

Interview with Brokeback Mountain Production Manager Tom Benz

In October 2006, Rob Freeman, philanthropist and owner of The Brokeback Truck, and Brock Justinick of Tac Mobility, telecommunications facility providers to the *Brokeback Mountain* production, met with *Brokeback Mountain* Production Manager Tom Benz. A seasoned film professional, Benz has over 20 years of motion picture experience, and refers to himself as a “logistical engineer.” He has worked on many important films, including *Cool Runnings*, *Viper*, the *Lonesome Dove* television series, and various Hallmark Channel productions, among others.

Our special thanks to Rob Freeman for his generous permission to make this important interview available to FindingBrokeback.com visitors. For more information concerning Rob’s charitable work and The Brokeback Truck, see: www.therobfreemanfoundation.ca/ and www.TheBrokebackTruck.ca.



Rob: In your opinion, what aspect of securing the filming locations was the most important? The most memorable? The most scenic?

Benz: The whole film revolved around finding the right mountain setting. Even though the sheep weren't in all parts of the movie, the sheep shots were the "money" shots and that's how we established our priorities and strategies.

Dealing with the sheep had its own special challenges because domestic sheep carry a strain of bacteria which can be lethal to wild sheep. Provincial authorities would not permit us to use domestic sheep in settings where an epidemic might ensue. To make this film work with this restriction was extremely difficult, but luckily, the mountain that we found where we could use domestic sheep was the closest peak to Calgary.

In terms of which scenes were memorable for the audience, I think the scenes between Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal that showed their true merit as actors, as performers, were, by far, the most enduring. *Brokeback Mountain* is a film about people. As wonderful as the locations were, it was the performances that made these scenes so memorable.

I would consider Moose Mountain the most scenic.



Rob: You have said that for many filming locations, you were “first in and last out.” When did you start your work on the film and how long were you there afterward?

Benz: The film was shot from May to the beginning of August, 2004. My involvement was from February to the end of September.

Rob: What was your involvement in securing and adapting locations? Which area was the hardest to acquire?

Benz: Initially I would develop location strategies. In an orderly fashion, there would be crew hired. Inevitably the work was delegated. I was responsible for the work of every crew member, which, in theory, would mean that I should be able to do it all, but obviously, there are cases where people have special expertise. There, I trust them and collaborate with them.

Moose Mountain was the hardest location to acquire because of the wildlife concerns with the sheep.

Rob: Were there any places considered by the filmmakers which were not ultimately used?

Benz: Yes, the ideal mountain peaks from Ang Lee's scouting were closer to Waterton and some almost as far north as Jasper.¹ In those areas we could not sequester our domestic sheep from wild sheep, therefore we were refused permission by Alberta Wildlife, and rightly so. The thing about Moose Mountain that made it ideal for our use is that it's a mountain that literally stands on its own, so therefore there is a break in wildlife traffic and the wild sheep never go to this little pimple outside of the Rockies called Moose Mountain.



Rob: When you are securing a location, area, or building for filming, how much information do you volunteer about the film? Is each situation unique or is there some set formulation of what you tell the people involved in providing their property?

Benz: In a general sense there's no point hiding anything. Let's face it, the people will likely see the film and it does no one any good to forget this. The film industry is always about return business no matter how you look at it. It benefits no one to have the public's opinion of the integrity of the film business sour. That being said, it's not uncommon to give potential hosts a copy of the script and from that point of view, not all people are interested in reading the script, to be honest with you. They have a passing interest in

¹ Canada's stunning Waterton National Park is 125 miles south of Calgary and just north of Glacier National Park in the U.S. Jasper National Park is approximately 200 miles northwest of Calgary.

the film industry. There's rarely a time, I can't think of a time in my career, where one has had to be covert with the content or the motivation of why you would like to use that location. Right from the start, the high road is the best road.

Rob: Is payment for use a factor or are most people approached happy to have the notoriety of having their property immortalized in film?

Benz: Oh, payment is a factor. I think everyone has different reasons why they would allow a stranger into their home, or on their property. Sometimes subject of the film is a priority, sometimes it's money, and sometimes it's exposure to a unique experience, so they definitely want to exploit the one that has knocked on their front door. Every situation is different and, oddly enough, money is not the primary factor.

A motion picture coming onto your property is an intrusion. It doesn't matter how well organized it is, it is an intrusion on your life and that usually is the first factor: whether the people can accept this kind of intrusion.

Rob: Do you appear anywhere in the movie?

Benz: No. I joke about a fictitious "witness protection program." I found the one time that I did agree to a cameo, it kept me away from my work. I can't be photographed and be answering the phone at the same time (laughing).

Rob: How long have you been involved and is this the first work you've done in Canada?

Benz: I am an Albertan; I've done all of my work on the Canadian Prairies. The first film I worked on was 1976.

Rob: How did you get started in the film industry?

Benz: I got together with a group of three friends and we formed a film club in high school in Edmonton. Everybody had their agenda: somebody wanted to be the director, somebody wanted to be the cameraman, somebody wanted to be the actor. I've always realized I didn't have an agenda but I had a lot of fun supporting everyone's vision of art and I realized at that time that there very obviously was a place for people like that in the film industry. One thing led to another and the desire for that kind of adventure never left, so I pursued it. I went to S.A.I.T. (Southern Alberta Institute of Technology) and never left Calgary after that.

Rob: What other projects have you worked on? Have you also worked in television, or strictly the motion picture industry?

Benz: In 20 years of production management, I've probably done 45 films. I was the production manager on the *Lonesome Dove* television series for two years; was part of the production team and locations manager on *Cool Runnings*; *Viper*; was on a period picture called *The Claim*; and did some television for the Hallmark Channel. I've produced a mini-series about Mark Twain. I did a lot of television earlier on and I tend to find that feature film producers find me now.

Rob: There were several scenes shot for *Brokeback Mountain* that were edited out of the final print. Would it be possible to get a list of these omitted scenes, including the characters involved and how the missing scenes related to the plot?

Benz: I'm so far removed now from the strategies of *Brokeback*, I wouldn't know about the marketing or packaging. I know for the longest time on eBay you could buy the script that we shot. And then I suppose the detail that would be in that script would be you'd look at the movie and you'd go 'Wow, that scene isn't in there,' because essentially we film the script and then edit the story, not the script. You find the story within what you've photographed, so you shoot the script and you edit the story.

Rob: Were there any scenes they set up that didn't get into the movie, that you wished had made it into the final cut?

Benz: I would certainly say 'No' to that. As a logistical engineer, when I read a script, even though I love in my own mind to be a creative person, I have a deep respect for the profession of a director as the storyteller. Once a film is has been made, I'm no longer an industry player but a member of the audience and I accept the director's version of the story without looking back.

I know I couldn't have done better and so for me it's easy to accept the director's final choice on the complete work of art that he puts forward to the audience.

Rob: Will these lost scenes be made available someday?

Benz: Again, I'm away from that part of things. In general, I see a wonderful DVD features market come up. It's not just the movie, it's all the other features. Suddenly deleted scenes have a value where they stayed on the cutting room floor before these features came out.

Rob: The *Brokeback Mountain: Collector's Edition* is due out in January 2007. Do you know what the bonus material will be?

Benz: I'm sorry, I don't have any knowledge of that.

Rob: Some think the film would have been clearer if some of the cut scenes had been included.

Benz: I think what is interesting is how a director makes the audience work for the story. When I hear comments like this, 'It would have been clearer' I must say, many directors would go 'Good, I'm making them work for it,' rather than be disappointed that it was hard to get. The easier a film is to figure out, the less successful it is. No one is challenged, nobody wants to see it again.

Rob: What is your favorite or most memorable experience from making the movie?

Benz: There are too many to separate one. In fact, the overall experience is the sum of so many little ones; it is impossible to take one and highlight it.

Rob: What was so special about Alberta, as opposed to Wyoming, for the filming?

Benz: I was phoned by Kevin Hyman, one of the chief executives of Focus who I met in 1999 on another film, and I was so surprised because it sounded like he knew me from just last week; the familiarity. Ang Lee had never made a film that was not on the location in which the story was set. That was, no pun intended, "Ang's angst" as we called it. Kevin was very clear to me from the very first phone call in December, that a key part of this effort was to make Ang comfortable that he was not going to be shooting in Wyoming.

The studio had studied the logistics and the costs of filming in Wyoming, a state that doesn't have as many people as Calgary does as a city. The essential support services that come with that, including hotels, cars, airports, simply to start a film, much less host the crew, the equipment, all of those things, are not available in Wyoming. Literally every last element would have had to be brought into Wyoming and my belief is it would have cost millions more to shoot there.

This is an independent feature; there is a ceiling to the amount one can invest in a work of art. When one goes to make a *King Kong* for \$200 million it is a different kind of gamble with a different kind of audience to see if you can fill the theatre. (That gamble, incidentally, a \$200 million investment in making *King Kong* compared with a \$15 - 17 million investment with producing *Brokeback Mountain*, both netted the same profit.) So it's a different risk and a different undertaking to make a film like *Brokeback Mountain*. Absolutely, *Brokeback* was motivated by the literature, a good short story made into a very fine screen play.



Rob: Was it difficult convincing Ang Lee and the producers of the movie to film in Alberta instead of Wyoming? Was there any one objection in particular?

Benz: The producers, no; Ang, yes. Simply put, if Ang Lee rejected Alberta, the project wouldn't have come here. The producers would have had to lie down in front of his truck to say, 'We don't have the money to go to Wyoming, we have to do this picture in Alberta.' That would be the only way Ang Lee's wishes, should they have been to film in Wyoming, would have been overruled.

Rob: Can you tell us more about what was special about Alberta: was it people, places, facilities, or all of these? What sealed the deal to have it filmed there?

Benz: What sealed the deal was having Ang Lee in my car for three days, introducing him to the potential of Alberta. Then we put him in a plane and sent him to Wyoming so that he could see physically if he had the same thing. He saw that he had far more opportunity in Alberta. Today, he very definitely feels that he filmed it in the right place.

Rob: When the filming was over, Ang Lee was happy that he had chosen Alberta to film *Brokeback Mountain*?

Benz: He was ecstatic, and has said so many times.

Rob: I've heard that Ang Lee became a devoted Calgary Flames fan, and wherever possible attended and watched the games. Is this true?

Benz: It is. He went to play-off games as a guest of the owners. If anyone has a very good hockey script (laughing), he probably would read it. He did become a fan and mentioned to me that hockey was a 'wonderful, violent ballet.' When I asked him, with his lack of experience in hockey, why he thought he would be a good man to direct a hockey film, he answered, 'Well, in fact, not having knowledge of hockey for a director would be better because they would be far more sensitive to things that Wayne Gretzky would not be, even if he was a Spielberg.' So he looks forward to actually making a hockey film.

Rob: At this moment, there is a production crew scouting locations in Moosejaw and Regina for a film called *Ferris Wheel*, in which Charlize Theron will have a leading role. She has been spotted at football games and concerts in these cities, presumably to get a feel for the area, its weather and the surroundings. Did Heath, Jake, or any of the other *Brokeback* actors do this? That would have been neat; Heath and Jake sightings would have created a stir! Did any of this happen?

Benz: Absolutely. Heath and Jake enjoyed the city; they got out. I think Charlize Theron, Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Anthony Hopkins and all of the stars that have been on the prairies, have had a good time because the public in this part of the continent respects privacy, gives them the distance, doesn't have the same demands that the public would make if they saw them walking down the streets of Hollywood. They exploit that, they enjoy new elbow room, new freedom of public privacy if you will, that they can walk on the street. I think Calgary is probably the biggest little city they can do that in.



Rob: Was there a point in the filming of the movie where, based on what you were seeing, you knew that this was going to be a critically acclaimed film? If so, what was it that gave you that feeling?

Benz: That feeling came far before we rolled the first frame through the camera. You could recognize that you were in the midst of a very sophisticated, collaborative, professionally motivated group of people. You knew something was going to happen. So that feeling came long before we started filming it, and certainly no experience in the actual filming would have surpassed that. It was the people involved.

Rob: Did you, or others you know, feel some of the impact of the film during filming, or after release, in the way the viewers did?

Benz: Did we know what we were making at the time? No. Did it feel special compared to all the rest of the projects? Yes.

Did we know why? The only thing we attributed it to was the quality of the collaboration of the people. Through all the films I've done, I see that that quality is generated from the top down. The producing and directing entities on this show - I have never been involved with a more sophisticated bunch or a bunch that was more comfortable in their own skin and not pretentious and took advantage of every opportunity to get the best out of people instead of worrying about controlling the project, and that is an extremely difficult atmosphere to achieve in film production.

There is often too much pressure and way too many unknown factors in making a film to establish that kind of atmosphere. To have achieved it here, and then to see the accolades that followed, one can't help thinking that that magic was there with the people long before the accolades.

The film entered pop culture and had a huge impact on all movie audiences; even those who didn't actually see it. It entered prime time TV. Even just yesterday *Brokeback Mountain* came up on the Jay Leno show almost a year after its release.



Rob: For you it's a job, plain and simple, but I wonder if it touched you in some way or if you get how it has affected us?

Benz: I absolutely do get it and it's not just a job. The shirt I wear most often is from my Mark Twain producing. Mark Twain said, "Work and play essentially are just versions of the same thing." If people enjoyed their work as much as I do, they wouldn't call it work.

Rob: Was the experience of working on *Brokeback Mountain* different than other movies that you have done, and if so, in what ways?

Benz: First of all, every movie is different, so one can't say why *Brokeback Mountain* was different from the other movies. Every film is unique, every movie has a different fingerprint of human nature, people, politics, and reasons to make it. The reasons to make *King Kong* were far different than those which led to the making of *Brokeback Mountain*. In my experience, the reasons for making a television series like *Lonesome Dove* are far different than making a television series like *Viper*. Nothing can compare between two projects. Good, bad, or ugly, they're all different.

Rob: In order for you to prepare a set or location, what kinds of instructions did you receive? From whom?

Benz: The location instructions I received would be general. Then, as we start to apply our design to a location, more and more details come out. As more details emerge, more crew is hired and delegated to deal with those details.

Rob: Were there sets or settings that had to be changed? Which ones? How? Why?

Benz: I'm not sure of the meaning behind "changed." We had to adapt things because of weather. In the movie, there is the scene where Ennis takes his family to the fair; the fireworks are there. Ordinarily, we would have been able to film that in one night. But we had to stop filming and pick up later because of severe thunder and hail storms, so our schedule had to accommodate the weather.



Rob: Were locations set up a certain way and then changed at the director's request?

Benz: No, that didn't happen and probably the biggest reason it didn't happen is that I have never seen a director more prepared than Ang Lee.

Rob: What specific instructions did you receive from Ang Lee? Were there particular sets or locations he wanted modified?

Benz: Ang would see a location. He would give his vision to the locations manager, production designer and director of photography. They would collaborate and come up with an overall presentation. Ang was an incredible communicator so their first draft, if you will, was exceptional because of the detailed instruction that those creative people received. At that point, if Ang changed something, he might say, 'Boy, a different wallpaper would look good here,' or, 'Maybe instead of white, we could darken this room a little bit.' He might come up with ideas like that. There were no sets that he came to where he wanted a complete change of ideas. He often, but not always, would compliment what was there with a little bit more icing on the cake. That's usually how it went.

Rob: Do you have any pre-production or production photographs of filming locations?

Benz: I generally don't take any pictures myself. I don't know where there are any, but I know if I looked at my crew list and started phoning around there'd be a lot of pictures.

Rob: Do you have a schedule or calendar that shows the order of filming?

Benz: I will check, but if I kept all that paperwork I'd have to live in the garage because the house would be full (laughing).

Rob: Were there creative debates/disagreements among the production team during the filming? What types of creative issues arose?

Benz: The real beauty of Ang Lee is that he not only could imagine what he wanted, he could convey his vision to others. Once when I mentioned to a colleague that there were four different towns in the opening sequence, he said, 'That must be tough working for a guy like Ang.'

In fact, it was much easier because Ang Lee knew what he wanted and for any crew to follow a director, it's a lot easier if they know what he wants. It doesn't matter what he wants, it's 'Does he know what he wants?' Since Ang Lee knew what he wanted and since he could communicate those things, there was never any creative difference. Creative difference usually comes about because people don't understand what the other person is saying. The production designer and the director of photography are there to make the director's image. It is not the production designer's or the director of photography's image to define. That is the director's job. And if the director can communicate that, there are few artistic differences to discuss. You efficiently get down to the business at hand and come in on time and on budget because the director knows what he wants to do. And that's another thing that separates Ang Lee from others; he didn't make *Brokeback* by accident or merely capture the moment. He knew what he wanted and went out there and got it. There are many ways to direct. Ang Lee's way, although the best, is the hardest.

Rob: Were scenes re-shot? Which ones and why?

Benz: Certain shots were re-shot. The majority of them were because of a scratch on the negative. We work in very trying environmental conditions. A piece of dust gets in, you have the dailies come back to you within one or two days time. The lab immediately phones you upon developing the film, going 'You've got trouble on scene 1, shot 8.' We look at it: if we can't salvage it, we re-shoot it. There were never any scenes re-shot because of a question of performance, or a question of did the elements arrive and were they photographed properly. It usually was a technical developing problem that would cause us to re-shoot a shot.

Rob: What scenes were the most fun?

Benz: The more people that are in a scene, the more fun it is. When you have a lot of extras, probably one of those most rewarding things is that people are coming to get a front row seat on how a film is made. They are usually very gracious and appreciative and add to a very sunny atmosphere that hopefully the film set has already got. Not all of them do, but this one did. The more people that have a positive exposure to an industry that they know nothing about, even though they may have three television sets in their house, the more fun it is. They probably know more about deep sea fishing or drilling for oil in the Arctic than they do about making the film, so it's always fun to watch people have fun learning.

Rob: Which scenes were the most frustrating?

Benz: A scene that gets frustrating is one that takes too long to shoot and I say that because the worst thing about the film business is you are constantly working when you are exhausted. The more exhausted you are, the less you enjoy yourself, the more you are apt to make mistakes. And the more mistakes you make, the likelihood of being frustrated grows. To size up a scene logistically and say 'Boy, this is going to be frustrating' - when you do a really complex scene and it works, it's far more rewarding than it was frustrating, and it happened. Probably the other side of that coin is somehow a scene that should have been so easy to do, you just can't get it right because it rains on you, the actor is late, the flat tire happens, something happens and it should have been so easy to shoot. The frustration comes when you can't meet your expectations.

Rob: Do you have any specific examples?

Benz: Not on *Brokeback Mountain*. The stars were aligned, the sun was shining on us from start to finish. The leadership on that film exploited every positive opportunity and avoided every negative pitfall. They knew their stuff. We were in the company of the best of this world's filmmakers.



Rob: Which scenes were hardest?

Benz: That's a tough one to answer because I look at things a little differently. Things are hard when I don't enjoy myself. I enjoyed myself from start to finish.

Rob: Do you have any other information or experiences to relate?

Benz: Alberta has an interesting record of Academy Award nominated and winning pictures: *Brokeback Mountain*, a few years after *Legends of the Fall*, which was a few years after *The Unforgiven*, has cemented, in any doubter's mind within the industry around the world, that Calgary is a "go-to" place. It is a motion picture center that stands on its own. *Brokeback Mountain* didn't entirely create that image, but it certainly brought it home.

One thing that the Alberta film industry appreciates, whenever we get nominated or win a cinematography award, it plays well because that's an award that truly belongs to the location, as much as it belongs to the filmmakers.

Rob: Were you at the Academy Awards?

Benz: No, not at the Academy, but I was invited to the Director's Guild Awards, in Los Angeles. I was invited by Focus and Ang to join them. It was very interesting for me as a professional, compared to the Academy Awards, because the audience was 2,500 of my peers. Clint Eastwood getting a Lifetime Achievement Award; to have Steven Spielberg give me a standing ovation was very surreal and humbling! The films nominated for Best Picture were *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, Spielberg's *Munich*, George Clooney's *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Crash*, which is the film produced by YARI Film Group - I ended up working on *Resurrecting the Champ* for them here in Calgary just this year. I met Ron Howard; he gave me my plaque. I was stumbling for words. I said 'It's certainly an honor to meet you.' He looks at me and goes, 'The honor is mine.' Again, more than humbling and very surreal to be called up on the stage with Ang.

Brock: You said in all of your 20 years of filmmaking it's the only time you'd seen it: Executive Producer Michael Hausman's insistence on holding a masters class for the film school.

Benz: Yes, he's a huge part of the dynamics of this creative team. Michael Hausman teaches at Columbia University and is very interested in film production classes. Within minutes of his arrival in

Calgary, he was planning lectures for film faculties within schools in Calgary. He had two very high-level seminars, one of watching films and one of meeting the “brain trust” from *Brokeback Mountain*. He invited one and all.

To me, it was a special thrill being on the panel with them, as I found myself in the same room that I showed my student films for grading as a young man. Again, another surreal situation. His approach even to this day, to prioritize teaching, not just his profession as a producer, was intoxicating, not just wonderful. It drew one and all into a sense of understanding of who these people really were. They gave far more to Calgary, without asking for anything, than any group of professionals I've ever run into.

Brock: I've heard you refer to yourself as a “logistical engineer.” The logistical engineering around film production is probably the most intense I've ever seen anywhere.

Benz: You have to take science, money and people to make a work of art that inevitably makes money. To have one portion of your mind in the technical areas and another in the art realm and constantly be dealing with human factors to get people to collaborate, that's my job. My job is to coordinate their ideas, not so much to pick my way of making the film.

Rob: How many people did you have working for you?

Benz: On *Brokeback Mountain* it would be in the 200 range. Sometimes I have films with 500 time sheets on my desk in a week, for a weekly payroll of \$1 million.

Rob: Many people feel *Brokeback Mountain* is destined to become a classic.

Benz: Absolutely, it will become a classic. I could put it in terms of Oliver Stone making the 911 film. The commentary came out that people aren't ready to watch this film yet, but they sure as heck were ready to make it. Sooner or later, the appeal of being able to watch such an emotional movie will rise and I believe more and more people will watch *Brokeback Mountain*.

One of the real reasons Ang Lee made this film was because everybody told him this film could not be produced. It was an un-producible film. That sealed the deal for him. That's why he made the film.

Rob: What do you mean “un-producible”?

Benz: Many said that there was no way anyone could make a film from this story that people would watch, that could enter mainstream filmmaking; and that the audience could accept it. And that there was no way to make it acceptable. That challenge hardened Ang Lee's resolve to make this movie. People were then ready to make the film, and over the years to come, more and more people will be ready to watch it and that really will be the true test of an enduring classic.

Rob: Thank you for sharing your remarkable insights and experiences.