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Talk Movie Talk, And Hang Out With “The Money”

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Groups of professionals tend to invent their own private languages, because shortcuts save time, and also perhaps to endow their field with allure and mystery.

Police officers round up “perps” and badmouth “skels”; doctors call surgeons “slashers”; lawyers throw around Latin terms.

But if the insider lexicon detailed by David Knox in “Strike the Baby and Kill the Blonde: An Insider’s Guide to Film Slang” is any indication, the movie business surely boasts the most exotic expressions.

Mr. Knox, a Hastings resident, has worked as a camera operator on 120 or so movies over the last 20 years. The book (Three Rivers Press, \$12.95) captures the magic and excitement of movie making while being comprehensive enough that after reading it, even us nobodies, also known as “nondescripts,” will be able to speak movie talk.

Or, more realistically, figure out what the obscurer end-of-the-movie credits actually mean. If you ever wondered about this, for instance, the key grip “is responsible for the safety on the movie set,” overseeing “the use of all lifts, parallels, and rigs” and moving the camera “by means of dollies jibs and cranes.”

Organized in alphabetical order, from “A Camera” to “zoom lens” the book can be dipped into at random, and still yield interesting nuggets of information. Did you know, for example, that the crew on a movie set is paid weekly, but stars get all of their money up front, before they do any work whatsoever? See the “above the line” entry.

“Page count” refers to the number of pages of movie script filmed each day; to film 100 pages in 33 days requires a count of three pages a day, Knox writes. A chatty scene set around a table could fill nearly eight pages of script, he says, but might need just an afternoon to film. On the other hand, “the cavalry charges- the Indians fight back,” takes only an eighth of a page of script, but will probably need three weeks to film.

Mr. Knox tells us that a “man-maker” is “a pile of apple boxes on which a short actor stands in order to appear as tall as the co-star.” Those requiring man-makers, he says, include Tom Cruise and Sylvester Stallone.

He also reveals that “banana” is a verb; the odd elliptical movement that actors must make to stay within or beyond camera range. And that a “spritzer is a pump bottle of water used for misting the actor’s skin or clothing so that it appears wet or shiny.” (Usually, the fake sweat comes in “little Evian bottles imported from France.”)

There are flashes of movie star gossip, including a story about Donald Sutherland, who refused to walk onto a set until all the fake smoke had been cleared, and then immediately lighted a cigarette and smoked furiously during the take (see “smoke”).

The author even throws in the occasional tip for amateur videographers: Turn off the auto-focus button on the video camera, if you want you videos to “look a lot better” (see “auto-focus”).

When he was a student at Northwestern University in the late 1970’s, Mr. Knox was interested in still photography. That morphed into a fascination with movie cameras, which he now operates, on average, about 120 days a year. Each job can require as little as two days or as long as six months of work, some close to home, much in faraway places like Canada, Hong Kong, and Germany.

Those trips can be like all-expenses-paid minivacations, he admits. But the downside is that he rarely knows very far in advance where, when or whether he’ll be working. In fact it was during a four month-lull in his work schedule that he finished writing the book, after having spent about two years collecting movie terms and expressions.

The project was inspired by a dialect coach he observed trying to teach John Cusack to speak with a Louisiana drawl. “I realized that one could take a scholarly approach to ephemeral language,” Mr. Knox said. “But I’m only an expert on it because I’ve been around so long.”

Mr. Knox, 46, says he would like to direct, but doesn’t have a story he is burning to tell. A more realistic aspiration, by his lights: “Being the director of photography is a very rewarding lifetime job.”

And there’s always the chance to meet MAW’s, “showbiz slang for ‘model, actress...whatever!’” Or to hang out with “the money,” which is not pieces of green paper.

As for the book's apparently violent title, it's not. Strike the baby and kill the blonde simply means remove the small spotlight and turn off the two-kilowatt quartz light.