

How We Made a 4k Feature Film for Under \$50k in Less Than a Year

By PeterPaul and Tony Shaker

Making a film is difficult, but it doesn't have to be expensive. We are two amateur filmmaking brothers from New Jersey who made an 80-plus minute feature film from scratch in well under a year. It's called [Killer Christmas](#) and is the story of a group of friends who sneak into an abandoned hotel adjacent a Christmas tree field only to find themselves being murdered by someone in a Santa mask. We came from varied backgrounds—Pete, a lawyer turned screenwriter; and Tony, a software developer—and had never made a short-film, let alone a full-length feature. The following is the story of how we did it.



Initial Ideation, Business Structure & Script-Writing

Our journey began on a family Christmas tree cutting trip over Thanksgiving weekend 2016. Over a dozen extended family gathered at a tree field in western Jersey—the same one we had been visiting for over twenty years—to cut down a handful of trees. Across the rural road from the tree field sat an old, abandoned, gigantic retreat house. It hadn't always been abandoned and was actually in use during our first visits to the area, but had shuttered-up over the past decade and fallen into disrepair. Now, it looked creepy and dangerous. We felt inspired and

started throwing out script ideas. Some of them were actually pretty good. And, hell, they could be shot in just the abandoned retreat house and around the tree field. We started imagining the things that could be. It was all in good fun... or so we thought.

The following Monday, Tony told Pete that he wanted to quit his job and make the film. Tony would put up the money and they would both work on it together full-time. Pete, who had recently returned from a couple of years in LA spent writing and gaining on-set experience, jumped at the chance to produce something from scratch. We declared our intent and started writing. Over the following month of December, we focused on two tasks every day: writing and building our plan of action—literally on a google doc so we could chart the progress of every task that needed our attention. By the end of the month, we had a ninety-page first draft of our script and a full outline with timetables of the tasks we would need to accomplish to take this script from inception to screen. Our task list included: business structure, equipment, locations, casting, crew, props, lodging, food, releases, post-production, software, visual effects, sound engineer, expense list, etc.

Each task was an opportunity for us to learn something. To be sure, no two days on this journey ever felt the same—at least not until we hit the editing phase. Our first task was to set up our LLC's and create our organizational structure. After some research, we decided to set up multiple Delaware LLC's using a local registered agent. Then, we filled out forms to tell New Jersey and New York that we would be doing business in their states and would pay applicable taxes. What we did isn't necessarily best practice for everyone. Consult a tax attorney to find out what's best for you. Between LLC's and attorney fees we spent roughly \$2,000. With a script in hand and our production company officially off the ground, we hit 2017 hard.



Getting Equipment, Locations, Cast & Crew:

In January, we bought equipment, scouted locations, hired crew, and cast the film. Buying equipment is fun—figuring out what to buy is tricky. We wanted to be cost-efficient (read: cheap) but also have great production quality. After some web research and a few personal recommendations from people who knew more than we did, we settled on the [Sony a6300](#) as our camera. For about \$1,300, we got great bang for our buck—we'd be able to shoot 4k RAW at 24fps for a fraction of the cost than bigger budget productions. We also picked up lights, stands, a camera rig, a steadicam, batteries, chargers, tape, foil, bounce boards, clips, etc. Finally, we needed a top end computer where we could edit our footage. We opted for an [iMac Pro](#). Overall, our equipment cost ran about \$10,000. Additionally, we borrowed two great lenses, which definitely saved us the cost to rent them for our shoot.



Finding the right crew is imperative to success. People make films. If you don't surround yourself with the right people, you won't make a good film—especially if you are trying to make an indie with a guerilla crew. We posted on craigslist for three roles: a DP/Primary PA with a background in cinematography who would feel comfortable behind the camera; a Sound Mixer/Secondary PA with a film background who would handle the boom in addition to assisting

the Primary PA; and a Hair & Makeup Artist who could also handle wardrobe and set design. We, two, would round out the crew and serve as everything from directors to grips to craft services to drivers and more. Everyone has to be willing to wear different hats when making an indie.

Young, hungry filmmakers are out there—you just have to give them an opportunity. We wanted people looking to gain hands-on experience and who could do so on a budget. One rule: we had to pay them something. Sure, we opted for non-union over SAG—we'd considered SAG but found it too expensive for a first film—but we would never ask people to work for free. No one gives you their best effort if they are getting zero money. It's a sliding scale—you pay for what you get. But, providing hands-on experience, some money, food, housing, and a story all in conjunction are attractive enough to get solid talent. Our offer was \$600-\$1,000 per person based on the role and days needed. Within hours of posting, we received dozens of applications.



Over the next few days, we interviewed a handful of people until we found our cinematographer, [Marco Andre](#)—a young-gun fresh out of Bard College who had a great eye for story and a hunger to be on-set. Marco also had resources—he enlisted his cohorts at [Bard onTelevision](#) to help as PA's for the two days we were on our tree farm in Red Hook, NY (conveniently located a stone's throw from Bard); and he borrowed additional equipment for our shoot, including two cinemascope lenses that would aid our production value tremendously. Finding Marco was among a long list of lucky breaks for us. The value he added to our indie crew was immeasurable. Great talent is out there—and it wants an opportunity to shine. If you actively look, you will find them. We rounded out our crew with two more hungry professionals—[Amy Watanabe](#) as our HMU, set design, wardrobe all-around all-star who took on everything from script supervisor, to continuity, to handling the bounce/shadow board; and [Juan David Pinzon](#) as our sound mixer, boom operator, and all around PA. Including bonuses for jobs extremely well done, we paid our three primary crew members roughly \$4,000.

Casting is a simple enough task these days because of the internet. We posted an audition notice on [Actors Access](#)—with a mix of pay, on-location accommodations, and a few days to a full week of on-set experience—and had over a thousand unique submissions for six roles in a matter of days. We rented studio space at [HB Studio](#) on Bank Street in the West Village for four consecutive days and auditioned over a hundred people. One actor, [Malcolm Xavier](#), destroyed the audition and booked his role the moment he finished. After a couple of days of reviewing footage and setting our callbacks, we returned to HB with two trusted colleagues to help us audition about a dozen actors. We had Malcolm work with all of them to gauge chemistry and built a stellar ensemble cast featuring [Kourtney Kelly](#), [Freya Lund](#), [Natalie Pavelek](#), [Hanley Smith](#), and [Matt Maretz](#). Casting notices and studio space for about 25 hours cost \$500. Including bonuses, the cast itself cost roughly \$4,000



The hardest part of January was finding a location to shoot our film. We initially approached the retreat house that inspired the story and found that the same owners owned the Christmas tree farm. We tried renting both properties but were rebuffed. In hindsight, their rejection was a blessing in disguise because it forced us to go out and look for better locations. Two specifically: a large abandoned structure (the bigger and more rundown the better); and a spacious Christmas tree farm (the more remote the better). We scoured the greater NY-Metro area for farms and visited almost a dozen before we found what we were looking for—[F.W. Battenfeld & Son's](#) Christmas tree farm: a hundred-and-thirty acres of trees and streams, dips and rises in Red Hook, New York, two hours north of Manhattan. The owners were very amenable to us filming and we reached a deal. Two full days on the farm for \$1,000 + cost of trees cut + hiring a farm-hand to assist us (he was a huge help—get the local knowledge because it saves you time, which saves you money). Throw in catering for the friends and family who came to act as background on one shooting day + the hotel for overnight cast and crew accommodations + cast and crew meals, and the Christmas tree farm weekend shoot cost about \$3,000.

Finding an abandoned building with the right aura was the truly hard part. We searched the internet to find local-ish abandoned locations and ran across a [website devoted](#) to America's hidden gems. We researched the properties, contacted owners, and lined up a half-dozen visits throughout the Northeast to boarded-up nunneries, schools, insane asylums, medical housing facilities, industrial lots, and, finally, the [Adler Hotel](#) in Sharon Springs, NY. The ideal setting exists, you just have to find it. Even if it means spending two weeks of driving around and a couple thousand miles on your car, it's out there. The look you want exists somewhere.



For us, the Adler Hotel was the greatest thing we could have found. This place was huge. We probably didn't even do it justice in the film because there were just too many rooms to cover. You can check out some of our walk around footage on our [YouTube page](#). The building is six floors in a horseshoe shape with all kinds of stylings. One, two, three, four bedroom rooms, banquet halls, stages, a huge kitchen, dining hall, and whatnot. All spray-painted by vagrants who'd run amuck for the past decade while the building sat abandoned. The Adler Hotel, and the little village of [Sharon Springs](#) in which it sits, enjoyed its heyday in the early twentieth century when local sulfur baths were all the rage. That was back before the ubiquity of airplanes shrunk the world and pulled tourists away from local getaways. Sharon Springs was once a hotspot, and now it was a town of boarded up and abandoned memories of the yesteryear undergoing a slow transition to modernity. It was perfect for our story.

If you're lucky, your ideal location from a cost-perspective will be in the middle of nowhere and your shooting schedule will be during the deadest time of the year. We went up for a visit to check out the property and loved it. The Adler recently had been purchased by [Sharon Springs Resorts](#), a real estate development group looking to revitalize the area by turning the sulfur baths into a trendy getaway vacation. They purchased several local properties and were currently refurbishing one when we asked to rent the Adler. They liked the idea of having a film that might bring attention to the town. We were able to negotiate a great deal—two weeks for \$2,500 (which later turned into a mix of cash and a brand new aerial drone camera that they could use to track their development progress)—but we would have to provide production insurance.



Production Insurance, Accommodations, Rehearsals & Shoot Supplies:

Insurance is easy enough to get. There is always someone willing to take your money—the trick is to find the person who will take the least. To be cover production, we needed to get two insurance policies—one for cast/crew, and one for locations/property. After pricing out our options, we decided to go with two separate providers. We used [New York State Insurance Fund](#) for our workers and [Fractured Atlas](#) for the locations. Total insurance costs to cover our sub-two week shoot ran about \$1,500.

Once we were set on the Adler, we needed to find local accommodations for cast and crew. We needed to house and feed between three and eleven people for thirteen days. An added benefit of us wanting to shoot ASAP, i.e. mid-to-late February, was that our shooting dates coincided with the quietest time of year in Sharon Springs. Almost nothing was open save a small cafe called [The Black Cat](#). We talked to its proprietor, who told us that the town mayor also owned [The American Hotel](#), a bed and breakfast across the street, and would be the best person to talk to about filming in Sharon Springs. We crossed to The American and found the front door locked. So we tried the side door and entered... only to set off the alarm. We hurried out and caught the cafe owner in his truck about to drive away. He'd heard the alarm sounding and stopped. He texted the mayor and told him we were looking for him.



Ten minutes later, the mayor drove up. After a good laugh at our mishap, we told him about our film and desire to shoot in Sharon Springs. He liked the idea, so we inquired about renting *The American* for our cast and crew. Now, he liked it even more, so we told him our shoot dates. He loved it because he'd be out of town traveling since Sharon Springs is a ghost town in February—the sulfur springs are not a winter attraction. We negotiated a deal to rent the entire 9-room hotel for two weeks at a fraction of what they normally charged + we tip the maid. Then, we reached out to the cafe owner and negotiated a deal for him to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner to our cast and crew every day. Between housing, food, and tips we spent about \$5,000 for just under two weeks.

With our locations, cast, and crew generally set, we spent the first half of February rehearsing, setting wardrobe, and getting ready for our trip by loading up on all types of supplies. A couple of the trickier items to find were believable prop weapons. We scoured the web to find quality workmanship that wouldn't break the bank. Finally, we found [The Specialists LTD](#), a full service prop house based in Brooklyn that makes everything from decapitated heads to Revolutionary War muskets. After an impressive tour of their facility, we knew these were the people. The prop knife and machete in total ran us \$700. We were going to be shooting from sundown to sunup every night in a huge, cold, creepy abandoned hotel that had no electricity. We needed to get ready and bought: hand warmers, flashlights, snacks, water, a hand drill, batteries, a generator, gasoline containers, gasoline, a haze machine, haze fluid, etc. Rehearsal space, wardrobe, props, and shoot supplies cost roughly \$3,000.



Setting-up and Filming On-Location:

In mid-February, we finally set off for our shoot—less than three months after we'd first thought of our script idea. At first, it was just the two of us and Marco heading up to Sharon Springs for a few days to explore the Adler, set up our shots, take inventory of the town, and figure out what we needed to have done so that when the cast and the remainder of our crew arrived we would be ready to hit the ground running. Sounds easy enough. It wasn't. We drove two cars full of gear up on the day of a huge snowstorm—which was a great blessing for our scenery, but a pain to travel in—and a three and a half hour drive took about eight. When we arrived in town, barely anyone was around. We found our key in a hidden location and started unloading.

In the midst of the snowfall—as we shuffled gear back and forth from our cars to the hotel—an older gentleman walked up the dark road, accented only by the moonlight and sporadic streetlights, barely wearing enough clothes to sustain the weather, in ragged shoes, and no overcoat or hat. The three of us shared a creepy look as the old man called out to us from across the street, “Hey you fellas just coming into town?” This guy looked like he could have been the vagrant main character of our flick. Needless to say, we were a bit thrown off. After some small talk, the old man ambled up the road and we never saw him again. Later on that evening, we decided to head up to the Adler to see what it looked like at night. The snowfall prevented us from driving up the backroad to the Adler, so we had to take the last part of our journey on foot. As we made our way to the front of the abandoned hotel, we started seeing sets of fresh footprints in the snow. Although we didn't see anyone, it was clear that someone else was trying to get in. We decided to head back to bed and breakfast for the night. Our trip had started off as creepy as we wanted our film to be... and it only got creepier.



The next morning, the three of us went to the Adler again. The landlord was out of town and wouldn't be joining us for a day or two. He didn't leave us any keys, just simple instructions on how to get in—swing around to the back of the hotel and drill the beams off the door. First, we had to hire a snowplow to clear the hilly road to the back. Then, we drove up, exited the car, and started approaching the hotel... when we heard noises coming from inside. The three of us looked at each other—we all heard it. But then it was gone. The landlord had told us that some vagrants still snuck into the Adler during the snowy months but that we could just shoe them away—a prospect none of us was looking forward to. We hoped it was just the wind, or a wild animal. We unscrewed the beams and attached our own padlock for easier access. The whole place had been boarded up by the real estate company, but the previous decade had seen the Adler serve as a playhouse for vagrants to run amok. Lucky for us. We entered and beheld the splendor. Spray paint and disarray everywhere. It was everything we could have wanted... until we started hearing noises again.

We shot our flashlights around the darkness and slowly walked through the back room into the first floor hallway. Though it was bright outside, only small streaks of light penetrated the boarded windows. We slowly moved ahead and heard more random noises. It was a bit unsettling. We decided to backtrack and exit the hotel. We needed a game plan to sweep the hotel and make sure no one was inside. This wasn't the kind of issue we had anticipated, as real as the possibility was. We circled the hotel perimeter and found at least three entry points that looked like they were active. People were inside, or so we feared.



The possibility of vagrants wouldn't dissuade us—we'd come too far to cancel our shoot. We amped ourselves up and marched back into the Adler, yelling out stern warnings to those who might be there that we intended to shoot a film over the following two weeks and that they needed to leave. Needless to say, we were a bit worried. Were there really vagrants inside? Would they heed our warnings? Was this place going to be okay to film in? We'd gotten insurance, and we had the assurances of the realty group that everything was okay, but still we felt uneasy. We set up a sound recorder and left the hotel. Of course, we didn't want to deal with any vagrants, but worst case scenario we could enlist the landlord and the local police to clear the hotel if needed. Later that evening, we returned and closed up the external entry points. We entered the hotel and retrieved the sound recorder, which we promptly brought back to The American for a listen—long silences intermittently broken by sudden bursts of feet shuffling and heavy objects being dragged. No voices, but certainly something was about. Perhaps an animal? We needed to check ourselves.

That night, we walked around with our camera to clear the hotel, get some b-roll footage, and plan out some of our shots. Obviously, we were on our toes, always worried that someone would jump out of a room or be lurking around the next corner. It was intense as we explored floor by floor. Thankfully, we saw no one. Satisfied, we started setting up our shots and figuring out lighting. We had no electricity in this huge place, but we needed to be able to record everywhere. Our lights were battery operated, as was the camera, but our haze machine wasn't—and we needed haze for all our internal nighttime shots so we could achieve the right feel. We couldn't bring the generator into the hotel because the place had no running water i.e. fire sprinklers. And our few fire extinguishers wouldn't be able to battle a blaze in this huge tinder box. Although the hotel was mostly open to the elements, we also didn't want to risk any carbon monoxide related accidents. Our solution was to go out and buy all the extension cords we could find, tape them together, and run them through windows to our generator in the backyard. It was doable, but it took a lot of work.



Thankfully, our cast and crew rose to the challenge. We really cannot stress enough how important it is to surround yourself with hard-working, team-oriented people. Being a creative is as hands-on as it gets, so your cast and crew have to be able to get their hands dirty. With less than a dozen people, it was important to have everyone on the same page. Our days were long—they started with breakfast around eleven/noon, followed by makeup, wardrobe, rehearsal, and shot set-up. Lunch was around four p.m. or so then we would head down the road from The American to the Adler, where we'd block our scenes and start shooting the moment the sun set around six. We broke for dinner around midnight and then shot until sunrise, or shortly thereafter. We did this for seven shooting days at the Adler.



Midway through the shoot, we realized we were way behind schedule. We had to cut a couple of scenes and start earlier in the day before the sun went down. The trick would be to make day into night. At the Christmas tree farm we were also running behind schedule one of the two days and we turned night into day by pushing a scene indoors. Here, we found ourselves needing to do the opposite. Though the Adler was generally dark even during the daytime, enough light came through the cracks to betray the sun. So, we found a hallway with some long creeping scenes and tarped up all the windows in the rooms along the way. We bet you can't even tell which part of the movie it was.

Filming guerilla-style requires that you are resourceful. One example of this is our jogging shot, which was filmed off the back of our truck with Marco being held by Juan as he filmed through the open trunk. We blocked out all our lights with tape and ran the shot over and over. Another example came in the hotel when we found a shopping cart in one of the rooms—Marco suggested the great idea of using it for moving shots. And we did—our best shot of the film is where four of the actors run down the hallway and split up at the staircase only to reveal Santa creeping behind them. We did that take over and over and over with Marco in the cart as we ran it backwards down the hall. It was amazing fun, and a great use of resources and manpower.

Post-Production: Editing, VFX, Color-Grading & Sound Creation, Mixing, and Mastering

Arguably, the hardest part of making a movie is the time you spend on location filming. Once that is completed, however, filmmaking becomes an exercise in meticulousness. That is when you edit. In early March, with almost fifty hours of footage in hand, we locked ourselves in our makeshift office space at our parents' house and got to work. After some research, we decided that our editing software of choice would be [Adobe Premiere](#). We signed up for the monthly Pro account and got to work (~\$50/month subscription cost). We learned how to use the software as we went, and watched YouTube tutorials to teach us what we couldn't figure out on our own. We tagged all of our footage and timed out all things we liked and didn't like. We cataloged every moment so that in any given line of dialogue we might have it from a number of perspectives—speaker close-up, listener reaction shot, a medium angle, and a wide angle—giving us plenty of choices for every shot. Once we'd chopped up all of our footage, we pieced it together by picking the parts we liked moment by moment. This process took around six weeks of the two of us working generally full-time, at the end of which we had an 85-min first cut of the film. Next, we needed to add VFX to our cut and have it color graded.



In mid-April, we posted on Craigslist for a VFX/colorist. We got price quotes all across the board from the low four figures to the low five figures. And, most quotes were for either VFX or colorist, not both. Finally, we found another young and hungry twenty-something, [Wilmon Black](#), not too long out of art school living in Brooklyn who had the software and the knowhow to do both tasks from home and jumped at the opportunity to work on a feature film. He was one of our most expensive single line items, but he was well worth it. He color graded the film, added our VFX blood, superimposed the hotel onto the tree farm, and created our moving production logo and film logo among other things at a cost of roughly \$3,600.

Simultaneously, we were looking for a children's choir to sing creepy public domain Christmas songs to accent the soundtrack. We always felt that this would give it an awesomely creepy vibe. After unsuccessfully looking for weeks, one of our actresses mentioned that her boyfriend was a music producer who was interested in working with us. He hooked us up with a friend of his out in Utah who had access to an international children's choir that could put down our music in a 2-hour session. It wouldn't be cheap, but it was still in line with our budget and ended up being our second most expensive line item after our VFX. We got the raw files of the children creepily singing the refrains to notable songs like *Jolly Old St. Nicholas* and *Deck the Halls*, and the music producer mixed some of them into beats that we used throughout the film. This cost \$3,000 for the choir + roughly \$500 of miscellaneous expenses to entertain the music producer who did his part for nothing more than credits. Sometimes you get freebies—take them where you can, as long as they don't cost you creative control.



Next, we needed to mix and master the sound on our VFX/color graded cut. At first we tried to do this ourselves, but it proved to be beyond our grasp. Sound is too important to not have professionals deal with it. So we hit Craigslist once again to find a sound engineer who could add foley, normalize vocals, and mix in our specially produced tracks. We eventually found someone based out of Wisconsin who had decent enough experience and could fit our price point. We sent him all our materials and waited. This cost \$1,500. In the meantime, we set up a preview screening for friends and family at a local cinema called [Hawthorne Theatres](#) where we handed out anonymous questionnaires to our guests in order to get as much honest feedback as we could. The screening + refreshments ran \$600. With the feedback we received and our own critiques after finally seeing our film in a theater setting, we headed back to the editing room to tighten up our cut. A week or so later, we received our mastered sound and put everything together.



By early June, less than eight months after we started, we had a finished product. Although most of our main expenses are outlined above, there were plenty of miscellaneous ones that came up as well. These expenses include lunches/dinners with people who help you/interviews/meetings; gasoline and tolls as well as transportation costs for actors who wrapped early; tons of batteries for equipment; last minute supplies on set such as tarps; a wrap party for cast and crew to thank them for their incredible hard work; additional computer software to make the editing process easier; etc. These costs ran approximately \$4,000.

Long story short, with enough passion and elbow grease, making a feature length film for under \$50,000 is possible even for a couple of amateurs. Now selling that film, well that's a story for another time...



Our Rough Final Budget:

LLC's and Attorney Fees -- \$2,000
 Equipment -- \$10,000
 Crew -- \$4,000
 Casting -- \$500
 Cast -- \$4,000
 Tree farm weekend -- \$3,000
 The Adler Hotel -- \$2,500
 Production insurance -- \$1,500
 On-location Food/Housing -- \$5,000
 Rehearsal/Props/Wardrobe/Shoot
 supplies -- \$3,000
 Editing Software -- \$50/month
 VFX/Colorist -- \$3,600
 Choir/Music -- \$3,500
 Sound engineer -- \$1,500
 Screening -- \$600
 Misc expenses -- \$4,000