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CASTING & CREW CALLS / FILM & TV PRODUCTIONS IN PREPARATION

No Money? No Time?
No Problem!

How **Dead Giveaway** Made It To Netflix

By Smith Daly

It's a problem that most aspiring independent filmmakers have to face.

You're determined to make the feature that will launch your career, or help you take the next step up the ladder. Problem is, you have a life — a day job, maybe even a spouse, kids, a mortgage and a dog. You have little time, and maybe even less money, to make your dream happen.

Filmmaker David J. Stern has been there, done that. When he set out to make his second feature, *Dead Giveaway*, he was “basically broke.” Stern, who attended NYU film school, says, “I had no money to spend, and I’d already borrowed money from friends and family to make my first feature (*Loopholes*), so I didn’t want to go that route again.”

Six days, \$6,000

Juggling the needs of a full-time job and a family of four, the Washington, DC-based Stern attempted the impossible: producing a feature-length movie in no time, for almost nothing. And he succeeded. *Dead Giveaway* was shot in six days for \$6,000.

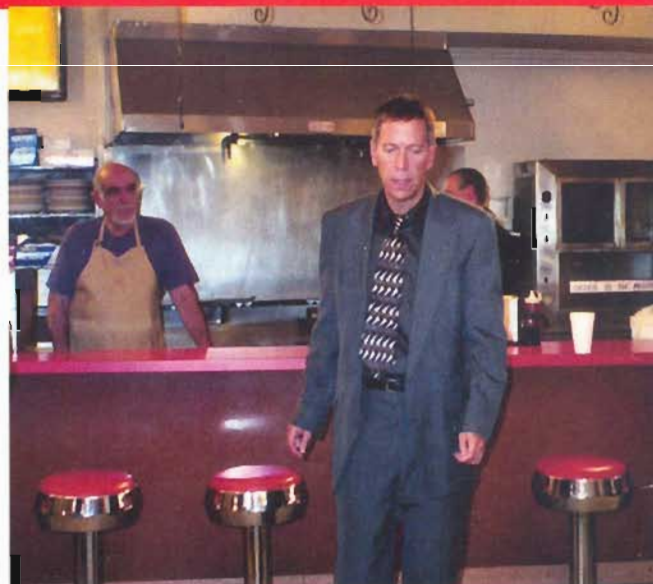
For that amount of time and money, the film paid off handsomely. Last July, it was picked up by Netflix.com, giving Stern’s work national distribution — something he failed to accomplish with *Loopholes*, even though that project cost \$50,000 to make. “I learned that you can make a successful movie with very few resources,” Stern says. “But it has to be a certain kind of movie. And you can’t compromise. The production value still has to be there.”

Most importantly, Stern knew he needed the right story for a low budget project. He chose to re-work a one-act play he’d written years before. “There were only a handful of locations, mainly one or two,” he recalls. “It wasn’t heavy on production requirements, but really centered on character and story.”

The Story

And it was a story that Stern thought would be attractive to actors and audiences alike. It focused on a triangle of desperate people fighting against a seedy past, and featured a twisting plot, thick subtext, and a nail-biting ending. “It was very atmospheric, and I always loved the characters and their relationships,” Stern explains. “I realized with a little work this could be expanded into a tension-filled ‘film noir.’”

After months of re-drafting, and a successful reading for an audience, he was convinced he had a script that not only he, but also others liked. “The comments after the reading were really



Marty Lodge as Allen in the lead role

positive so I knew I had the right script,” Stern stresses. “Still, I had no money to pay people up front. But because people loved the material, they were willing to take a chance and work for deferred payment.”

Casting was the next important step, and Stern, having to serve as his own casting director, quickly gave up on the idea of an open call. “I wasn’t seeing what I wanted, and I was no more willing to compromise on the acting than I was on the script,” he says. “Strong performances are critical. If you have bad acting, then the cinematography, and even the script, doesn’t matter.”

Casting

Stern focused his search on the right actress to play Melissa, the central character. “I thought Melissa had similar qualities to Lady Macbeth, so I searched through reviews of actresses who had played that role on stage in DC. Right away, that helped me narrow it down to a handful of candidates who had already reached a pretty high bar.”

Ultimately, he selected Lucy Newman-Williams, a veteran of the Folger Shakespeare Theatre and other nationally renowned Washington stages. Williams, with her inside view of the professional theater community, suggested another noted theater actor, Marty Lodge, to play Alan, one of the movie’s two male leads.

“Everyone who sees *Dead Giveaway* says the acting is great,” Stern says. “I had no budget for ‘name’ film actors, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get actors who are just as good. Marty and Lucy had acted at Arena Stage, The Kennedy Center, The Shakespeare Theater, The Roundhouse, and had had small roles in films and TV shows like *Gods and Generals*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and *The Wire*. A problem for them, living in D.C., is that it’s hard to get a leading role in a film, even a small-budget independent project. They were willing to work for less in order to get screen time, so it worked for both our agendas.”

In putting together the crew, Stern understood that, without money, he’d have to hire people who were willing to donate their time in order to gain production experience. “But it’s not that big of a problem,” Stern says. “I only needed a few people who really had film experience: the cinematographer, the camera people and me as director. Everyone else could learn [on the job].”

“And it’s not like you just take people off the street,” he adds. “You look for people with transferable skills.” For example, Stern



Neil Conway (Barnie) works with Lucy Newman-Williams (Melissa) on the set



Dir David Stern (L), works with actor Neil Conway while DP Bruce Geisert lines up the shot

hired Neil Becker, a construction project manager, as producer. "His day job was to budget, organize, find staff, oversee things. That's what a producer does. And he was a film buff, so he was eager to sign on."

Another producer, Peter Mitchell, a marketing account executive who now runs his own firm, Marketing for Change, in Tallahassee, Florida, was in Stern's view "a great idea guy to talk over ideas with." And he had a special knack for finding locations. Mitchell secured the upscale location for Alan's office, as well as the waterfront house in which much of the movie takes place.

Stern chose Stewart Waller, an AOL employee with a background in theater design, as his production designer, and put Eric Humpert, "a guy who simply wanted to get into the film business," in charge of catering and accommodations. "They did a great job. Stewart was meticulous and detail-minded, and Eric went out and got discount rates on hotels, and donated food from restaurants."

Production

This last item was critical, Stern notes. "Half the shoot was three consecutive days near Annapolis, about 45 minutes from DC. Because we shot from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., we didn't want the cast and crew to spend time driving back and forth when they could be sleeping. So we had to bite the bullet and spend some money on hotels. And as far as food is concerned, you have to feed your cast and crew well - really well - if you're asking them to work for nothing and stay up all night."

Because time also translates into money, Stern wanted to save every second he could on the set. "What takes a lot of time is lighting, so I told Bruce Geisert, our cinematographer, that it had to be lit so there was minimal re-focusing of lights. Bruce was able to create a plan where the lights were up and away. We spent a few hours at the beginning of the day lighting, but when we began shooting, we could move around with the camera quickly to get the coverage we needed without having to re-light for every setup."

Stern also wanted the camera hand-held. "Artistically I wanted an 'unsteady' feel, like nothing was on stable ground," he says. "But it also helped save time, because we didn't have to set up a tripod, dolly, etc. But most importantly, it worked with the style of the movie, and once again, here's how the right script helped us.

"We used a Sony DSR-11 DV camera with a zoom lens, and to

avoid the 'shaky-cam' look, we used relatively short focal lengths." The camera gear was borrowed from Stern's boss at the time, Coerte Voorhees of BNTV (BusinessNow Television). The lighting equipment also was mostly borrowed.

Stern edited *Dead Giveaway* himself on Final Cut Pro, but a final challenge was the music score. After wrestling with it for a while, he convinced himself that he could find a composer who, like everyone else, would be willing to donate music in exchange for experience and exposure. "I spent some time Googling and, sure enough, there was a site that listed jazz composers." Stern says with a smile. "I ended up getting people like Dennis Mitcheltree, a musician who has played at Carnegie Hall."

The Sailboat

Looking back, Stern credits much of his success in getting *Dead Giveaway* finished to the fact that "I had plenty of enthusiasm and confidence, and the lack of money wasn't about to stop me. I needed things, so I just asked around and got recommendations. Once people were hooked, things started to come together quickly.

"For example, we needed a sailboat. The bigger the better to accommodate the main characters' overblown life-style. And again, I knew nobody. But, someone knew someone who knew someone else who had a buddy who had a sailboat. I crossed my fingers, not expecting anything, but when we arrived on location on our first day, there was a 60-foot sailboat sitting next to the dock. It just arrived. And when we were done, it just disappeared, like a ghost. To this day I've never met whoever's boat that was.

"It's a snowball effect," Stern says. "You start with nothing, but you keep going and before you know it you have a 60-foot boat in your backyard."

And a movie on Netflix.

Stern's next project is a feature currently titled "Tenants of Time." Using his tried and true formula, he spent almost two years working the script. Now he's gathering a team as the snowball begins to roll. See the *Dead Giveaway* trailer and connect with him at www.detroitfilmyard.com.

Tech Specs: **SONY**
 Shot with a Sony DSR-11. Edited on Final Cut Pro.