

DGA Nominees: What about the a.d.?

Below-the-line pros part of nominated team

By JAIME NETZER

When Tony Gilroy got word that he had received a DGA nom for his work on "Michael Clayton," he didn't have to call his directorial team to relay the good news. They were all in a scouting van together working on their next film, "Duplicity." To celebrate, "We stopped work and had a much nicer lunch than we usually do," Gilroy says.

And why not? Everyone -- including unit production manager Christopher Goode, first a.d. Steve Apicella, second a.d. Michael Pitt and second second a.d.s Matt Power and Jason Ivey -- are all named in the guild's nomination under Gilroy's marque.

"A lot of thought went into who we were going to use," says Gilroy, who keeps his team intact from film to film. "You want people who are interested in being filmmakers all up and down the line. You want people who are invested every day in the script and the scene, and aren't just punching the clock."

Certainly, should the "Michael Clayton" team win the DGA's feature trophy this year, Gilroy will get 99% of the press. But with below-the-line pros including a.d.s making up about 40% of the DGA's membership, a trophy will carry weight for the subordinates within the guild.

Jon Kilik, tapped for unit production manager duties this year by the DGA for working under Julian Schnabel ("The Diving Bell and the Butterfly"), says being on a winning helming team attracts the attention of other top directors looking to staff their films. "The encouragement of our peers is a greater prize than money for a lot of dedicated a.d.s," he says.

Betsy Magruder -- DGA-nominated this year as the first assistant helmer for Joel and Ethan Coen on "No Country for Old Men" -- has been working as an a.d. since 1984, and has teamed with the Coens since 2000's "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" She says that a successful a.d. needs to have enough ego and presence to run a set, but not so much that it overshadows "the people who are really running the show."

Daniel Lupi, who served as the unit production manager for Paul Thomas Anderson on "There Will Be Blood," has also worked with Anderson on all his films.

"To have a good relationship, the director has to trust that you have the greater good of the picture in mind; that you're not trying to undermine his vision," Lupi explains.

The exact job descriptions of the different members of a directorial team vary from film to film and director to director. In general, the unit production manager is the boss of the directorial team and watches the budget.

The first a.d. acts as the helmer's right hand and main vehicle of communication; in fact, the first a.d. usually runs the set.

The second a.d. and second second a.d. then communicate the first a.d.'s needs to the outside world of a production (for example, they can set the background, keep the public at bay, and communicate with department heads.)

"As first a.d., I get to stand in the eye of the storm and send the information out, and the seconds are the ones who have to enact it," says Steve Apicella, first a.d. for "Michael Clayton." Apicella says he keeps the immediate set moving, and his seconds keep the larger machine working.



BELL'S TOLL: Directorial team members like 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' producer Jon Kilik -- shown to the right of pic's nominated helmer Julian Schnabel -- share the DGA acclaim.

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