

Title:

10 Steps to Getting Your Dream Job in Film Special Effects

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Summary:

Essential advice on gaining a career in the film industry. Sean Blakeley offers 10 key things to bare in mind, including practical advice to improve your chances of achieving an opportunity in special effects work.

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Article Body:

Getting a break in film special effects is hard, but not as hard as you may think. The following ten things will go a long way to help you achieve your dream job.

1) Understand the Industry

If you want to work in special effects, it's important not just to know the difference between a Stag (stagehand) and a Director, but know how special effects itself is divided up. Long gone are the days when Ray Harryhausen (Jason and the Argonauts) would lock himself in a shed with a small team of people and do all the special effects himself. Now, everything is spread across different teams and departments. So, if you're interested in sculpting sets and large monsters, you want to work as a film sculptor; if you'd prefer smaller more technical projects you'd be better off choosing the model unit.

2) Be a Realist

Working in the creative industry and particularly the film industry is not easy. You'll often be faced with challenging projects and demanding deadlines and there'll be dozens of different people waiting for you to finish so they can complete their own jobs. You'll have to strike a balance between the time allowed and quality of what you produce; you can't get too precious about your work. Not only that, you've got to promote yourself - all special effects

artists are freelance and you've got to hunt down the jobs out there.

3) Study Art

Whether you're self-taught or went to Art College, it is vital you have a keen interest in Art to work in special effects. If someone asks you to sculpt a life-size Roman-style Statute or an Egyptian sarcophagus it's invaluable to have a point of reference in your own mind. But more important than this, it'll make the job more enjoyable. You may be flicking through an art book over the weekend, and on Monday morning you're asked to recreate one of the pieces you've been admiring.

4) Drawing

In the film industry all technical drawings are done by draughtsmen in the Art Department. So is this just padding to reach the magic '10' steps? No. If you want to create any 3D object, particularly the human form, it is vital to learn to draw and keep practicing. Sculptors regularly liken sculpting to drawing their subjects in clay from various angles. The key to good sculpture, like drawing, is defining the lines and shadows.

5) Practice

This is obvious but it's also vitally important. If you practice creating and sculpting things in your spare time, you will improve. It is also very valuable to recreate a film working experience - so limit yourself to reference photographs (rather than a life model) and give yourself a challenging deadline for the job. A little more difficult, but just as valuable, is to try different mediums. You may be an expert in steel construction and welding, but unless you join the engineering side of special effects or metal work team, these skills are useless. The materials of choice in the films tend to be low-grade potter's clay and polystyrene.

6) Approachable

Almost everyone in the film industry is self-employed and so they understand the only way to get work is to promote yourself. This doesn't mean you should go around to a potential employer's house or create wacky self-marketing campaigns; it means most people in the industry are approachable. If you could call a

relevant Head of Department (HOD) and show commitment and desire to learn they'll often agreed to meet you for 5-10 minutes to look over your portfolio.

7) Persistence

When you do finally meet the man or woman you're hoping to be your future boss, don't stop there. They'll take your details but it might be 18 months before they have a suitable project and give you a call. You need to make sure you meet as many future employers as possible, and stop and have a chat with other people in the department if you feel brave enough. Try and leave a card or better still, copies of your favourite 1 or 2 pieces of work with your contact details on (and ideally your online portfolio address if you have one). Then, give them a quick catch-up call every 6 months or so - even if they can't offer you a job, it's amazing how much information you'll get about different opportunities.

8) Portfolio

Vital. In a word. The key rules to a good portfolio are simple:

>Diversity - show different types of work you may have done - you may be proud of the series of 18 statues you've done, but don't show them all. Also, you may not think that 30ft polystyrene snow drift shows you're finesse as a sculptor, but it shows your versatility so put it in.

>Honesty - it should go without saying but it doesn't. Only one thing gets a HOD's back-up more than seeing a large piece of work with someone claiming to have created it single-handedly, and that's seeing a piece of their own work being claimed by someone else. Believe me, it does happen. So, be honest. If you did the left foot of a giant, then say so and don't be ambiguous about it.

>Concise - use your opportunity wisely. 10-12 photos are definitely enough to show a range of your work and skills.

>Best Foot Forward - most people will make a decision about your work within 2-3 examples so put your best work at the very front.

>Presentation - try not to have scraps of paper tumbling out of your moth-eaten portfolio. Invest in an easy to carry A4 portfolio and use plastic binders. If you have any Photoshop skills to improve the presentation of your work then use them. Don't feel the need to take in an example of your sculpture - you will be showing your work to professionals who are very used to assessing work through

photographs.

>Information - you may have produced a full-scale replica of Michelangelo's David, but if it took you three years it's no good to the film industry. Make sure you note down the scale of each example of your work, what material you used and how long it took. These simple pieces of information are important for HODs and will be appreciated.

>Online Portfolio - if you can, get an online portfolio designed and make sure any contact details contain the address. Ideally, try and get the HOD's email address so you can send them the link. Any time you update the contents of the portfolio, it's a good excuse to contact the HOD with another link to your work.

9) Networking

Networking can feel a bit uncomfortable and embarrassing at times, but it is important to get to know what jobs are out there. After you've worked on a job or two you'll get the phone numbers of a few fellow workers - make sure you give them a ring. But be warned, if you're first to hear about the new James Bond film and then tell everyone, you'll find yourself joining the queue to show your portfolio. This doesn't mean you shouldn't share information you may have about up coming jobs, it means you should bear in mind that everyone is trying to get employment. It's also a good idea to keep an eye on movie news websites.

10) Watching Films

A great perk for those times when you're not in work - you can watch films and claim it's research. Obviously, it's a great feeling to see your own work on the big screen, but it's also exhilarating to see the work and names of people you know. After your first job or 2 you'll very quickly start to feel part of the industry and start recognising names and faces. Also, for those jobs you missed out on, you can go and have a good grumble about how you would have done it better!

Working in the film industry is not for everyone; but if you're keen and develop your skills and knowledge, then you're likely to get an opportunity to show what you can do. Best of luck!