

Out of Thin Air: Working on Spec



IMAGES COURTESY OF ANNA GUDBRANDS AND ESTEFANIA KRÖL.

As you set out on your path to a career in cinematography, a common (and paradoxical) frustration tends to be that no one will give you the opportunity to shoot the kind of material you want to shoot without your having shot it before! A step toward circumventing that, which I've long advocated, is to

build your reel for the type of career you want to have. Do you want to shoot car commercials? Then you'd better have amazing examples of car work on your reel. Do you want to shoot the next *Game of Thrones*? Have impressive examples of medieval drama on your reel. How do you

do that when you haven't yet been hired to shoot those types of projects? *Spec work*, or material created on speculation.

That means you're not paid to do it. In most cases, in fact, *you* are paying to get it made — without a specific client, studio or network behind you.

In the early days of my career, when I was a gaffer looking to work as a cinematographer, the spec was my main tool. I shot specs every chance I could — commercials, shorts, even just single shots — to help flesh out my reel. *You know what would be great here? A steaming cup of coffee in a warm kitchen ...* and that became my next spec shot to do.

Of course, in those days, spec work required getting my hands

Stills from a spec commercial shot by Anna Gudbrands and directed by Estefania Kröl.

on a 35mm camera package, grip and lighting, and motion-picture film stock, and then working deals for film developing and telecine. It's a *lot* easier today thanks to high-end digital cameras, LED lighting and at-home editing systems that can work with native footage.

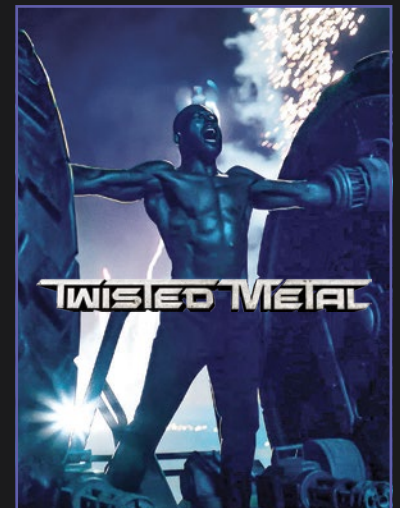
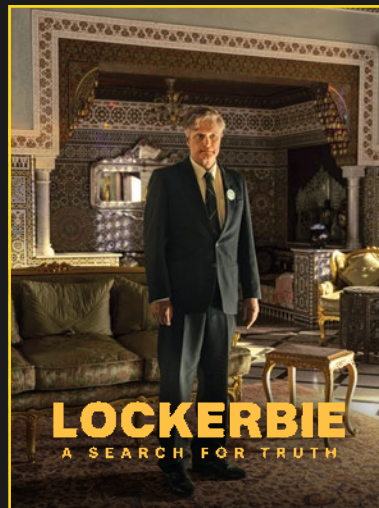
It also behooves you to partner with friends. Connect with fellow filmmakers and work toward a mutual goal. When I was coming up in Hollywood, I was lucky to have some amazing filmmaker friends and collaborators. One was Christopher Probst, ASC. Whenever we could, we'd pool resources and share opportunities





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do on my own at home. Those experiments not only built my reel, but also taught me how to design a look from scratch and communicate ideas visually; they helped me refine my skills as a cinematographer.

Spec Commercials

The spec commercial is the most traditional form of spec work. It's creating an ad for a product without having any official association with the company that makes it. It's a "fake" commercial, more or less, and when you put the result on your website, if you've used a real brand name, you should identify it as such to make it clear that the piece wasn't created on behalf of the company. Alternatively, you can avoid any issues by making up a fictional brand name.

Recently, Icelandic cinematographer Anna Gudbrands — who works in commercials and music videos — decided to pursue more car work, and to add relevant shots to her reel, she used her own vintage Jaguar to shoot a spec commercial. She collaborated with Argentinian director Estefania Kröl, who had a strong vision for the spot: a driver's transformation into the classic car's feral feline namesake.

"The budget for this spec consisted of a full tank of gas, multiple pots of coffee at the Chateau Marmont while prepping, and then snacks and non-alcoholic beer while we were working in post," explains Gudbrands. "We shot this with an iPhone 16, DV cam, and two vintage Sony action cameras that I found on eBay. These cameras were a deliberate creative and practical choice. We wanted to be able to easily move the cameras around and also achieve a more raw and 'alive' image for the visuals, to go with the vintage aesthetic of the car. Lighting-wise, Rosco kindly



Top: Holben directing the short film *Terminus*, shot by Kaity Williams. **Middle:** Behind the scenes of the short film *Descent*, directed by Holben. At the camera is Christopher Probst, ASC. **Bottom:** A late-night spec spot shot in the author's living room on 35mm film.

for both of us to shoot spec material. When I shot, Chris was my AC, and when he shot, I was his gaffer. We supported each other, even when the only time we had to shoot was somewhere between 2-5 a.m. (between wrap of one job and call on the next)! Jamie Neese was another friend and collaborator on many spec projects as I built my reel.

It's hard to do alone, but not impossible. If you're looking for commercial work, shooting tabletop or product shots in your living room means you're not relying on anyone else to help move your career forward. There were many times when I would go to the grocery store, pick out a random product, and figure out a commercial for it that I could





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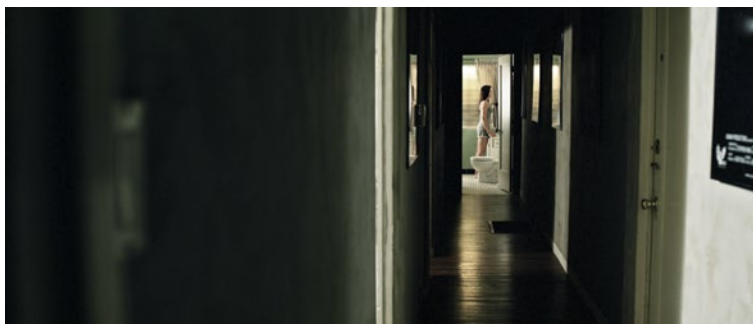
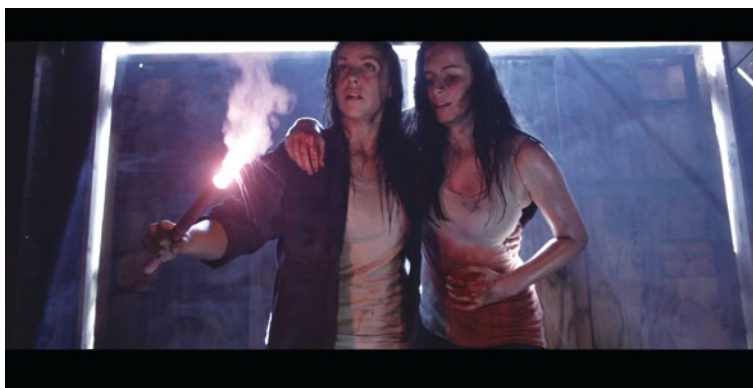
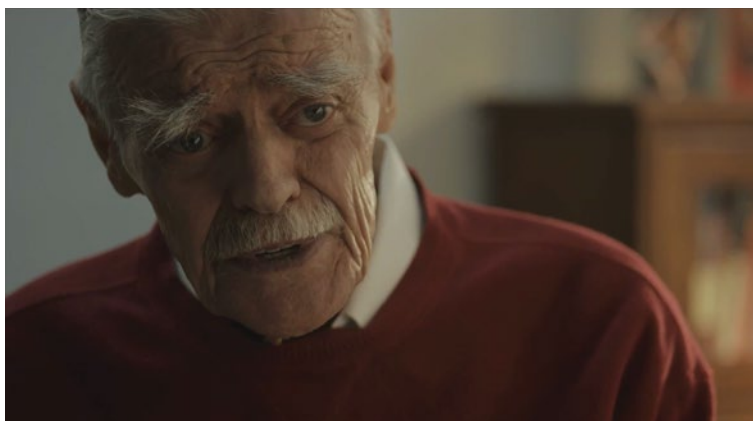
**“THIS FILM IS A SIGHT
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AND PRODUCTION DESIGN
AND ENCAPSULATING
CINEMATOGRAPHY”**

Taylor Wells, *FILMSPEAK*



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From top: Jack Wallace in a spec trailer for *Tis It the Season?*, written and directed by Jason Gedrick and photographed by Christopher Probst, ASC; Becka Adams and Brett Hargrave in an actors' reel scene titled "Hiding Place"; Adams in the short film *Alone*, photographed by Jayson Crothers; another shot from *Alone*.

lent us their excellent DMG Dash lights. We had two of those kits, which could be easily attached to the interior of the car and also worked well for car exteriors, and with that setup we could be portable and quick. Working with restrictions can be freeing, even a blessing in some ways. To make a project work with limited resources, you must think in highly creative ways and know how to solve problems with the tools you have.

"Specs are a great way to showcase your creativity and abilities to tell stories for brands you love, and to collaborate with directors on projects you're both working towards," she continues. "I love shooting commercials, and doing specs allows me to flex my creative muscles, take risks and work with visuals I may not be able to try out on a regular commercial shoot. As we know, there can be a reluctance to hire a DP unless they've done a similar project before. Taking the reins and shooting a spec is a great way to showcase your abilities and vision."

While AI-generated visuals are starting to encroach on some commercial work, there's still no substitute for the authenticity and tactile control of real cinematography — especially when you're building your personal voice through spec work.

Narrative Specs

Delving into narrative-spec work can seem more daunting, but one technique I've used successfully is to collaborate with actors who are looking to build their reels as well. They hired me to write, direct and shoot a scene for them — a scene that felt lifted out of a longer piece — and in turn, I would get new material for my reel. It's a lot easier to tackle a two- or three-minute scene than

an entire short film, pilot or feature, and after working with multiple clients, you can find yourself with an impressively varied sample portfolio featuring all sorts of looks and genres. The low fee I'd charge the actors helped me pay for the production, and we'd both get something really helpful out of it.

To make those projects, I'd sit down with the actor and ask, "What's your dream project?" And they'd say, "I really want a starring role on a forensic series..." Then I'd write a scene that felt like it was pulled from *CSI*, *NCIS* or *Dexter*, and light it and shoot it in that style, thereby demonstrating I was capable of creating those looks. Meanwhile, the actor would get the scene to sell *their* talents.

The Agent's Perspective

Louiza Vick, a partner and co-head of the Motion Pictures Department at Worldwide Production Agency — which represents craft department heads, including cinematographers — shared her perspective on spec work: "When you're talking about short films or a spec pilot, it's always been about the director you're going to be working with and the material. If the director is someone the DP feels really excited about — they have a shared sensibility, a shared vision and a gut feeling that this might be someone they could form a long-lasting relationship with — then doing a short film, a proof of concept or a spec pilot is worth the investment. I wouldn't advise a DP to necessarily invest financially unless they have overall creative control as a producer, but if you're talking about donating time, I think when you're building your career, there is a certain investment you have to put in — and it's an investment in yourself. It helps you build a reel, build a network, and it potentially



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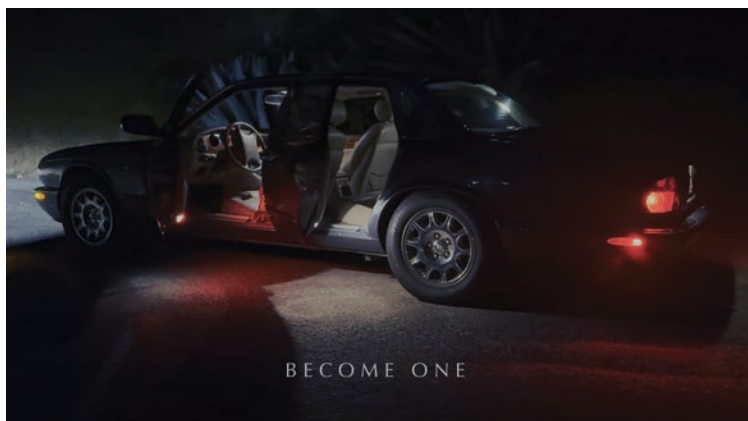
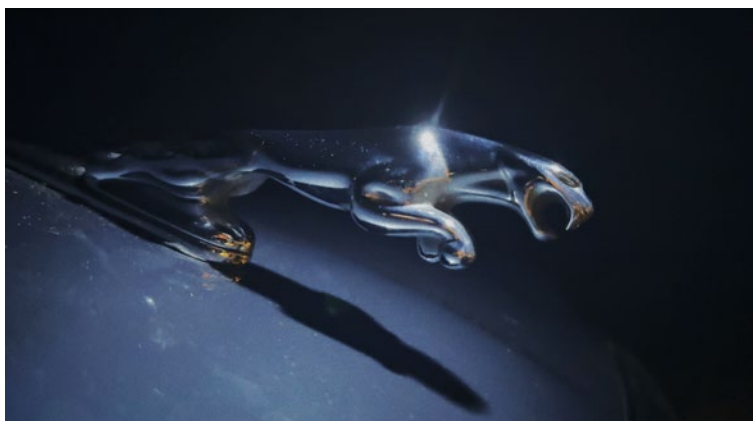


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Above, left and right: More shots from Gudbrands and Kröl's spec commercial. Below, left: Kathleen Wilhoite attempts to wake Dan Lauria from a comatose state in *Tis It the Season?*. Below, right: Keleigh de la Cruz and Matthew Dugger perform a scene from a spec project titled *The Ex*.

leads to other opportunities, especially if it's a proof of concept. Maybe the DP who shoots the proof of concept can also shoot the feature.

"I agree with the idea that you should put on your reel the kind of work you want to be hired for, especially when you want to do something you haven't necessarily done," she adds. "Cinematography is a visual medium. So, a way to try to get yourself hired on something you want is to showcase that you can do it."

Pushing Boundaries

Shooting spec work is also a phenomenal way to push your boundaries. Try out new

equipment, test out concepts and storytelling techniques you've never tried before. Explore in an environment where you won't get fired if it doesn't work out! It is precisely when times are slow — during those breaks between jobs — that you should continue to exercise the creative muscles and *create*. Continue to expand the reel, the resumé, the website, and even just material for your social media.

"It's definitely very important that you keep moving forward [in slow times], and it's certainly better to stay positive and stay inspired," says Vick. "Some spec work is worth doing. The main caveat is that it's usually very low

or no pay, but could be a way to build new relationships, and short films and specs don't necessarily have a massive platform; shorts usually go to festivals or are just purposefully used as a proof of concept."

Discipline and Discoveries

It's important to treat every spec like a real job; that discipline carries over when the real gig comes. Build a crew, make a plan, and test your lighting well before production. And remember that specs aren't just a young cinematographer's game; even seasoned cinematographers like Gudbrands use them to reinvent their reels, explore new genres or experiment with emerging technology. I still do spec work, especially testing new equipment and concepts, and they continue to help me refine my skills.

A bonus of spec work is what

you can discover about yourself. Every test, every experiment, every late-night setup is another step toward mastering your craft. When the phone's not ringing, pick up the camera. The work you do for free is often the work that pays off the most. I can trace every big opportunity I've ever had back to something I did either out of curiosity or to support another filmmaker. Specs are where you prove — to yourself most of all — that you can create beauty and story out of thin air. And sometimes, that's exactly what a producer, director or agency wants.



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