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JERRY ZIESMER

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Ready When You Are,
Mr. Coppola, Mr. Spielberg, Mr. Crowe

Jerry Ziesmer

with an introduction by
Cameron Crowe

Filmmakers Series, No. 69



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For Suzanne, she was there at the beginning.

To Francis, Steven, Cameron, and so many more—
I've always been just a kid from Milwaukee
who came to town to help make some
motion pictures. Thank you all for sharing in my
journey and for showing me the way.

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Finally, my thanks go to my wife, Suzanne, who shared the sun and the rain with me, and now shares the memories.

Introduction

by Cameron Crowe



Once a year, viewers worldwide gather around their television sets and watch that glorious tribute the film industry pays to itself. By the end of Oscar night, a handful of emotional writers and directors and stars have blinked back tears as they stared into the spotlight and thanked God, their parents, even their makeup artists. Few ever think to acknowledge the individual who gasses up the engine of moviemaking . . . partially because the job is by nature invisible. Even the job title is suspiciously low-key. But no movie has ever been made, or made well, without the character who toils just outside the spotlight. Hell, he *arranges* for the spotlight, hires the spotlight operator, and even made sure it was trained correctly on the stars. But as a director of three movies, I can now peel back the veil and speak the truth. There would be nothing on movie screens, no teary-eyed Oscar winners, no finished films, good or bad, without the assistant director. And in that world, I have been fortunate enough to work with the best.

Jerry Ziesmer has just been embarrassed by what I've written.

Quietly and with singular good humor, Ziesmer is the King of all assistant directors. On a good night he might tell a classic story or two, but unlike many others, he is a keeper of secrets. Until now. And more powerfully, even after the front-row seat he has held for some of the great films of our time, Ziesmer is a man who understands what it is to be a fan. This book is no cushy tell-all from high atop show-biz hill. It's a love letter to that most precarious art form—cinema.

I was twenty-nine, nervous out of my mind, when I first heard Jerry Ziesmer's name. My first shot at feature directing, *Say Anything* . . . would soon begin filming. I had gotten a good break in securing the

great cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs to shoot the movie, and I quickly asked him for a suggestion on hiring an assistant director. Who had impressed him? Kovacs came back with three names. The first one was Ziesmer, of course. He had graced many sterling pictures, but there was a palpable myth surrounding his powerful helming of *Apocalypse Now*. The other two candidates, said Kovacs, were the guys you called if you couldn't get Ziesmer. In short, I was learning about the two categories of assistant director: Jerry Ziesmer, and Not Jerry Ziesmer.

"Can we get Jerry?"

The question loomed larger with each passing day. I soon received another Ziesmerian recommendation from Eric Stoltz, a friend since he'd first appeared in *Last Tango at Ridgemont High*. In a move that hasn't happened before or since in the history of Hollywood, Stoltz had put his own exploding acting career on hold to serve as a low-level production assistant on Ziesmer's then most recent effort, a film by Peter Bogdanovich. For two months Stoltz had been bringing coffee to other actors, carrying a production walkie-talkie, and "working with Jerry" as part of the assistant director team. Poised and ready to dial Ziesmer's number, I now had an idea what to expect. The world's greatest assistant director was starting to sound like a cross between Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Bond. "Oh, and something else you should know about Jerry," Stoltz added cryptically. "He appears in *Apocalypse Now*. He only has one line, but you'll remember it."

"Which line?"

"*Terminate with extreme prejudice.*"

Ziesmer was all business on the phone. Send the script, he said, and he would come in for a meeting. I did, and he did. By this time in his career, with films like *Apocalypse Now* still ringing in his ears, Ziesmer had become more selective. He was all business, but the twinkle was unmistakable. A true love of movies, the *making* of movies, was quite obviously still in his blood. He quizzed me on the way I like to shoot. I promptly inflated a bag of wind on my directing methods, but I had no experience, no real methods, just dreams. Grinning respectfully, a little slyly, he listened. He knew. He soon came aboard *Say Anything . . .*, in part because it was a small film, but largely because it was shooting in town. Ziesmer is a family patriot, dedicated to his brood, and staying near them in Los Angeles was a big draw. The values and soul of a movie are as important to him as the participants, and he liked the script. It probably didn't hurt that I was a neophyte who so clearly needed him. Plus, I begged a lot.

Our work sessions were invaluable. We discussed the rhythm of a movie. How a director should pace himself. How a director stays on schedule. The choreography involved in staying sharp during the long, long hours. Previous to these sessions with Jerry Ziesmer, the advice I'd gotten from other directors had been of the cliché two-sentence variety. You know the kind—"Directing is about clean socks and good coffee!" Bullshit. Suddenly, here was the truth about the job. It was an intense, mathematical, physical, and creative brutal race. A job requiring unwavering vigilance, utter psychological warfare, and impossible belief in yourself. You will not sleep. You will dream the movie. And sometimes, even after you've made it through all those minefields, the movie will *still* suck.

Before long, Ziesmer had alchemized *Say Anything . . .* into a shooting schedule. Based on our conversations about each scene, after considering logistics and actor availabilities, my movie had become a six-paneled notebook in Jerry's hands. Ziesmer was extra careful to arrange the first two weeks of shooting so that the studio could soon see a few flashy scenes in dailies and also he pacified that their director would pull the job off. Soon he had named each scene with a phrase like "Lloyd will die for her," and that is how we would refer to the pieces of our frantic puzzle. Jerry had quickly become as invested in the film as I was. Assistant directing, I was learning, was a dizzying task of scheduling and problem solving, with more eggs in placare than a big-city mayor (which, come to think of it, is close to the acting role I gave Ziesmer on the next movie). But Ziesmer was also interested in what a film *said*, and his own human values became part of the film's spirit, too. Together we attacked the never easy job of turning people and words and script pages into a film that, for better or worse, would live longer than either of us.

There is a reason that studio production "suits" are respectful of Jerry, almost begrudgingly so. For a studio, hiring Ziesmer to AD means they'll get their world-class movie. Most likely it will be on schedule and under budget. But they won't be able to push the director around easily. Ziesmer is an assistant director in the truest sense of the word. As I would soon find out on *Say Anything . . .*, there was much that was unpredictable about the whole process. But I could always bet on one thing—the guy alongside me in the trenches was *my* guy.

Ziesmer first brought his wife Suzanne and son Chris into the crew. Then, like a wily coach with a couple of Super Bowl rings at home in the drawer, he artfully added the perfect mix of personality and ability

to support me. And even though he was a bigger star than most of the actors, Smitz came aboard again as a production assistant. It is testimony to Smitz's loyalty, or at least his love of me inexplicable, that for the next six weeks he patrolled the set with one hand always on the walkie-talkie and brought coffee to actors like John Cusack and Lili Taylor. The spirit of the crew was invaluable. Suddenly my first movie set was about people, family, and even on the toughest nights of standing there was one more thing I could count on—the unwavering and radiant support of Suzanne Ziesmer. She and Jerry had been high school sweethearts. They still are, quietly disappearing together side by side at the end of each night of filming.

On the set of *Say Anything . . .*, Jerry and I communicated with a discreet set of unspoken signals. With a quiet nod, or a shake of the head, we stayed in touch. An unpredictable actor, a scene not quite falling together . . . where a less skilled assistant director might have let anxiety rule the atmosphere, or made himself a hero, Ziesmer diffused the toughest situations with a dry joke or a calm human solution whispered in my ear. He also joined me in the unceasing monitoring of the acoustics. Was the good guy becoming too good? The bad guy not bad enough? We finished the film under budget and, remarkably, on time. Oh, and that's also Ziesmer playing a lawyer, bawling for the future of James Court (John Mahoney) toward the end of the movie. It's a nice little scene, and in it you get a real glimpse of Ziesmer's comedic style. It's dry, baby.

"Can we get Jerry?"

The big question returned as I finished the script of my second film, *Shogun*. Jerry and I had kept in communication throughout the writing process, and now came the issue of him pulling up stakes and traveling to Seattle, where the film was set. Although Ziesmer had grown even more selective of characters and sequences, and we would be working with a number of inexperienced actors, he listened quietly as I grandly said this movie would be easy. He knew better, of course, and let me know it with his trademark wolfish silence.

Now adding his daughter Jillian to the crew mix, Jerry and I shot for several months in Seattle during the very explosion of that city's now-famous music scene. Filming the club and concert sequences, I was able to glimpse a bit of Ziesmer's myth-shrouded *Apocalypse* mode. It wasn't the Philippines, but it was the jungle of Seattle rock, and it was a sight to behold his cheerful wrangling of hundreds of newly pierced and rowdy counterpunks. There was Jerry, shepherding Alice in Chains and

Soundgarden and Pearl Jam through their first experiences on film. Eddie Vedder, then a painfully shy newcomer, quickly bonded with Ziesmer. Their on-set conversations helped Jerry understand the life course of his son Tim, who is now a full-time musician. And Eddie was able to witness big time professionalism, performed with skill and heart.

Eric Stoltz returned again, this time for an arming career. There are few things in life you can depend on, and one of them is Ziesmer's hilariously biting relationship with Stoltz. The two of them throw more barbs at one another than a couple of cranky vaudeville comedians. It is the exception, not the norm. While Ziesmer is loved by actors—he is *not*—he refreshingly does not try to be their pal. Invariably, they *taunt him*, but Ziesmer mostly keeps a respectful distance. In calling actors to the set, he asks that the “artists” be brought in. I’ve yet to see the actor who does not shimmer with pride at the description.

In the middle nineties, Jerry Ziesmer retired. In our conversations it was clear he was finally enjoying an uninterrupted family life with Suzanne and the kids, mentoring others, but mostly living a quieter life atop L.A.’s Mulholland Drive. I was finishing my new script, *Jerry Maguire*, and it wasn’t hard to glimpse the big question returning.

“Can we get Jerry?”

Thankfully, I found his retirement to be of the fluid, Frank Sinatra variety. He was still in his prime, uninterested in work for the sake of work, but there was no mistaking the twinkle that remained. We were shooting in town this time, and I knew that would help me in my quest to lure Ziesmer back onto the floor. But *Jerry Maguire* was different from our previous movies—much bigger, with greater responsibilities. Tom Cruise was still mulling over his involvement in the project when I met with Jerry and Suzanne. In tribute to the music that was then a big part of the script, jazz was playing on Ziesmer’s home stereo when I arrived. For close to two hours we discussed the care and handling of a huge star. Also, the budget of this movie would be close to three times the size of *Singles*. Once again, I told him it would be easy. Once again, he listened with a pensive silence. He knew I needed him, and this time *man, I really did*. He accepted the job. As had now become my norm, Jerry Ziesmer was the first person hired on *Jerry Maguire*.

The filming went on for months, with a nervous studio often peering over our shoulders. This was a long way from *Say Anything . . .* The final budget was more than fifty million dollars, and the movie was filled with delicate acting moments. Plus, with Tom Cruise now signed

on, this was a film far different from the others. I was no longer the most important person on the set. If a problem arose with Cruise, the world's most popular film actor, certainly Cruise would remain and I would be gone. Again, my unspoken communication with Ziesmer kept me on track. And, thankfully, Tom Cruise was as deeply invested in the project as Jerry and me. He loved the script, loved each scene, and quickly noticed that no creative stone would be returned by us. This was a victory of scheduling, as well as directing. As Cruise said throughout the filming, it was "the best experience I've ever had on a movie." Never did he glimpse the dark side of the heavy load Jerry and I were shouldering. There were many emotionally complicated scenes, difficult to act on film, and I began to run slightly over schedule. More than a few times, I walked swiftly past a gaggle of worried "suits," leaving Ziesmer to protect me while I kept my eye on the ball . . . the creative vision of the movie.

Leaving the set of *Jerry Maguire* one afternoon, I overheard Jerry soothing the anxiety of an inexperienced moneyman. "This is how it always works on the great ones," he said calmly. I will never forget it. He had said those words loud enough for me to hear them too, simultaneously inspiring me and silencing the worried man in front of him. That is why he is the King.

The movie turned out to be my greatest success as a director. And somewhere along the way of our most difficult cinematic adventure, I had truly fallen in love with the job. In the months that followed, we returned to our respective corners to write. Me, a script. Jerry, this book. His voice and style run through every page. The story of his remarkable journey is as inspiring as it is a ground-zero glimpse of real movie-making. And there is no greater compliment you can pay a writer than to say his book sounds like *him*. This book is pure Ziesmer.

There are magical performances in *Jerry Maguire*, and Jerry Ziesmer's own is on display after Cuba Gooding, Jr., as Rod Tidwell, has been knocked out on *Monday Night Football*. There is Jerry, playing the team trainer, yelling into the wounded warrior's face. "Can you feel your legs, Rod?" It is one of my greatest delights that when Rod Tidwell comes back to life, the first face he sees is Jerry Ziesmer's. It is a metaphor for the relationship between a director and his assistant director, or at least mine. More than a few times, I've blinked back to life only to see the face of Ziesmer cheering me on. And like Tidwell, he has allowed me to dance. I didn't used to be a dancer, but I am now, thanks to Jerry. I hope you cherish this book as much as I do.

Tom Cruise and *Jerry Maguire*



Tom Cruise kissed my wife. It wasn't anything Nicole Kidman or I had to worry about, because before Tom Cruise was born, Suzanne and I had graduated from Rufus King High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, class of 1957. It was Tom's last day on *Jerry Maguire*, and Suzanne wanted a photo with TC. The kiss was something a little extra.

We had just finished filming the scene of the Roy Firestone Show with Cuba Gooding, Jr., Regina King, and Renee Zellweger on Stage 8 at the old M-G-M lot, which was then Sony Studios. The crew was moving about two blocks east down the studio's Main Street to the Sydney Powner Building for Tom Cruise's last shot in *Jerry Maguire*. It was 11:00 on Friday night, and I knew Tom was flying to Europe on Saturday to publicize *Mission: Impossible*. He didn't have to worry about flight schedules; he owned the airplane.

"How long before you're ready?" Tom asked me, as he started out the stage door.

"About a half hour," I said.

Tom didn't believe me and neither did his assistant, Michael Diven; they knew assistant directors were optimistic animals by nature. It would probably be at least an hour.

"We'll be in the Blue Bird. Give us a warning," Tom said, and off they went.

The Blue Bird was Tom's motor home. It was a communication center and penthouse with phones, a TV satellite dish, a full kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bath. It wasn't a limo on wheels; it was an estate on wheels. During *Jerry Maguire* I tried never to talk to TC in the Blue Bird because it was like being summoned to the Oval Office; you were

in awe. As soon as you entered you knew you were in the presence of a world-class superstar whose pictures make nearly a billion dollars a year. That's billion, with a B.

I was Cameron Crowe's assistant director on *Jerry Maguire*, as I had been on his other two films. Suzanne worked with me as a production assistant. Most production assistants were young people looking for an entry-level position in the movie business, but for Suzanne it was different. We had one of those storybook romances people love to hear about. Tom had me tell him our story twice during *Jerry Maguire*:

Suzanne and I had been high school sweethearts, even into college, but then had paroled and married other people. My first wife and I had gotten married for all the wrong reasons. The happy marriage lasted one year, but the denial of the inevitable divorce lasted for another fifteen years and three children, Chris, Tim, and Jillian.

During those years Suzanne had been teaching fifth and sixth grades at Huntley School in Appleton, Wisconsin. Suzanne's husband had died, and my marriage had ended in divorce. I realized that I needed a lot of help in raising my three children, and she never had children of her own. I decided to take a chance and gave her a call. That was sixteen years ago, and we're still together.

I don't think I entered the Blue Bird more than two or three times during the movie. If Tom wanted a small favor, like to come in an hour later in the morning because he wanted to take his kids to school, he would talk to me on the sound stage. One day about half way through our shooting schedule, Michael Doven asked me to talk with Tom in the Blue Bird.

As I stepped near the door, Tom's driver opened it and smiled at me. I tried to read his face as I entered, but I couldn't.

"Hi, Jer! Come in! Look, is there anything you'd like? Juice? Tea?" Tom offered.

Tom was a bit over the top, too friendly. Michael Doven was the only other person there. I knew the two of them were up to something. Having been an assistant director for thirty years, I can sense when a superstar is about to pounce.

"Sit down. How're you doing?" Tom continued, and gave me the big Tom Cruise smile.

He didn't have to say another word. There's no signal to any assistant director that is clearer than when a superstar asks about your well-being.

The red lights and whistles were going off in my head. I assumed a defensive mental attitude and waited.

"What's the matter?" Tom said, as he and Michael laughed.

Fish would never get caught if they kept their mouths shut, and that's a big part of my philosophy for an assistant director around the really big movie stars.

"Don't you want to sit down?" Tom laughed.

I learned a long time ago to take it all standing up, if they're going to try to rock you, it's best to be on your feet.

"OK, OK," Tom hogan. "I hate it when you don't trust me!" He and Michael laughed and rocked back and forth in their huge, comfortable club chairs.

I smiled and waited.

"Nic and the kids are in New York, and I want to fly there this weekend to see them." Tom said.

I was a father of three and had been a junior high school teacher, so I knew there was more coming. I kept my mouth shut.

"I'd like to leave at three on Friday afternoon so I could have dinner with my wife and kids in New York Friday night." Tom said. It had finally all come out.

What a character I had sitting in the club chair in front of me. He was smiling at daddy, teacher, and assistant director all at the same time. He wanted to leave three or four hours early on Friday afternoon. How many times have I seen that same big smile for the same reason from actors like Robert Redford, Mel Gibson, and Robert DeNiro and actresses like Barbra Streisand, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Diane Keaton? I'm not even going to think about the old times when I saw the smiles of Robert M'chum, Rita Hayworth, and Joan Hutton. I go back a ways.

They all wanted something they probably shouldn't have, and they wanted the assistant director's permission to pull it off. Oh, they all had the power, clout, and guts to just do it on their own, but if they got the assistant director to give his permission, it'd be simpler, more fun, and somehow legal in their minds.

Tom had been wonderful on *Jerry Maguire*. He was punctual in the morning, came out of his dressing room as soon as he was called to the set, and his performance was everything Cameron Crowe wanted in *Jerry Maguire*, super sports agent. Except for one practical joke he pulled in the spring, he was being a model superstar.

For Tom to leave four hours early on a Friday could have been a major problem, but we were filming in Dorothy's House on Stage 21 at

the studio, and there were a lot of short scenes with Dorothy and her sister to do without him. I didn't think it would be a problem. I'd talk to Cameron, but I knew we'd make it work, and we did. We might have needed a favor from Tom before the end of the picture. I tried never to say no to Tom Cruise.

There was only one person who consistently said no to Tim and got away with it every time—his three-year-old son. It was his favorite word.

"Do you want something to eat?" Tom asked.

"No!" was his son's determined reply.

"Do you want something to drink?" Tom asked.

"No!"

"Do you want to go to the movie?"

"No!"

"Do you want to go to Philadelphia?"

"No!"

Soon Tom would be doubled over with laughter at his three-year-old son. He and Nic enjoyed their kids. They were good parents, spent all the time they could with their kids. Tom and Nic tried to take turns doing movies so that one of them would always be with their children. It wasn't easy.

I remember my daughter Jillian was also three years old when Suzanne and I married in December 1982. She alone took a lot of attention, and there was also Tim, age eight, our sports buddy, and Chris, our poet, twelve.

Tim's i-ball team went undefeated at Balboa Park; we never missed a game. Chris had memorized all of the dialogue in *Apocalypse Now*; his questions about the movie never stopped. Jillian and Suzanne were inseparable doing girl things.

But raising children and making movies demanded a lot of your time. Sometimes you had to choose.

Tom Cruise's practical joke took place in the very early spring when we were filming in the large SMI set, the sports agents' complex. We had more than one hundred extras dressed and groomed to be the mod 1997 sports agents. On the day in question, we were beginning to film the scene of *Jerry Maguire* leaving the SMI office after he was fired.

Michael Doven always radioed to me when he and Tom arrived at the studio, but I hadn't heard from him that morning. I wasn't concerned, because Tom was always prompt.

"Jerry, come in. This is Michael Doven," my walkie-talkie called.

"Yes, Mr. Doven," I answered.

"Jerry, there's a problem. I'd like to talk to you and Cameron privately," Michael continued.

We never had problems with Mr. Doven or Tom.

"What do you mean, Mr. Doven?" I asked, realizing that I was talking on a walkie-talkie and many cars were listening.

"There's a problem. Tom isn't with me," Michael said.

"What?" I was rocked, but not panicked.

"Tom isn't with me. We have a serious personal problem. I have to talk to you and Cameron," Michael said. "I'll come to the set."

"Cameron!" I shouted to him across the SMI Office set. I moved Cameron aside and told what I knew:

"Cameron, look, there might be a problem with Tom," I began. "He isn't here. He has some personal problems."

Cameron looked at me, and the panic set in on both of us. Personal problem? Family problem? Separation? Divorce? Oh, my God! Tom and Nic are going to get a divorce!

"What can we do?" Cameron wondered.

I got back on the walkie-talkie.

"Suzanne, go to channel two," I said, to try and get some privacy.

"Suzanne? Check to see if Tom is with Michael in his car."

"I can see the car and Michael, but Tom isn't there," she answered.

What are we going to film without Tom? He's in every scene!

Michael Doven hurried onto the sound stage and found Cameron and me huddled together.

"Michael," I said, "please tell us! What's happened? Is it Nic, the kids?"

"It's too personal. Tom's not able to work today, maybe not this week," Michael answered, and his eyes were moist.

Cameron was in shock, and I was entering the lows of manic depression. We had such a wonderful film, so happy, so full of life and now this tragedy that would tear apart the whole production.

I felt Michael Doven was about to collapse in tears. Cameron and I looked at one another, helpless and alone. What could be done?

Suddenly a figure ran onto the set screaming, "April Fools! April Fools!" Of course it was Tim Cruise. He sprinted around the set laughing and yelling and enjoying the fright he had put Cameron and me through. I glanced at Mr. Doven who was smiling and pointing at Tim as if to say, "He planned it all." I nodded and waited for our superstar to stop rumping around the set and go to makeup.

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