

Audio on an Indie Budget

Contributed by David John Farinella

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Perhaps it's not that unusual to have a production sound mixer follow an A-list star from picture to picture, as Lee Orloff has done with Joseph Gordon-Levitt over the past few months. What puts an interesting spin on this instance, though, is that the two went from working on the summer blockbuster G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra to the indie film Hesh.

While Gordon-Levitt was learning new lines and discovering a new character, Orloff had to find ways to adapt to the smaller budget, location and process issues that are inherent on an indie production. "I like it," Orloff admits. "I think it keeps your perspective a little more honest. What's the saying? Necessity is the mother of invention? That's it in a nutshell. When you sit back and everyone gives you everything you need, sometimes you lose the edge. Plus, I'm not saying that the people on the bigger shows are not as passionate, but there's a lot of enthusiasm on these [indie] shows."

Hesh is being shot in 31 days as a feature that falls under the Low Budget Theatrical Motion Picture Agreement with IATSE. To conserve portions of the budget, Orloff is doing a variety of things, such as shuttling ISO tracks on hard drives (rather than burning multiple discs) and only burning one disc to give to telecine for dailies. "That saves pennies here and there, but it makes a difference," Orloff explains. "I mean on indies they are concerned with everything, like how many batteries am I going to use in the wireless microphones, so it helps." At the same time, Orloff isn't interested in compromising the quality of the tracks he records. "I showed up on this show for literally less than half of what my normal equipment package would be renting for, but I don't leave anything at home," he says. "I still want to go out and do the job the way I like to do it."

To minimize the postproduction budget, Orloff takes special care when he mixes dailies for good production sound. Whether there's more time available for postproduction or not, he delivers all of the ISO tracks recorded along with the mix. His sound cart includes an Aaton Cantar-X recorder (with a Sound Devices for backup), a Sonosax SX mixer, a collection of wireless transmitters and receivers, and a variety of microphones, from Schoeps and Sennheisers to the occasional Neumann.

Orloff bounces between big budgets and indies for a handful of reasons, such as to sharpen both his skills and his perception of the future for mixers in Los Angeles. "With the shift of productions [moving] away from Los Angeles, often what's left are smaller shows," he says. "So I think there are going to be a lot more people like myself who are going to find themselves occasionally working in arenas where we're not used to playing."