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## As tiers go buy

Four films, four budget levels, and four challenges

By TODD LONGWELL

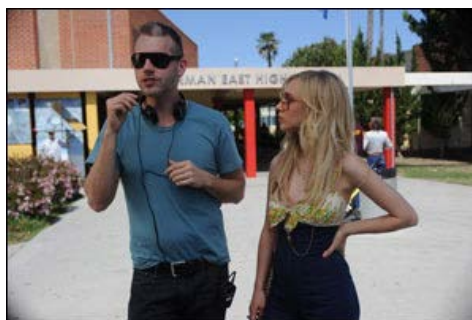
Size does matter. The size of the budget, that is.

The amount of money filmmakers are able to spend on a production has a huge impact on their options for sets, locations, technology and crew size. Here's an inside look how four different productions -- one with a budget of more than \$100 million, another with what can only be called a microbudget, a third with a small budget and finally one with a mid-size budget -- dealt with the opportunities and challenges posed with the availability of money, or lack thereof.



'Bellflower'

Naturally, the higher the budget, the greater the options. The \$195 million spent on "Transformers: Dark of the Moon" included \$30 million in additional costs to produce the film in 3D, which required multiple camera systems -- Arri Alexa and Sony F35 on the digital side, and 35mm film cameras to shoot slow-motion sequences, close-ups and sky shots that needed higher resolution than the HD 3D could provide.



'Dirty Girl'

The budget also allowed cutting-edge vfx, heart-pounding action sequences and a wide choice of locations -- some of which gave supervising location manager Ilt Jones a headache, including the the decision to set a chase sequence on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It wasn't the mechanics of shooting the chase itself that pushed him to the brink, it was sorting through the bureaucratic red tape.

"Washington, D.C., is a complete cat's cradle of abutting jurisdictions," Jones says. "You've got the National Parks Service, the Capitol Police, the Secret Service and other agencies, all with turf wars. It's a minefield."

The microbudgeted (\$16,000) "Bellflower," which shot in Ventura, Calif., faced no such issues. Its biggest problem came when the engine blew out in the main character's tricked-out '72 Buick Skylark (nicknamed Medusa) and it took a year to cobble together enough money to repair the car for a pivotal slow-mo shot of it burning rubber.

On the other hand, the filmmakers, with their low-profile skeleton crew and director-star Evan Glodell's small homemade camera rig (a Silicon Imaging mini digital model augmented with Russian lenses and other vintage components) were able to avoid arousing the ire of the authorities, even

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when blowing up a propane tank with a sawed-off shotgun or accidentally scorching power lines with Medusa's two built-in flame throwers.

"The cops would come to see what was happening and we'd say, 'We're just shooting a project,' " recalls cinematographer and co-editor Joel Hodge. "And they'd be like, 'That's cool, just keep the noise down,' or they'd get super-excited when they saw Medusa."

"We had no permits," points out Vincent Grashaw, who was a producer, co-star and second camera operator on the film. "It was one of those situations where you ask forgiveness, you don't ask for permission."

Although many of the cast and crew invested in the film, none received a salary, save for a stunt driver found on Craigslist who got \$200 to execute some tricky maneuvers with Medusa. Interiors were shot for free at friends' houses and the catering was virtually non-existent after funds ran perilously low five days into the 90-day shoot.

But for Jonathan McCoy, co-producer on the \$4 million Weinstein Co. release "Dirty Girl," not feeding the crew properly is a big no-no.

"The message you send the crew is, 'I don't really give a damn about you,' " says McCoy. "A lot of line producers will spend a little more on their food on a low-budget movie because it makes the crew happy and it's really cheap."

On "Dirty Girl," big money was saved by taking advantage of California's 25% tax credit for independent films with budgets between \$ 1 million and \$10 million. While there are larger tax credits to be found (e.g. Georgia's 30%), the raw percentage of a location's incentive is just one component of the economic equation. The L.A. area, where "Dirty Girl" shot, offers cheaper and more plentiful equipment than the rest of the country. It also has the world's largest crew base, which means it's not necessary to fly anyone in, saving on lodging, airfare and per diem costs.

The locale also made it easier to attract name actors like the film's co-stars Milla Jovovich, Mary Steenburgen, William H. Macy, Tim McGraw and Dwight Yoakam "because if they're in town and they're not doing anything and it's a fun indie movie with a great role, why not do it?" says McCoy. "And you get better day players because the pool of actors here is so competitive and so big."

While "Dirty Girl" had enough money for talent, it couldn't afford any set construction. The situation was entirely different for "Crazy Stupid Love," which had a budget of around \$50 million. For its producers the decision whether to shoot a particular scene on a soundstage or in practical location was purely logistical.

"A lot of the movie takes place in this bar," says the film's unit production manager David Siegel. "If you were to shoot at a real bar or take a practical space and turn it into a bar, you'd need to weigh how much work you're going to have to do to reach the director's vision without compromise, especially if it's an important set piece. It's not just the space. There's the neighbors, the noise, traffic control" and so on to consider.

In the end, 25 of the Steve Carell starrer's 52 shooting days took place on soundstages at Warner Bros., including those for the bar scenes, while the rest was shot in and around L.A.

In contrast, "Transformers" spread its production dollars around the map (Chicago, Houston, Detroit, Los Angeles, etc.), in one instance spending \$1 million for a single day of shooting at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Meanwhile, "Dirty Girl" squeezed every ounce of value out of three days in a local mobile home park, shooting scenes set in the protagonist's (Juno Temple) trailer home in a real double-wide, and redressing the park's clubhouse to portray a therapist's office and lobby.

"Would we liked to have had more money?" McCoy asks rhetorically. "Of course. Would the movie have been more cinematic? Yeah. But when you have a situation where you don't have much money, it can make people come up with pretty ingenious solutions. And if you see the movie, it looks pretty freakin' good."

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