

## **Best job in the world**

### **Lesley Robson-Foster Visual Effects Supervisor**

This seminar is about the SET. The job of production VFX supervisor – can go all the way from early prep to late post. So there are lots of other aspects – but today is about the SET.

My favourite part of this job is being on set. I love the camaraderie of the crew. It's the only business where 100 strangers can come together on a given day and be productive. Everyone knows their job and how it connects to the next guy. You have to do your part. After a certain skill level it's about people. Preparation is 50 per cent of it. You'll have time to do the people part if you're thoroughly prepped and have thought through every scenario.

Be proactive. Warn everyone what you will be needing as quickly and professionally as you can. Don't speak too soon or too late. Be in a place where your requests can be heard as your shot happens.

#### **PREP**

Why are you going to set?

What exactly is the work?

What do you need to come home with?

Who can you talk to before you go about what you need?

Think about having a PLAN B if things don't go your way.

Think about what you can do without. Aim for getting everything – but think about it if there's trouble.

Hopefully you've been in a meeting and know exactly what is needed and what you or your company have promised. Discuss with the producer/artists – anyone you can brainstorm through what you need to get. Like lens info, HDRI, clean plates, plates, elements etc.

Another set of eyes on your job is useful. ASK the artists who will be doing the shot what they would like the most. Then work out the plan b plan. At least we need the clean plate...!

Find out from production office (or your producer) who the 2<sup>nd</sup> AD is. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Director will be making the call sheet and will know where and when you are supposed to report.

Ask if you can be emailed a pre lim. (Preliminary call sheet). This will give you the lay of the land for the shoot day – but you must wait for the real call sheet to know what the call time is.

Things can change very quickly and frequently do. If it's a series of days – ask for a one line schedule also. They won't send you a real call sheet until the unit has wrapped for the day – so it could be very late. The prelim is important so you can plan your route, know where to park, get an idea of what's going on.

(See examples at end)

On the call sheet. Know what your scene number is. Look to see when it is up in the order of things. Don't bank on it staying the same – but if an actor is in your shot – see what time their call time is – then you'll know generally what time your shots might be.

If you see on the pre lim that your PLATES, your TILES or your ELEMENT shots are not listed and you know it may take time to get them – mention it to the 2<sup>nd</sup> AD. If they brush you off – tell your producer they may need to make a phone call to warn them you'll need some time. Its ok to contact the 2<sup>nd</sup> to ask questions. If you can't get answers – speak to the UPM. ( Unit production Manager) Know your crew hierarchy. ( Beware of online resources for that – not always correct or big budget enough to be correct. Every level of production has a different hierarchy). ON set a representative from production is always there – look on the call sheet!! Look at the names on the chairs. Ask for whomever hired you.

Make sure PRODUCTION has your number and email address.

\*\*\* If there is an important greenscreen that you know will be crucial to the success of the project it may be that you should be there with the rigging grips who will be putting it up – which will be an hour or two before call. Or you may even need to visit set the day before. Get your tracking markers planned out – not for position because you won't be able to do that till you see the shot probably – but at least you can see what KIND of thing you might need. Sticky trackers. LED lights? Simple tape?

Are you there for TILES? Crowd tiles, stadium tiles, environment tiles?

Are you expecting a repeatable head or a special piece of gear? Do you see it listed on the call sheet under special equipment? See a crane tech? If you don't see it. Call production or get your producer to call production to speak to the UPM and make sure its coming.

Take the appropriate kit based on what you need to do that day. Camera Bag always. You should have a bag for set. You will collect stuff you need as you go along and try to keep the bag always ready. (Kit contents list at end).

Arrive at SET 15 mins before your call time.

If it looks like there is distant parking and you need to get a shuttle to the set. Be there 30 mins ahead.

Go to breakfast if you want to but listen for WE'RE IN, WE'RE IN. That means it is call time and you should go to set immediately.

Find the 1st AD. Assistant Director. The 2<sup>nd</sup> AD you may have spoken to probably won't be on set. Their job is prep and advance planning.

Introduce yourself to the 1<sup>st</sup> AD and hope you can have a chat about what you need to achieve that day.

Ask for an introduction to the DP Director of Photography.

Try to have a chat about what you need to achieve that day.

Tell her/him about ALL the plates you may need. Make sure you've thought about the most efficient order for those to be shot in.

( Clean plate at the end? Clean plate first?) Have a cheat sheet or shot list with you. AD will love you for being organized and together. It's a good way to start.)

If your shots aren't up till later. Find a good place to hang out. Hovering around the DIT ( Digital Imaging Technician) station is often a good safe place. The DP will probably sit there also – so it's a good place to be. If you are exterior and the DIT is in a little tent and you can't see – then go near the directors monitor. You need to see when it's your stuff. Don't sit in the chairs there at the video village. When it is your time – it will be ok to ask to go in the DIT tent – it's important to watch. The director may want to talk to you - so then watch at her monitor so you can say if it's no good quickly and why. ( His head went through the light, we shot off the set etc.)

Find a safe dry place for your kit. Some people carry a little foldable camping stool – so they can put their camera bag up off the ground at least.

If you do have to do business with the grips for your bluescreen. Look on the call sheet for the name of the key grip and try to chat to him or her. ALWAYS go through the head of the relevant department. Tell them what you hope for – in an ideal world. ( Greenscreen digi or chroma, Bluescreen digi or chroma. You should have sent in that request ahead of time ( via the UPM) if there is something particular you need. Wrapped around the frame on all sides or just the floor side, nice and tight so your tracking markers stay put if that's what you need. Also say if you'll need help and a ladder to put up your trackers. You are NOT welcome to pick up ANY equipment on set. Union rules.

If you need to shoot reference stills and or HDRI imagery and there is a SET photographer on the call sheet. Seek them out and tell them. Strictly you need to be Local 600 to shoot stills on set – but they will typically let it slide if its HDRI.

If you do need to shoot HDRI – however you do it. Theta, fisheye lens, silver balls etc. then you really do need the AD to help you. Give them fair warning you will need to run in to do this. You'll need them to help you clear people away if you need. You better have practiced this A LOT – if it takes you more than 2 mins something is wrong. Yell when you are done and clear out of the set fast. If you have to do it when its lunch time – remember they will probably turn all the lights off so it may not be good for you – so you need to have set that up.

Next when there is appropriate moment go and introduce yourself to the camera dept.

You want to tell the 1<sup>st</sup> AC that you will need help collecting lens info on your shots. The 2<sup>nd</sup> AC will probably be the one who actually does it.

They will either tell you after every shot – or keep a little book themselves and download to you later. Be careful not to piss them off by hovering – but If you can tell that they don't mind - it might be good to be close to hear that info.

Also – train yourself to get camera info by looking. The lens focal length is always ON the lens. Know the height of your knees, belly button, shoulder etc. If you can't get your info – something is better than nothing.

There are many iphone/ipad apps to collect lens info – but a pen and paper is a better idea. Make notes and transfer the info to your report at the end of the day. They might just yell it out and you better be ready. If you get stuck the focal length will do.

If you are on a movie or a series – or this is all for a big set extension or part of a digital matte painting – then you will need to map the lenses. (Lens map PDF at end.)

See SHEET for lens info included at end.

Now go and find the Script Supervisor. Tell her or him what you're doing. They will only be interested in what scene and how many plates and how you would like them labeled. Usually they would put a V in front of the scene number to show the editor what the plates are. So Sc 36A would become Sc V36A – then the different plates might be tk 1, 2 etc. I like to get scripty to record all the lens info also on the script notes.

Who else do you need to speak to? What is in your shot?

SPFX supervisor – is there smoke, wind? Do you need it NOT to be there for PLATES?

Props

Hair

Costumes – if this is a big greenscreen set – make very sure someone has let the costume department know. Hopefully WELL in advance. If there are many extras in your crowd tile. Maybe ask to walk through them with one of the ADs. Reject any that will cause you a problem. If it's all too much – then maybe you have to work with the grips to get another colour screen up in time.

### **How to deal with an unfriendly set.**

It's hard to walk onto a set and not know anyone. Everywhere you stand will feel like the wrong place. Don't fret – you're there to do a job – all that matters is that you leave with what you came for. There's just YOU and your plates/tiles the next day.

Try to manage everything by yourself – but if you run into trouble – like seriously can't get what you want trouble – you can see the light is going and it looks like they aren't getting to you.

The grips have put up a shitty greenscreen and won't change it. DP says no way are you getting your clean plate.

Then use the hierarchy. The PRODUCER or UPM has paid good money to have you there. If you don't get it – the shot will cost more. No trackers, no keyable background? then they are in for roto. Try to speak to the AD first – but if you just can't get in there you must speak to the producer. Say quietly and non-hysterically that you're concerned 'you can't deliver what was promised if you don't get your plates'. A good thing to remember is that matching light or time of day with the master really matters and if they decide they will get your plates later when the light has shifted – then that's no good. That's the kind of thing you must say UPFRONT. Or if the camera is locked off – and you need to shoot a bunch of elements or tiles – and they say we will put the camera back there later – say NO I really need to shoot them with this camera NOW.

If you're not worried about the light and you have a switcher – and you have triangulated and measured and you CAN actually get the camera back – then help production by doing so.

Who has been friendly with you during the day when you spoke to them? Get in however you can.

**Know who is in charge of whom.**

All the camera dept and the grips and the electricians work for the DP.

All the SPFX people and the props, costumes etc. answer to the production representative on set and the AD.

But really the AD should make it their business to get you in and sorted out.

Stay attentive – don't ask for stuff that is just a safety to make your life easier unless it's really OK to do so. CAN you manage with those few wrinkles?

**Homework you should be doing to be an effective set supervisor.**

Photography, exposure, resolution – can you talk to the DP about how you like the greenscreen exposed? Do you know why a stop under the key light is useful or not? What do they even mean by that? What is the key light? Learn about looking at the LOG image with a LUT. The DIT can be so helpful – know on the scope what your greenscreen tolerance is.

If the DP asks if you want to switch to a prime for your shots?

Depth of field. Should you ask for your plates to be at a different stop so everything is sharp?

Focus – do you want it to match in the photography – or ask for it sharp so you can match it later.

Sensor size and capabilities of the motion picture camera – if the DIT says do you want this 5 to 1 for the VFX shots? Or shall we shoot RAW? What's the answer?

Learn the different capture methods – RED MONSTRO, ARRI LF, VARICAM PURE

Are they shooting Pro Rez 4444 HQ – what does that mean? Does POST know you want to shoot RAW – you should have asked or warned them. It may not be in their workflow.

**Grip equipment**

Understand about stabilized heads. Repeatable heads.

Understand what to ask for from the operator if you need to. What does LOCKED off actually mean? How to promise to put hand held feel back. What does NODAL mean and how to ask for it and why.

What can be stabilized and what does it mean? Asking to shoot wider to let stabilization be done.

**LIGHT and sun path**

What happens if you shoot your plates at the wrong time. ( Driving plates where car in in studio and exterior plates are on the road).

ORDER of shooting.

Look at HELIOS or any sun path app.

Taking photos that are useful. Matching lenses. What is your stills camera – calculate the lens difference. Use ARTEMIS app on your phone.

Know the names of camera moves.

BOOM up or down - camera travels up and down on the same plane

TILT up or down – camera moves from a central point to look up or down.

Tracking shot – Camera physically moves on a dolly across a physical space – and can also pan and tilt or boom as its doing so.

Panning shoot – camera moves sideways from one spot. Looks left or looks right.

Handheld.

Steadicam.

Movi. Gimble.

Crane with remote head.

Stabilized heads. Motion suppressors.

## **COMFORT.**

Long days on set can be grueling. You might think this is stupid to mention but believe me – being prepped can save you from being unable to do your job effectively.

SHOES. Even if its boiling hot – do not wear open toed shoes. Set is full of stuff to hurt you. Bring a change of shoes or socks. A fresh pair of socks half way through the day can be just what you need! ( When I was starting out it was the best advice I ever got!)

LAYERS. Raincoat. Warm layer. Sunblock. Hat. Glasses. I've had to send PAs and data wranglers home because they just braved through the sun and got sick.

When its seriously cold – you really have to get your warm gear sorted out. ( the team who shot motion control work in the ARCTIC for BBC Frozen Planet taught me about Merino Wool Layers). Heated jackets. But your FEET – nothing more crucial than keeping your feet warm.

Phone – extra battery. Charging gear. DO you have inverter in your car? Bring an extension cord.

Don't plug in on set without permission from electricians. Video Assist may let you charge your phone. But be self-sufficient if you can.

FOOD – craft services will be available most of the day. But probably not immediately. If you get there in time CREW breakfast will be available. LUNCH on a union shoot is 6 hours after call time. But could well be later. If you hear the AD asking for grace – or were taking one. ( ONE

means one penalty – a meal penalty gives you half an hour – the crew will get paid that penalty). Grace means just a few minutes to finish the shot. Carry an energy bar or two. The crew lunch can be like high school. The departments sit together often. The director, producer and DP usually sit together – don't be tempted to sit beside them at their table. Camera dept or video assist are often safe bets. Keep an eye on the time. You'll hear a BACK IN time. Get back well before that – especially if you have to shuttlebus back to set. A second meal can happen SIX hours again after the back in time. But more likely catering will circulate with handheld snacks. You may hear – 'its sandwich o clock' – then you have to look for it just off the set. Or there may be a line with a little hot food. A quick bowl of pasta or soup.

BATHROOMS - sometimes there are portable bathroom trailers clearly marked. Sometimes the bathroom is in the HONEY WAGON. This is a long trailer with lots of little doors and steps up. Sometimes the MENS room is called DESI and the WOMENS room is LUCY. Sometimes CHER and SONNY. They could be far – like blocks away. Go when you can so you don't have to leave set at a crucial moment. There will almost always be a bathroom at catering where you eat lunch.

A potential scenario...

You have discussed and agreed on a series of shots that you will go to set to manage.

Let's say the shots are of a storage room. Your job is to make that Indiana Jones shot – where the shelves go back to infinity.

The set will be built on a stage – and only have 4 rows of shelves with 4 hanging lights over each set of shelves. You've asked for a bluescreen to run across the entire back of the shelves. This will allow you to get the master shot with the actors in – and then you've asked for clean plates so you can make the tiles to repeat the BG to complete the shot.

Simple lock off – the director agreed in prep.

It will only take a few minutes to get the plates if the shots are locked off each time. The camera should stay still. We will get the plates immediately.

SO – time comes and the director has decided this is a walking shot on a Steadicam that weaves through the shelves. No possible way of matching for clean plates.

You gently approach the AD and say – Ooo – we had agreed to shoot this as a lock off. I don't have a repeatable head planned so it will be hard for me to get matching plates.

AD will potentially shrug.

You try the DP who says “Sorry this is what they want now”

SO – worth risking trouble by going to the director? Yes – you have to.  
No luck there either. They’re now mad at you for questioning them.

It’s the middle of the night. No one to cry to.

Is there a production representative on the set? Maybe not as it’s the middle of the night.  
But if there is let them know how this impacts the end result. Your producer will have to get back to them with a number but its easily 3 times as much money per comp.

SEND an email to everyone as fast as you can. Cover yourself. Call your own producer. Maybe they can work behind the scenes.

This is now a bigger deal and won’t fit in the agreed upon budget.

Etiquette demands you cannot say ‘BUT YOU SAID IT WOULD BE A LOCK OFF...’

Now regroup FAST and work out how you to get the plates you need.

At the risk of being unpopular – make sure you get to walk through the rehearsal with the DP.  
See if you can influence the camera moves so they are more nodal and then a series of locked off plates might help you make the DMP to fix the BG.  
See if there is a possibility to cover it both ways – because then the argument can be had later.

So watch very closely and as the master is shot – figure out what you need. When will the deep BG of the room show in the camera move? Making sure the Steadicam guy can walk through the shot he just did - but now slowly and without actors in the way. Do a quick sketch about how the plates can be used. Make sure your covered. Include the DP or AD in your plans so they help you. Say you want the plates shot immediately after the master – so the Steadicam guy has a sense memory of what he just shot. Then get them to SHOOT a SLOW version of the move. Make sure you have now tracked up the BG if you need to.

Make sure script supervisor has all the info about what each plate is meant for.

Also you should have been shooting stills like mad in case you have to make the DMP yourself.  
Match the lens on your stills camera with the motion picture camera.

Some other trouble...

DP says you cannot have a clean plate. He doesn't have time. ( Be clever – ask them to keep rolling at the end – ask DP to just clear everyone).

Grips make a big mess of the greenscreen. Blowing in the wind. Trackers have to go on frame?

Trackers fall off. Lasers.

Televisions, phones, iPads etc.

Stabilization – shoot wider

Driving plates. Nightmare. Shooting plates first. How to advise on where to put the camera.

Repeatable heads, motion control, heads to shoot plates at 90 degrees.

Right kit for the right job.

### **Camera BAG – this is a personal thing!**

This is what is in mine.

SONY A 7r3 x 2 bodies.

24mm – 105mm G series for general set use.

8mm fisheye for HDRI

Many batteries

Media – case

Lens tissues

Panchro

Theta V - VR camera for fast HDRI

Gitzo tripod x2

Nodal head preset for HDRI work

Black Magic URSA mini

Black Magic 6k pocket camera

EF mount 24 – 70mm Canon lens

Precision heads for tripods.

Many batteries, chargers, media, card readers, drives etc.

### **SET BAG**

#### **Tracking Markers**

Tracking Marker Stickers - Big and Small

Battery Christmas Lights – tiny LEDs in string

Dayglow dot stickers - Big and small

Dayglow target stickers - all sizes

Golf Tees

Beads

Single LED lights – made with magnets and velcro

Adhesive Magnets

### **Tapes and Adhesives**

Various colors of ½" gaff tape

Double-sided tape

Non-adhesive flagging tape - neon colors

Electrical tape

Sticky tack – snot the props call it!

### **Measuring**

Tape Measures - 12', 50'

Leica Laser Distance Measurer

Digital Level

### **Misc Items**

Tennis Balls

Rope

Fishing Line

PENCILS! Pens, sharpies, highlighters, markers

Zip ties

Black wrap

Scissors. Leatherman.

Batteries

Notebook.

Ipad.

Chargers. Phone extra power bank.

Stinger for power

### **CAR BAG**

Rain gear

Cold weather gear

Hat

Socks

Hand warmers

Batteries for heated jacket

Invertor for car

Bug Spray

Sun block

Useful APPS

Setellite.nl

Camerareports.org