CHAPTER 1

What Exactly Are Prop Masters and What Do They Do?

Let me begin by explaining what a prop is and the responsibilities of a property master on a film or television project. Simply, props are items actually handled or used in any way by the actors during the filming of a show (coffee mug, camera, gun, grocery bag, pen, football etc.). There are many additions to this that I will explain later in this chapter. The prop department is also responsible for the directors', producers', and actors' chairs. Don't get me started on this subject; it warrants a chapter of its own and is forthcoming.

The property master is the head of the prop department and hires an assistant or assistants according to the size of the project and the budget. For example, a film like *The Pirates of the Caribbean* is going to have several more assistants than a half-hour sit-com such as *Two and a Half Men*. A one-hour episodic action series or drama for television like *24* or *Criminal Minds* will have between two and three full-time assistants, occasionally bringing in extra people or what are known as "day players" on particularly heavy days (days with big scenes that involve lots of background actors, known as "extras").

So now, let's take a simple example of the use of props. Visualize a scene with a lawyer entering a jail cell to converse with his new client. A jail keeper leads him to the cell and

opens it for him to enter. The lawyer enters, sits down, opens his briefcase, and pulls out a file that pertains to his client's case. The obvious and most likely scripted props would be the jailer's keys, the lawyer's briefcase, and the folder. But let's dig a little deeper into what the property master has to consider, beginning with the jail keeper.

He/she needs to be wearing a utility belt, which is a prop, not a piece of wardrobe. The first thing would be to find out the actor's waist size. Next would be to research what would be on an actual jail keeper's belt, which will vary depending on the city, county, or state in which the jail is located.

Would this person have mace, a baton, a radio, or maybe just keys and a walkie-talkie? Is the belt black or brown, smooth or basket weave? All principal characters will have what are known as "personal props" which include wedding rings, watches, pens, eyeglasses, and so on. These must all be shown to and approved by the director in advance.

Next, let's take the lawyer's briefcase. The property master will have shown briefcase choices to the director and will have the approved case plus a double (an exact match) if possible, as actors are notorious for leaving the set promptly with their props and then forgetting them in their dressing rooms. This makes it important to double principal props. Should there be a delay in shooting due to a prop left in a dressing room, it becomes the prop man's problem—not the actor's.

Now, for what's inside the briefcase. An attorney would have the case file. Keep in mind that no director wants to see a brand-new prop, as it would look straight out of the package, so careful attention must be paid to the aging of the folder. The inside of the folder also has to be accurate. It should be the same type of file that a lawyer would actually use, with the appropriate labels and markings. It must contain documents that refer to the case. If the camera happens

to see into the file and it is filled with invoices from your last show, it will indicate to the director that you are not paying attention to detail. Plus, it gives the actor more to work with. It is imperative the case be properly outfitted with other files, legal papers, depositions, or anything else that a lawyer might carry.

If the lawyer wears glasses, they need to be pre-approved by the director and may need the actor's prescription lenses inserted. Next, they will need to have an anti-reflective coating applied so the director of photography doesn't see the lights reflected in the lenses.

Now, we should be ready to shoot—unless there are any last minute ideas from the actor or the director. Last minute requests are something we never like to hear. Any time we hear, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if...?" our blood pressure shoots through the roof.

There are several items that are not physically touched that still come under the prop master's jurisdiction. For example: vehicle license plates. More often than not, the scene takes place in a city or state that we are not really shooting in. Cars play an important role in most films so the license plate must reflect the appropriate state and period of time. If it is New York 1935, the plate needs to be accurately researched and then manufactured. There will need to be doubles for any principal vehicle, as frequently a "second unit" (an additional crew) will have a duplicate car and shoot at another location. So, duplicates are imperative.

The property master must put himself in each situation, as many props are not scripted. Here is a very simple example: If there is a doctor in the scene, it won't be scripted that he needs a stethoscope unless he specifically uses one to listen to a patient's heart. A prop man needs to know that a stethoscope is an obvious thing a doctor would have. We wouldn't be around long if we said to the director that we did

not see a stethoscope written in the script. This illustrates the importance of picturing oneself at the location described and really giving thought to what would be of importance there.

Essential to keep in mind is that we are working within the confines of a budget that now more than ever is constantly being scrutinized. This means that should you have any ideas as to how you might be able to save money without sacrificing the director's vision, they need to be discussed with the producer and director, so that nothing is expected that you can't deliver. Sometimes even the biggest and most costly films have not been budgeted to anticipate or accommodate expensive last-minute requests. The un-realistic expectation of less-experienced producers is that the prop department should have everything needed at all times, yet still remain within the framework of the initial budget. Often, it's a struggle to find a happy medium. There have been times when I've had to jump through hoops just to get extra help for a very busy day (which amounts to a few hundred dollars), because there just isn't the money in the budget. However, when the writers come up with ideas and changes that can sometimes cost thousands of unbudgeted dollars, the money magically appears.

Food is the prop man's responsibility as well. If an actor needs to eat or drink, we must discuss with that person what she or he likes or doesn't like. Allergic to anything? Vegetarian? Frequently, actors will ask if their food can be fat-free so they do not ingest unnecessary calories. For big meals, party or restaurant scenes, I call in a "food stylist" so everything looks and tastes just right.

Small household pets, such as dogs, cats, birds, fish, etc., also fall under our jurisdiction. We might even have to get a horse or two, although the producers will handle the arrangements for a western or a scene that requires a larger

number of animals. It can be a gray area, so communication is vital. Obviously producer input will be much more inclusive if we are casting an animal with a large or recurring role, like Lassie.

Over the years as the industry continues to evolve, the lines that were once very clear separating individual departmental responsibilities have become rather blurry, and things that really aren't prop issues are continually being thrown our way. In my opinion, this began when many talented young filmmakers graduating from film school were denied access to the unions. Frustrated at being excluded from union work, they were left with no choice but to forge ahead and produce their own non-union projects.

In film school, the young directors put their production designers in charge of the overall look of the show, relying on them to be certain that the props, set dressing, and wardrobe be true to the director's vision. When the unions finally opened their doors to these upcoming filmmakers, who by now had their own way of doing things, the gray areas that already existed between the prop master, the set decorator, and the art department in general began to grow larger. I found myself being asked to do things that had not been my responsibility in the past.

Anyway, I hope this gives you a basic understanding of a prop master's job and some of the challenges and dilemmas we frequently face. Much more will certainly be revealed in the stories that follow.

CHAPTER 2

Like Father, Like Son

Like Father...

I was born into the industry like many Hollywood employees. My father, Allan Levine, started in the laborer's union but rapidly moved into the property department. He climbed the ladder from set dresser to assistant prop master to property master in a very short period of time, just as I would do many years later. He worked on some of Hollywood's biggest budgeted and most popular films of his era. A partial list includes; the original *Dr. Doolittle, Tora Tora Tora, Three Days of The Condor, Jeremiah Johnson, Shampoo, All The President's Men,* and *Heaven Can Wait.*

As he worked on films, he began to collect valuable items he could eventually use as rentals, storing these items in several garages around the city; no public storage-type facilities were yet in existence. As a young boy, I tagged along, helping him arrange things to best make use of his limited space.

In 1973, he opened his first prop-rental house, The Hand Prop Room (HPR), on the old Desilu Studios lot in Culver City, California. By 1978, he moved it to its current location on Venice Boulevard in Los Angeles. He built it into the finest prop-rental facility in Hollywood attracting a large clientele.

It was, and still is, a "department store" for props where the thousands of items are neatly organized and displayed

within a huge, two-story building, all divided into different categories, sections, aisles, and rooms. For example, if someone needs to rent an 1800's medical bag with appropriate instruments, medicine bottles, etc. or an authentic African tribal wedding-ceremonial item, The Hand Prop Room is the place to find them. My father traveled around the world purchasing items he knew would rent. He ventured into remote tribal areas in Africa to purchase exquisite indigenous items.

My father passed away in September of 1999. I am proud to say that he accomplished something quite amazing in his life. He forever changed the entire concept of prop-rental facilities, raising the bar and setting a new industry standard. Gone were the cluttered and dusty old prop warehouses with a randomly stocked inventory, and in came the highly stylized establishments that today serve as Hollywood's prop-rental facilities. At the time of his passing, HPR owned several items worthy of being displayed in museums. Independent Studio Services (I.S.S.) is another prop house that has blossomed into an amazing full-service facility, and History 4 Hire has done a terrific job specializing in vintage props as well.

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Like Son...

As a small child I accompanied my dad to the studio to watch filming of *The Untouchables*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, or *Kentucky Jones* while he was serving as property master. "The Untouchables" was particularly exciting because it frequently involved cars being blown up or Thompson machine guns being fired. The "Greatest Show on Earth" had wild animals on set that I also enjoyed.

Most of the people on the crew were friendly to me unless I accidently walked directly onto the set, which I quickly learned not to do.

As I got older my interest switched from gunfire and animals to the young starlets prancing around the lot. At that time, my father was working at 20th Century Fox Studios where a television series entitled *Land Of The Giants* was being filmed on Stage 17. The fact that I still remember the stage number of that show indicates how often I visited that particular stage in 1968!

However, it wasn't the show that drew me repeatedly to Stage 17. I was a big fan of the two girls with recurring roles named Deanna Lund and Heather Young. They wore very tight outfits and their breasts became objects of my fascination.

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Shortly after graduating high school in 1970, I moved to downtown San Jose just a few blocks from the University. My group of high school friends attended school there, but I went to a local junior college instead.

If ever there was a time to live in Northern California that was it. Just south of San Francisco, the music scene was smokin'. Bands such as *The Grateful Dead, Santana, The Doobie Brothers* and *Jefferson Airplane* among many others were from that area. Blues music was predominant as well, and I attended several shows seeing some of the greats of all time. Studying was not high on my priority list, but I did become a scholar of pot smoking and beer drinking. In spite of the partying, I managed to get a two-year degree, but that was as far as my formal education went.

As the summer of 1973 began, I returned to live in Los Angeles with my father. Sadly, my mother had passed away

four years earlier at the age of thirty-eight from a battle with breast cancer, so we were alone in the house. My plan was to spend a summer of fun and leisure and then return to San Jose for one more year of indulgence. For some reason, my dad had other plans.

He didn't approve of my beer drinking, pot smoking ways and without my consent, got me a job at CBS Studios in Studio City. The head of the prop department there agreed to give me a job for thirty consecutive days (weekends not included) that would qualify me to join the union. To remain in my father's house for the summer, I had no choice but to accept the assignment.

I was told to meet a fellow named George in the commissary at eight a.m. He would be looking for me as my dad told him to look for the young guy with long black hair. Wanting to make a good impression, I was there early. At eight o'clock sharp George approached me and asked if I was the prop man he was to hook up with. "No," I politely responded, "but my father is a prop man."

He then inquired, "Is your name Steven Levine?" When I answered in the affirmative, he informed me that I was indeed hired as a prop man and it would probably behoove me to be aware of that.

For the first week, I worked on the scoring stage where a full orchestra records music for specific scenes in film and television projects. My responsibilities were simple: setting up chairs and music stands for the musicians, etc. It was an easy job that I quite enjoyed. Incidentally, prop people no longer work the scoring stages and haven't for many years.

During the next five weeks, I worked as a set dresser. A set dresser is part of the set decorator's crew that puts the furniture, the paintings, and lamps, etc. onto the set. This was a substantially more difficult, time-consuming and

detail-oriented job. Thankfully, at the conclusion of the six weeks I was laid off. I did join the union but immediately packed my car and headed north for one more year to enjoy being twenty-one years old.

When that year ended, I returned to Los Angeles, moved in with my girlfriend and began my life's experience of being a Hollywood film crewmember.

CHAPTER 3

The Last Tycoon: My First Major Motion Picture

Here I was, a twenty-three year old fledgling prop man working on a major motion picture. My father, Allan, was the property master; his main assistant was a fellow named David, who, like myself, was just starting out. I was low man on the totem pole.

Written in the script for *The Last Tycoon* was a very important personal letter to Monroe Stahr (Robert DeNiro) by his love interest in the film (Ingrid Boulting). The director was the very famous Elia Kazan who, among other major films, directed Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. My father had very briefly introduced David and me to this legendary author and filmmaker at some point early in the preparation process of the film.

On this particular day, Allan decided that since David and I were going to be on set a good deal of the time, we should have the opportunity to meet Kazan again, this time in his office, to give him a choice of stationery on which the letter was to be written. Remember, directors always want to see things before they arrive on set, and they always want to see choices, particularly on "inserts" (props to be seen up close for the audience to get a good look at).

David and I, stationery choices in hand, nervously walk-ed up the old outdoor stairway at Paramount Studios in Hollywood and entered the corridor leading to Kazan's office. (Think of Dorothy and her friends approaching the great and powerful Wizard of Oz.) Once there, his secretary announced our arrival, the office door was opened, and we were ushered in to see *The Man*.

While trying desperately to exude confidence, we explained the reason for our visit, proudly displayed the stationery choices and anxiously awaited his decision. Kazan took a beat, looked up at both of us and bellowed, "Get the hell out of my office and never bother me with this type of shit again!" Without another word or a second's hesitation, David and I grabbed the stationery, ran back through the corridor, down the staircase, and headed directly to my father's office on Stage 5.

This incident is forever tattooed on my brain, as you may well imagine. My dad said very little and sent us on our way to continue our other assignments. At some point later that afternoon, while we were reviewing the day's accomplishments in our office, Kazan very casually came strolling in. David and I looked at each other like, *Oh God; we're getting fired before we even start shooting!* Instead, Kazan broke into a smile and apologized for what had happened and for scaring the living shit out of us.

The two amazing things about this were that not only did he apologize (not common among directors) but also he actually came to our office to do it. We never did find out if my dad asked him or if he had done this on his own, but just the fact that he did showed us he was a decent man and had some concern about his crewmembers. At any rate, we were far more careful in the future about when and where he was to be approached. By the show's conclusion, we had nothing but admiration and respect for this great film legend.

Recently, I was on the Paramount lot and walked past the same staircase thirty-five years after this incident occurred. It immediately brought back the memory and feeling as if it had just happened yesterday.

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The Last Tycoon was filmed in 1976 before Robert DeNiro was a big star. There were plenty of other current stars of that era in the cast: Robert Mitchum, Tony Curtis, Ray Milland, Carl Malden, Donald Pleasance, Jack Nicholson, and Anjelica Huston, who at that time was Nicholson's on-again-off-again squeeze. Ingrid Boulting was a well-known model, and newcomer Theresa Russell went on to star in several other pictures but is probably most remembered for her role in *Black Widow*.

DeNiro's role as Monroe Stahr was patterned after the real-life Irving Thalberg, who had been a major player in the early days of big time Hollywood. There is a large office building on the Sony Studios lot named after him.

Being a method actor playing a large studio head, DeNiro would come in during pre-production, get into his wardrobe, come to our office, pick up his prop briefcase, watch, glasses, etc. and just walk around the Paramount lot as if he were truly the character he was about to play. This system obviously worked out very well for him.

One night, we were scheduled to film inside a guesthouse located in the backyard of a Hancock Park mansion. Hancock Park is a gorgeous neighborhood located adjacent to Hollywood where wealthy, old-money families reside. In this particular scene, Monroe is very drunk and in the company of Theresa Russell's character. DeNiro started asking me for real cocktails earlier that day while we were shooting a large banquet scene at the old Biltmore Hotel in downtown

Los Angeles. I was getting used to doing just about anything actors asked of me; but for some reason, before I started getting him lubed up, I figured I had better ask my dad first. He explained to me that Kazan would have to be consulted because if we got an actor drunk without first checking with the director, we could be accused of holding up the company.

Kazan gave his blessing, and I started pouring. DeNiro drank for the rest of the afternoon, and asked for more when we arrived at "The Hudson House," the name of the Hancock Park location. By the time we were ready to shoot at around nine p.m., he was too drunk to do the scene.

Now everyone was scrambling; production assistants were bringing him coffee, ordering him food, and trying whatever other remedies they could think of. I just remember him lying with his head in Theresa Russell's lap and me being grateful that I had thought to check before serving up the cocktails that got him so drunk. As I recall, there was about a two-hour delay while he got sober enough to do the scene.

Most of us either hung out in the yard or retreated to our respective trucks to wait it out. Just to keep things lively while we were in the yard, Kazan suddenly clutched his chest and fell onto the grass as if having a heart attack. David and I were the first to get to him, yelling for help and trying not to panic. He popped up and blurted out, "Just kidding!" Looking back, I can laugh about it today, but at the time found it more scary than funny.

In those days while shooting on the Paramount lot, the stars had quarters similar to small ground-floor apartments that were used as dressing rooms or places to hang out between shots. When it was nearing time for an actor's scene and they were needed on set, either the second assistant director or a production assistant knocked on the dressing