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Markee

Film • Video • Animation • Audio • Locations • People

2.0

Hunger Games!

District 13 gets lit up

The Route 30 Trilogy

*Sinatra and Steve Jobs
in Post*



Location, Local, Location

The real estate sales mantra, “Location, Location, Location!” can fit nicely with the independent filmmaker’s mantra, “Keep It Cheap.” The majors can send scouts to find just the right location for a film or TV show based on the script writer’s concepts. It often seems that the big budget productions send crews and actors around the world looking for the perfect spot to resemble another spot that didn’t quite look like what it was supposed to look like, even though it was the actual spot being portrayed. Case in point: shooting the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean*... in Australia. Or Portland, Ore., sited for Boston in the TV show *Leverage*.

Okay, we recognize that several factors come into play when a studio looks for a site for a project that, according to the writer—or the author of the book that the project is based upon—is a particular city or area. For obvious reasons, *Game of Thrones* and *The Hobbit* are not going to be shot in Westeros and Middle Earth, respectively. The former travels to Northern Ireland, Spain, Morocco, Iceland, and Croatia while the multiple parts of the *Lord of the Rings* franchise have been shot in New Zealand and touched up in the UK.

But why choose these locations over others? Often that come down to money, or to put it in the term many producers prefer, incentives. Where will they offer the best tax breaks, local crew rebates, quickest and easiest permitting, and so forth? States compete to land those blockbusters-in-the-making and some literally go broke doing so. Not the whole state, but the film commission office, where the budgets can fluctuate wildly year-to-year and success is measured in tourist influx. Few locations, outside of LA, Las Vegas and NYC, have achieved this better than Albuquerque. The six-year run of *Breaking Bad* has made “Duke City” a choice vacation destination for fans to come and explore the sites familiar to them from the show. Car wash, anyone?

Scenery, of course, plays a role in the choices producers make. How exotic, how typical, how outlandish; the camera can catch it all in long shot and close up. *Game of Thrones* seems to pick shooting sites for the visuals, uncommon to most of the world, that convey an [other-worldly](#)—or at least other time—feeling. And once the fans find out where those scenes were shot, the tourist trade goes up. And find out they do with fan sites on the Internet hounding the production for inside information.

But those are big studio productions. What about the indie producer? Not likely to have a budget big enough for the film *and* location scouts, many turn to another mantra, that of Fiction Writing 101: “Write what you know.” Or in paraphrase: “Go where you know.” That can help in many ways, not the least of which is cutting travel costs. Shoot in your home town and you can go home every night. Well, maybe not. Check out the philosophy of John Putch in this issue’s Spotlight feature. His low-budget shorts were shot in his hometown area, southern Pennsylvania, but still required cast and crew to stay in hotels and motels.

And that brings up another cost savings, if you have the chutzpah to work on it: trade outs. “No promises, but we can make (fill in name of motel, restaurant, car wash) famous by showing it in our film. Oh, in return, we sure could use (fill in trade: sleeping rooms, meals, car washes) on the house.”

Hey, it works for travel writers... 🌍

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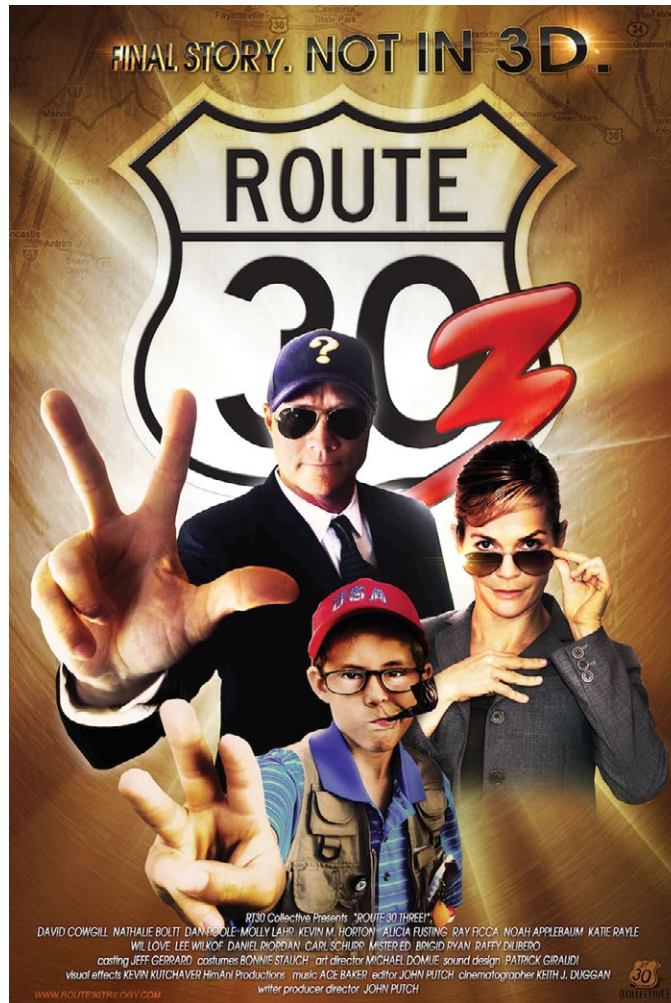
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NOT THE ROAD TRIP YOU EXPECT

An award-winning filmmaker finds creative freedom in making micro-budget movies right down the road from his childhood home.



[John Putch](#) is an independent sort of independent filmmaker. An industry veteran, Putch is the son of Emmy- and Golden Globe-winner Jean Stapleton, and producer/director William H. Putch. He began acting at the age of five and produced his first film at age 12 when his father shoved a super-8 camera into his hands and told him to go off and make a movie people could watch at his parents' dinner parties.

By **Tom Inglesby**



John Putch

He transitioned to directing films in his 40s, and after a list of TV mini-series, big screen movies, awards, and industry recognition, Putch was beginning to create an enviable directing career. But then he began feeling he was missing something and losing touch with his craft. That was in 2005 and the immediate result was the 2006-released *Mojave Phone Booth*, which won 13 awards including a Best Independent Feature Under

\$100,000 award at the Wine Country Film Festival. "Bigger and bigger budget projects rely heavily on big names, elaborate special effects, and an obscene marketing budget," Putch recalls. "The creative talents of artists—producers, directors, writers, actors, and sound people—are drowned out, minimized. With the tools we have today and the outlets at our disposal, Indie filmmakers are taking the power back."

This philosophy is reflected in Putch's [The Route 30 Trilogy](#), feature films which collectively have earned more than 30 film festival awards. The series has proven that micro-budget films, with the traditional values of filmmaking, can be rewarding for the artist and craftsman as well as the audience, especially with all of the new technology and distribution channels available today.



[Above]

Although Putch prefers to buy, use and then sell his cameras after the production, on *Route 30 Three* he rented a Sony F3.

[Below]

Cast and crew of *Route 30 Three* ham it up for the camera.





[Above]

John Putch felt right at home while filming the *Route 30* series. Not unlikely since it was shot near his hometown.

[Below]

All packed up and ready to hit the road. One of Putch's rules is that everything has to fit in one car or mini-van.



Route 30 is a dramedy; *Route 30, Too!* a sci-fi comedy; and *Route 30 Three!*, a romantic comedy. All three were shot near Putch's hometown in the picturesque south central Pennsylvania countryside between Chambersburg and Gettysburg, along Route 30, The Lincoln Highway. Recalling where he grew up, Putch's *Route 30 Trilogy* takes a humorous look at a slice of rural Americana that has almost been stuck in time. Unlike most trilogies, each chapter stands on its own—you don't need to see one to understand another.

In explaining his preference for micro-budget, anti-Hollywood movies, Putch says, "The big difference in most films today is that they're less about the creative product and more about the commercial results. There's the luxury of a good budget and a team of talented people, but very seldom do you actually get to touch every scene, every segment, every part of the total project."

What is a micro-budget film? Putch has a set of digital filmmaking rules that govern the making of his films:

- The budget cannot exceed \$100,000.
- The crew should be limited to eight.
- Actors must be responsible for their own wardrobe and appearance—no makeup or wardrobe staff.
- The film must be shot in less than 18 days.
- All the equipment has to fit in one car and one mini-van.

"I looked at that list and thought it was impossible," Putch admits. "The biggest challenge any Indie filmmaker has to overcome is fear—fear of coming up short, fear of looking bad in front of your peers, fear of your work not satisfying the entertainment public. It's really BS because that's when creativity really kicks in and you end up with something you're really proud of; and I think *The Route 30 Trilogy* is some of my best work to date."

[The first film](#) was shot in 2007 and was released in 2008. It was shot entirely in south central Pennsylvania, in the towns of Gettysburg, Chambersburg, Fayetteville, St. Thomas, and Orrtanna (population: 173). "After a wildly fun reaction from the local town that it was shot in at a premiere, I blurted out that it would be a trilogy," Putch says with a smile. "After all, it was fun to do and that was the whole point, to have fun. So to come back two more times to have more blissful experiences was a no brainer."

The work—and fun—began anew. *Route 30 Too!* was shot in the winter of 2010 and was released in 2012. "It's a far more farcical film with more ghosts and some alien activity," Putch comments. "I sent up the end of ET in the finale of this one."

Route 30 Three! was lensed in August of 2013 and premiered one year later in Gettysburg. It will finish its three-city release in July 2015. Over all, the three films were about eight solid years in the making, doing it the anti-Hollywood way.

Keith Duggan was the DP of all three films. He also was cinematographer for *Mojave Phone Booth*. Each film was shot with an increasingly sophisticated camera. As Putch explains it, "For the first two films, Duggan and I owned the same camera. When we finish a film, we'd usually sell the cameras since we'd want to use newer technology on the next film. *Route 30* used a [Panasonic HVX200 P2](#); on *Route 30 Too!* we used Canon 5D and 7D with both [Canon](#) L series lenses and Nikon glass."

Putch continues, "On *Route 30 Three!* we rented a [Sony F3](#) and a set of [Zeiss Compact Prime Super-speeds](#) from our friend Steve Borow at [Production Gear Rentals](#). We acquired clips on a [AJA Ki Pro mini ProRes HQ](#). Since I'm the editor and post guy, I wanted to bypass Sony's mpeg codec and go straight to ProRes."

Why the rented Sony? "It was the first time I rented a camera in the trilogy," Putch acknowledges. "We did it only because we were sick of the DSLR fad and did not want to buy an F3 as the F5 was on the horizon. Owning the equipment rather than renting saves a lot of money in insurance and rental costs. When you need all that gear for over a month it actually pays to buy it, shoot, then sell it rather than rent. When you own the equipment, you can knock down your premiums on the insurance."



[Above]

DP Keith Duggan with Putch in a camera truck riding down *Route 30*.

[Below]

Even micro-budget films have group meetings to revise scripts and plan shooting days.





[Above]

Background music and voice overs are handled in studio.

[Below]

Top: Kevin M. Horton (Cletus) at pulpit, with crew member Devin DiLibero on far right.

Bottom: Innovation at work. Mounting a camera for shots while driving on Route 30.



Putch goes on, saying, “The next film we are doing in August 2015, *The Father and the Bear*, will be shot on the [Blackmagic URSA mini](#) as A-cam and the Blackmagic pocket cinema cam as B-cam. We’ll use a set of Zeiss super-speeds, which I now own.”

Cameras need light; all three films used just four lights, two tripods and a slider—no dollies. “All the equipment is either owned by me or Keith,” Putch says. “We usually rent one small HMI (Hy-

drargyrum medium-arc iodide) light, the [K5600 Joker-Bug 800](#). I have put together one of the finest micro-budget sound packages ever seen. It includes a micro cart built on a [Film Tools](#) hand truck. I have four wireless mic packages, two boom poles, two [Sennheiser](#) 416 shotgun mics and one [Sanken](#) short shot gun.”

In many cases, the crew engineered their own special equipment. That will continue, Putch says, in their next film. “We’ll be using a lot of LED lighting, which I own or Keith will build. He makes his own LED China balls that are strictly awesome, light weight, and put off no heat.”

As DP, Duggan regularly clones the compact flash (CF) cards as disk images and makes an insurance copy of the day’s clips and sound files in folders numbered by rolls. As Putch says, “Since I am an [Adobe CC](#) guy, I only use the cloud to have another set of backups for my edit project files. When shooting these movies, you don’t have a DIT (digital image technician) or ‘file jockey’ on set to download clips. It’s like the film days. You have enough cards or hard drives to get you through a day’s shoot, then, when it’s over, you go back to the hotel or house you are crashing at and download clips.”

He adds, “I usually add the sound files as well. We’ve used big external Firewire drives all the way to Thunderbolt external drives on the last film. I buy raw 3.5 drives from [Other World Computing](#) (OWC) and plop them into a Thunderbolt dock, what I call the ‘hard drive toaster,’ which is also from OWC. When one drive is full, we clone it. One set goes back with Keith and the other with me for editing. We keep them separate in case something ever happened to the set I am using. We box the raw drives in [Hudzee HD cases](#) until I get back to LA to edit. I usually edit right on the raw drive in the toaster, then pull it, clone and archive it. I’ve been using this form of archiving ever since *Mojave Phone Booth*. I make it a point to have an offsite backup of every project and I copy the projects to fresh drives every 4-5 years. And aside from having a set in my closet in my home office, I keep clones offsite in a climate controlled storage unit, which also is home to all my gear for making the movies.”

For the final chapter of the Trilogy, Putch used 4TB OWC-certified Thunderbolt hard drives in his “toaster.” The hard drive dock enables him to add and remove drives for maintaining multiple drive backups, cloning a hard drive, or providing extra storage. He emphasizes that he uses new OWC hard drives for every film project because reusing/overwriting a drive is a false savings and that isn’t a risk even the Indie film maverick wants to take.

Putch’s rules state that the shoot should be only 18 days long. But how would that break down in total hours? “We shot all the freaking time, weekends included,” Putch exclaims. “Depending on the locations, we’d sometimes do three weeks of six days each with only a day off. On subsequent outings we sometimes had a five-day week and two days off, then a six and another five. There is always some SAG holiday you have to avoid. By the third film, I wanted the shoot to be very easy and pleasant. So I scheduled some fives and one six-day week. With a crew of eight and me doing all of the producing, I need days off to prepare for the upcoming week. At micro-budget prices, it’s all about hotel rooms and food. I got such great deals in Chambersburg from the [Country Inn and Suites](#) that I saw no reason not to have a more relaxing shoot.”

Putch notes, “Most of the crew worked on all three films; they are an ensemble. The core is Keith Duggan, Mike Vartholomatos, and myself. We’ve had rotating sound guys for all three. All eight crew members are hyphenates. Sometimes you’ll be booming and other times you’ll be camera operator, or art, or props. It’s very communal and super-8 like—there is no department segregation. Keith dictates the lighting and together we decide the shots. I try to stage the scenes very simply to minimize the camera set-ups. But Keith is so fast and flexible and has a great skill with economy of light that I never have to worry about omitting shots in sequences.”

In addition to writing, directing, editing, producing, and financing his micro-budget films, Putch also built the promotional websites, produced and posted behind-the-scenes podcasts (40 for *Route 30*). He also markets the films and fulfills online orders. “With a micro-budget and the broad reach of the Internet, I’m able to make entertaining films that really give the power back to the artist,” he states.

“The entire concept of these movies for me is to be less professional and have more fun,” he points out. “And it’s no fun to work 12 hours a day on an indie movie. This filmmaker is not insane about his ‘art piece’ and doesn’t want to run his friends into the ground while shooting. The mantra I use on these movies is that I must be a host, not a boss.”

And *that* is how you make a micro-budget award winner. 🍷



[Above]

Lee Wilkof (Rotten Egg) shooting his opening title montage moment on green screen.

[Below]

Putch at work with his laptop while, bottom, Duggan adjusts some of his LED China balls.

