

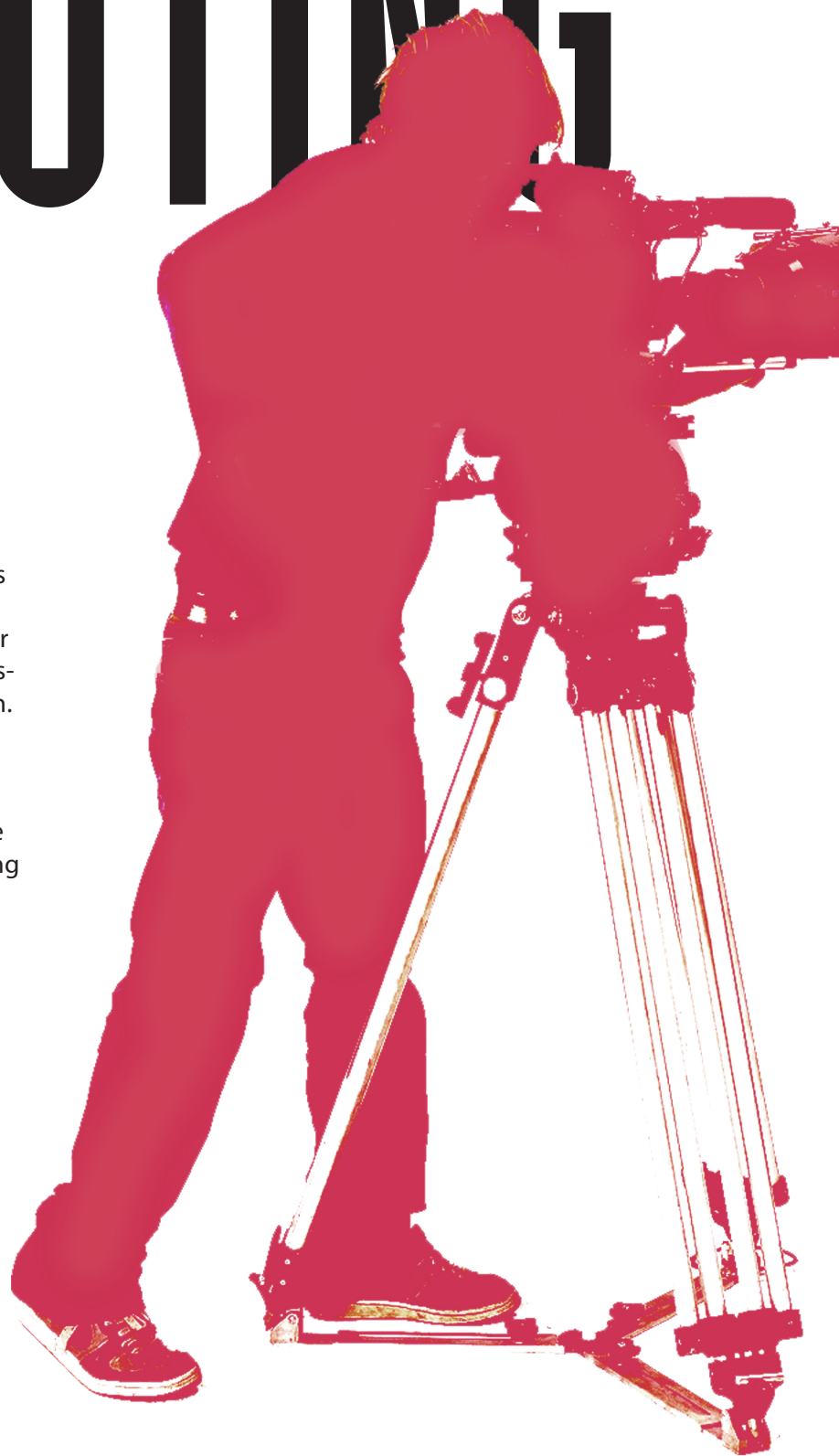
SHOOTING

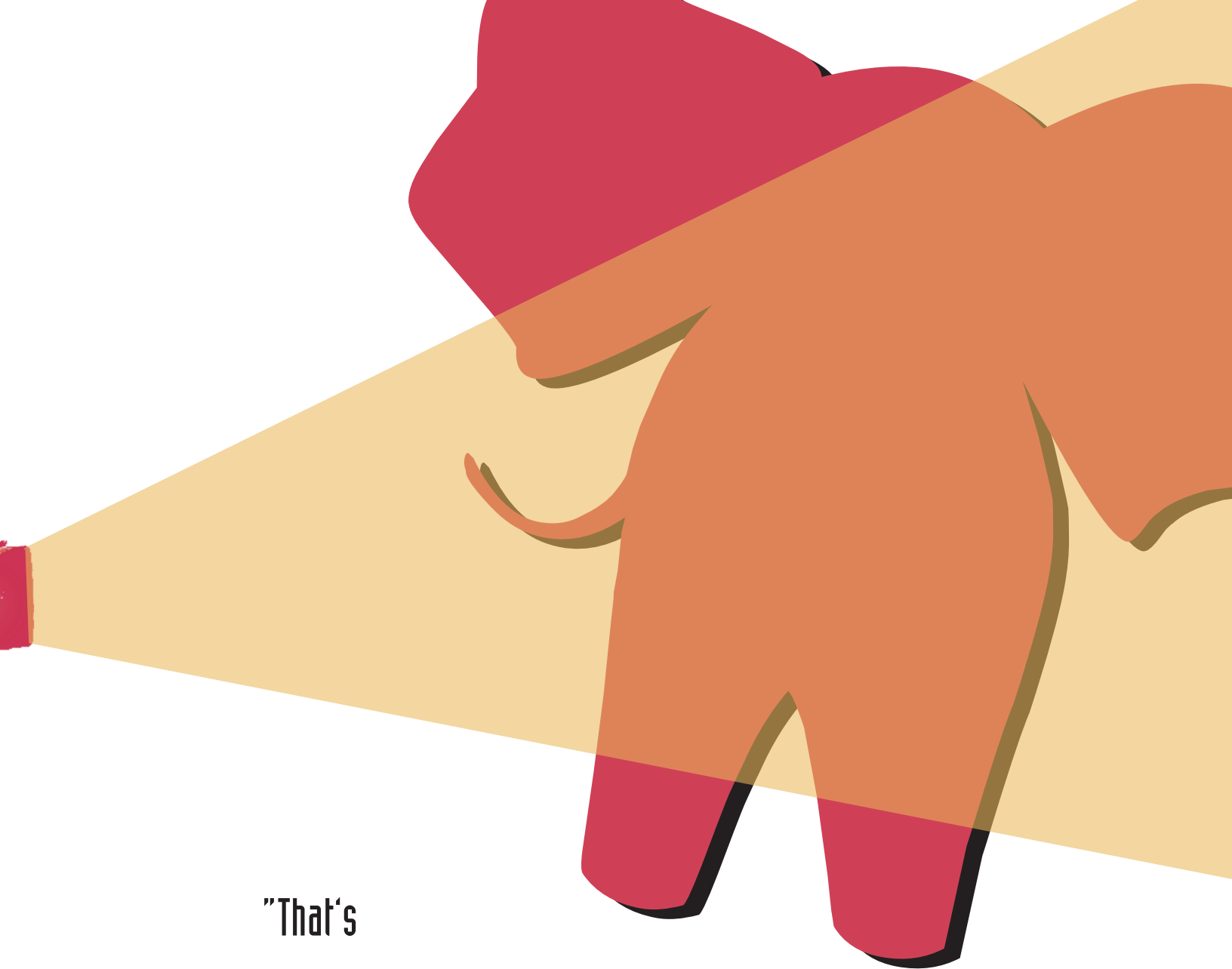
THE ELEPHANT

We had just finished a bar scene in a popular 24-hour dance club in Midtown Atlanta, and the PAs were herding the extras off the dance floor and out onto Peachtree Street. The doors were cranked open to clear the fogger smoke so we could begin rehearsing the next scene before breaking for lunch. I was halfway across the club's dance floor, walking backwards toward the bar so that I could keep my eye on a super hot brunette in a form-fitting white dress. A strange rattle and the distinct feeling of a rather large thing pressing into my back suddenly halted my rearward progress.

I yelped, "What the hell is that?!!!" before turning around to discover that I'd just collided with a rather large Panavision camera perched atop a rather large Chapman dolly being pushed by a rather funny Darryl Humber, one of the smartest dolly grips in the motion picture industry.

In an exaggerated version of his native Alabama twang, Darryl announced:





**“That’s
what keeps this from
being a Broadway Show, baby.”**

That pearl of wisdom made the quote of the day on the call sheet, and of course it was the number one quote on the 2nd AD’s season-finale t-shirts. Darryl’s quote isn’t just funny, it succinctly describes the most fundamental law of filmmaking: motion pictures are only one camera away from being a rather expensive stage play... at least, that’s what the camera department would have you believe. You see, there’s a special machismo that can insulate a camera department from the rest of the crew. Like jet pilots on an aircraft carrier, the camera crew knows that their cameras are the instruments through which the rest of the crew’s efforts are transformed into movie magic. The stereotype of the “cocky camera guy” exists for a reason, because, frankly, people on camera crews sometimes come across as self-absorbed pomposities.

The thing that amuses me, though, are the people in other departments who grumble about the attitude of the camera department, while being as self-absorbed

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about their own department's work. To be fair, it's important for everyone to have a laser focus on his or her job, but in the process I think it's important that we all need to step back from time to time to see the bigger picture, a picture I like to refer to as "The Elephant."

There is an old, old story about three blind men and an elephant.

Each of the blind men touched a different part of the elephant and when asked to describe the elephant each had a different interpretation of the beast. The first blind man said, "It is a great and powerful snake!" for he held the animal's wriggling trunk between his hands. The second blind man said "Why, it is a mighty pillar, surely one of the foundations of the earth itself!" for his arms were wrapped around one of the creature's tremendous legs. The third blind man laughed and said, "Listen not to those old fools for this is a mighty ship of the sea", for his hands felt the elephant's enormous ears surging in the breeze.

Like the blind men in that parable, those of us who make up a film crew have a thousand unique views of The Elephant that we're shooting; until we share our observations with each other we can't really begin to understand the true nature of the beast. In the case of a collaborative work like a motion picture, "sharing" should translate to "understanding your fellow collaborator's job and the challenges they face in that job".



So how much do **YOU** know about your co-worker's jobs?

Back when I was still doing props, I was surprised at how often people on the crew would walk up and ask me if they could buy something from the set when the show was over, as if I knew a darned thing about the set dressing on the set. I was a prop guy, not a set dresser, but they didn't know the difference. These weren't people fresh to the business either, these were men and women who'd been in the industry for 15+ years and they had no idea exactly what it was that I did on set. When I began doing set design and art direction, I still encountered experienced people on the crew who honestly didn't seem to understand my role in the process.

Natural curiosity began to make me wonder how widespread this interdepartmental ignorance was, so I began talking to hairdressers about the art department, to set dressers about the sound department, to publicists about transpo... and the result was that nobody seemed to know much at all about what their friends' jobs actually entailed. After years of working side by side through the rigors of filmmaking there existed a remarkable amount of ignorance out there.

It turns out that camera guys weren't being arrogant after all; they were simply guilty of the common crime of being so focused on getting their jobs right that they had no time to look around to see what everyone else was doing.

One of the most important "keys to the industry" that I hand to aspiring filmmakers is the advice to "learn everybody else's job;" observe other departments in action, ask questions about why they do things certain ways, find out how their job affects their fellow departments and which departments have an impact on theirs, and then ask a few more questions.

Keep asking questions! The Elephant is complicated; it requires a lifetime of observation. But the more you know about everybody else's job, the better you become at your own job. Please write that last bit down, it's going to make you a lot of money in the future and I'm expecting my standard 3% cut.

You know I'm just kidding, right? They really were pompous. Special hug to all my friends in camera, somebody has to bust your chops. ;)



BEHIND BEHIND THE CAMERA WITH DREWPROPS

Andrew Duncan, known in the motion picture industry as "Drewprops" has been writing about the craft of filmmaking from the inside out since the mid-1990s. His confusing and often embarrassing stories from behind the scenes provide a unique insight into the craft of filmmaking from the perspective of the shooting crew, artists and designers who bring your favorite films to life on the big screen!