

# Producing DVDs:

## Behind the Scenes on Behind-the-Scenes

By Laurent Bouzereau

**T**oday's moviegoing public probably knows more about what goes on behind the scenes of their favorite films than any previous audience. But for the most part, they have little idea that a parallel production takes place alongside each film. A creative team that includes directors, producers, writers and editors is carefully assembled to tell precisely those behind-the-scenes stories, and an enormous marketing machine, sometimes rivaling that of a theatrical release, is utilized with the launch of a film on DVD. Although producing documentaries for DVD obviously operates on a much smaller scale, the issues and challenges met during their production have many similarities to the tribulations encountered by most "traditional" producers.

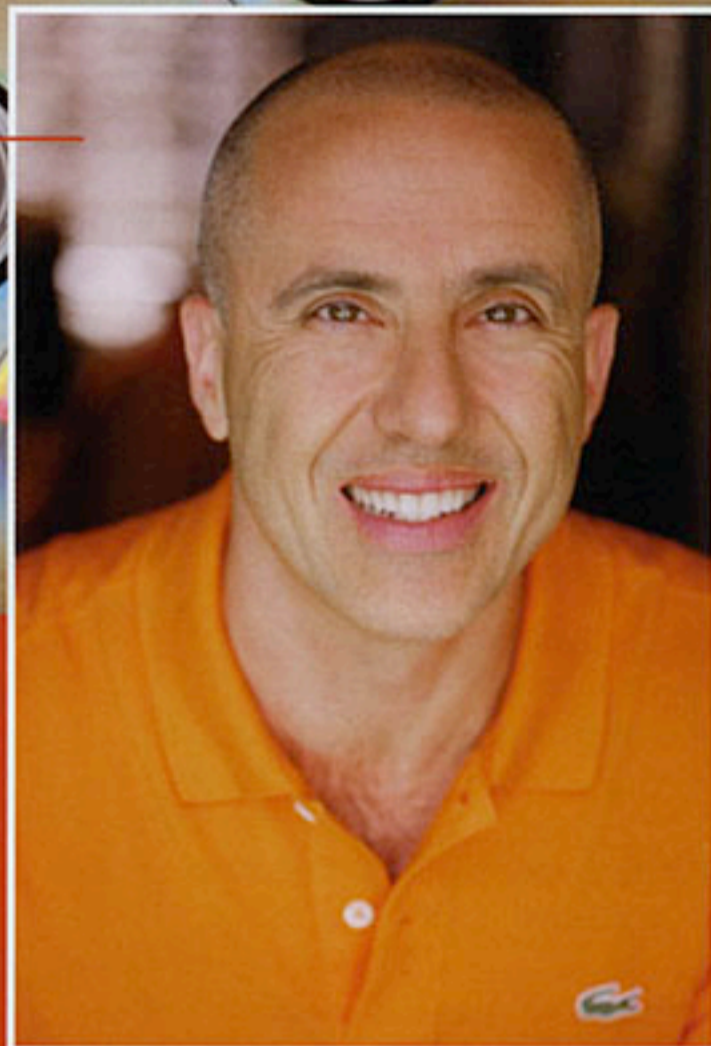
Growing up in France, I dreamt of coming to America and working in film. But after seven difficult years in New York working in independent film distribution and three disappointing years in Hollywood as a "development person," I found myself disenchanted. Just as I was seriously contemplating going back to France, the home video market introduced a new product: the laserdisc. Suddenly, consumers could buy more than just the movie. They could get the film with an audio commentary, archival material and sometimes even a documentary about the making of the film. Even better, the films were at last presented in their original aspect ratio, with great-looking image quality and amazing sound. Laserdiscs quickly became the equivalent of those wonderful coffee-table movie books I had always coveted. True, laserdiscs would always remain a highly specialized rather than mainstream item, but I felt this could be the niche in film that I could fill.

Behind-the-scenes footage, including interviews with directors and their teams, had always been done for marketing purposes. On the other hand, documentaries about directors and/or memorable films were far more rare. Laserdiscs created a new means for filmmakers to expand the cinematic experience for themselves, for the studios, and for a small-but-growing band of avid film fans.

I had no experience in documentary filmmaking when I started. But my background as a film journalist and author of books on the cinema gave me the confidence and proper

knowledge to jump right into it. I began producing audio commentaries in 1991 and shortly thereafter found myself producing a documentary retrospective on Steven Spielberg's *1941*. One documentary led to the next, and within a year, this sideline had become a career. At the time I began producing documentaries for laserdisc, there were no established industry standards for the format. (In fact, the first contract I ever received was the same sent to feature film producers and required the delivery of the documentaries on 35mm!) Not all distributors immediately embraced the new platform, believing that VHS was here to stay. But as more and more studios jumped on the bandwagon, the market exploded, the technology advanced, the industry grew, and laserdiscs and videocassettes evolved into DVDs.

At first, DVD felt like a potential threat to the earlier work I had been producing. If DVD were to replace videocassette, the target buyer would become the common consumer



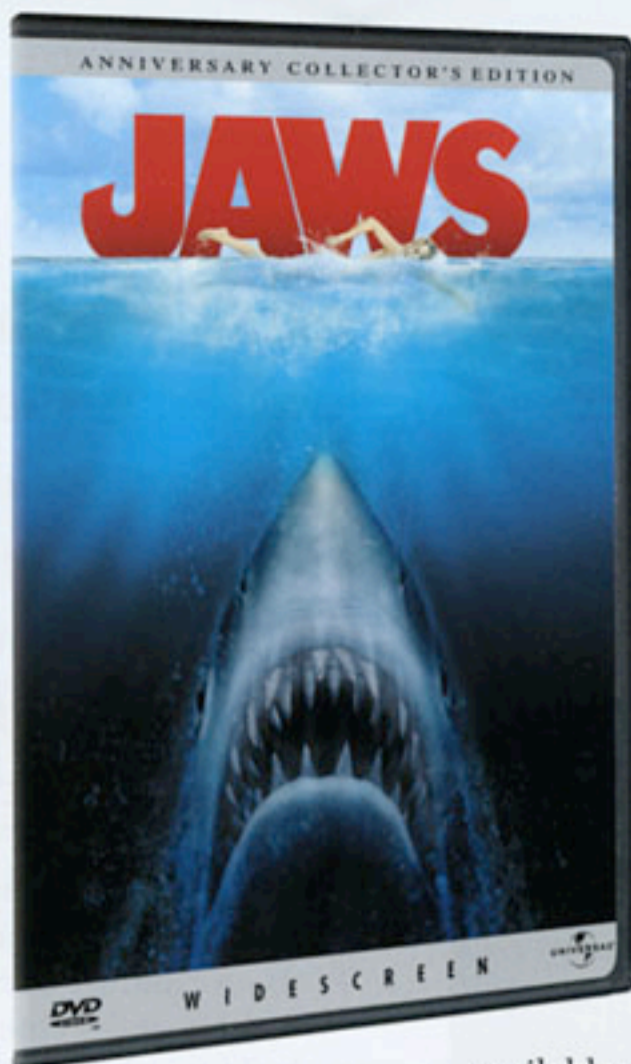
DVD producer Laurent Bouzereau

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rather than the cineastes I had been catering to. I worried that the new, broader audience would not care about “making of” documentaries, or issues like widescreen format versus pan and scan. Luckily, I was wrong, as the mass audience’s collective knowledge and expectations evolved right along with the technology.

*Jaws* provides a useful case study for the evolution of DVD producing in response to shifting industry demands and audience tastes. In the early days of laserdisc, the approach tended to be academic. The *Jaws* laserdisc I produced in 1995 featured more than two hours of interviews I conducted with Steven Spielberg, his cast and crew. I was very sparing in the editing room; I wanted the viewers to experience the same feeling I had had talking to everyone, and felt that any cuts would betray the personal accounts I had filmed. In 2000, *Jaws* came out for the first time on DVD and I was asked to cut down the documentary to one hour. It was a fascinating and challenging experience to revisit the same material and squeeze out the essence of the interviews while maintaining the integrity of the history behind the making of *Jaws*. The prevailing sense at the time was that material for DVD had to be presented in a more commercial way, perhaps closer to specials done for television. What was most interesting was reading the reviews — across the board, everyone seemed to miss the original documentary that had been done for laserdisc. And five years later, another *Jaws* DVD was released, this time with the original documentary restored to its full length. I think fans of the film knew of the earlier documentary and felt that the short version had somewhat condensed some of the fascinating history of the making of *Jaws*.

Expectations have continued to evolve. Today, it’s not uncommon to create documentaries that step outside of the work itself and examine a film’s themes. For the DVD of Sidney Lumet’s *Network*, for example, we produced a piece with Walter Cronkite, offering not only an appreciation of the film, but also an overview of the state of television, past and present. Of course, the growth of the DVD industry has also



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spawned a lot of excess. Not every film warrants loads of special features, and if it does, distributors owe it to the filmmakers to ensure that the process is carefully conceived, structured and produced by capable professionals.

Over the course of my career as a DVD producer, the work has typically fallen into two types of documentaries, each requiring a separate and distinct approach. Library or catalog titles like *Jaws*, *The Birds*, *Taxi Driver*, or *Carrie* begin with copious research — the goal is to find who is still around, who wants to talk, and what archival material is available. Once those elements are gathered, the producer can start thinking about the story to be told. Current titles demand a completely different kind of collaboration with the filmmakers and the studios in order to guarantee that both marketing (for the theatrical release) and DVD needs are fulfilled. The deadlines are often frantic — with final deliveries expected at the time of the theatrical release, and require the full attention from a director who, in many cases, is on the road promoting the film.

A DVD producer will often be working on both types of titles at once, as I did last year, working on Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* while also completing the anniversary edition of Warren Beatty’s *Reds*. For the former project, after visiting the set of *Munich*, I was not only able to develop exclusive documentaries with the filmmakers for the domestic marketing division and the DVD, but also created pieces for the international market.

By serving as the behind-the-scenes point person, I was able to offer unique content for the DVD and still cater to the needs of two separate distributors — Universal for domestic and DreamWorks for international. That access was a key factor in what I view as the most creatively and logistically successful project I’ve worked on.

For *Reds*, the key was to find a link between the film, the history of its production, and the techniques Warren Beatty had used to tell the story of his principal characters, John Reed and Louise Bryant. One of the most brilliant devices in the film was the use of “witnesses” — candid inter-

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# REDS



25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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views with contemporaries of Reed and Bryant, filmed against black and used to support and authenticate the historical story. As a result, we decided to use the exact same device for the documentaries — interviews against black, but this time, the tables had turned and Warren Beatty and his team had become the witnesses. The DVD brought the experience of the film full circle, and represents Beatty's first-ever filmed interview on *Reds*.

In the wake of new technologies such as Blu-Ray and HD/DVD, as well as the opportunities created by broadband distribution, the job description is about to change and expand yet again. We can likely expect that producing content will start earlier, and delivery schedule will shrink. In some cases — and it is happening already — we will be working without the finished film and will have to rely exclusively on the behind-the-scenes material gathered during production. In this model, the ability to “think ahead of the film” will become a key skill for future DVD producers.

The most important developments resulting from laserdisc and DVD were incredible advances in sound and image quality, and we can expect Blu-Ray and HD/DVD to push the envelope even further, perhaps even outstripping the capabilities of theatrical screenings. It's entirely possible that home viewing will be the only means of seeing and hearing the film as the director intended. Hence the growing importance of added material; with the different layers and the capacity of Blu-Ray, for example, consumers may soon be able to experience the same scene from separate angles, listen to a commentary, or view storyboards ... and all that, simultaneously. The approach will be less linear and more interactive than DVD, offering greater variety but hopefully be just as rich and as complete.

As these new technologies continue to develop, producing compelling and innovative content will become a key factor in their adoption by the home entertainment market. I don't believe that these technologies will ever replace the theatrical window, but rather will provide alternate and profound means for consumers to deepen their engagement with the material. Indeed, if the DVD producer can be said to have a goal, it is to create content — regardless of the technology involved — that will motivate audiences to watch the film over and over again, gaining a new kind of knowledge and appreciation with each viewing. 