986, a dangerous midnight classic called *Street Trash*. After that, Jimmy went on to appear in the films *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *King of New York*. He starred in Frank (Basket Case) Henenlotter's *Frankenhooker*, then landed a regular gig on the Valerie Harper series *City*. When that ended, he and Roy and I collaborated on a project called *Swirlee* that spawned a 15 minute short film which didn't succeed in convincing anyone to produce it as a feature, but did generate enough cult status to merit a chapter in Chris Gore's book *The Fifty Greatest Movies Never Made*. I then was involved in the writing of a picture that did get made starring Jimmy, but the experience proved so unpleasant for me, he and I ended up not speaking for something like two years. He moved out to Los Angeles, got married and had a child, and continued to appear in films and television shows. Eventually, we reconnected, and when Roy first suggested producing *The Sweet Life* ourselves, we'd considered Jimmy for the role of Frankie. But he was still living in L.A., and for a number of reasons it just wasn't practical, for us or him.

However, in the weeks just prior to our start date, Jimmy's circumstances had shifted dramatically. He and his wife had separated and decided to come back east, but rather than make the journey by airplane with his wife and daughter, Jimmy had chosen to drive cross-country. At the very moment *The Name and No-Name*

were pulling their scummy last minute shenanigans on us, he was somewhere out there in the heart of the republic, motoring towards New York.

But where, exactly? And could he be reached? I tried phoning his wife's parents, but got only an answering machine. I had no number for Jimmy's parents, and wasn't even sure they still lived in the city. I called information and asked for any listing of a Lorinz in the five boroughs. There was only one. I dialed it. A woman picked up.

It was Jimmy's mother. "Mrs. Lorinz, please tell me your son has a cell phone with him, and that you've got the number." He did, and she did. I thanked her profusely, hung up and dialed the number she'd given me.

He was somewhere in Nebraska. I told him what had happened, and asked him if he'd like the starring role in our movie. He said yeah, sure, of course. How soon could he get back to New York? Monday or Tuesday, came the reply. Fine. (Roy had already told me we could push the start date from Monday to Tuesday, or even Wednesday if we had to.) I told him to call us soon as he stopped for the night, and we'd fax the pages for the first week of shooting to the front desk of his hotel. This way he'd at least have a few days to learn the lines and be ready to jump in when he got here. Fortunately, he'd already read the script some months before and was reasonably familiar with the story as a whole. I wasn't sure what we'd get from

Jimmy in the role of Michael, but it was a part loaded with funny lines, and we knew if nothing else he'd deliver a good comic performance.

I then called my leading lady, Barbara Sicuranza. She is married to Chris Stein, gifted songwriter and co-founder (with Deborah Harry) of Blondie, who had generously offered to compose our music score for very little money. I told her what had happened, and what we were doing to overcome it. I assured her that we were going to be making a movie, that she was going to play Lila, and that no one was going to stop us. She suggested offering the part of Sherry to Deborah Harry. We thought this was a great idea. Chris added that if Deborah passed, he could also put in a call to Joan Jett. (Before the weekend was out, Harry would pass, graciously, and we would move on to Jett. In the end, it turned out to be the luckiest thing that could have happened to us.) I thanked them both and hung up, feeling that now at least we had options.

It had been a nerve wracking, gut wrenching day, but we'd made it through and kept the project alive. Sure, all our well laid plans and preparations had gone out the window, but we were still breathing, still moving forward. And at this particular moment in the project's history, that's all that mattered.