

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Most Underpaid People in Hollywood

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, November 9th, 2011

Forbes magazine just published its list of [most overpaid actors](#). According to their analysis, Drew Barrymore tops the list, returning just 40 cents for every dollar she's paid. Rounding out the top ten, Nicole Kidman is slightly less overpaid than Tom Cruise, earning \$6.70 for every dollar she gets, compared to his return of \$6.35 for each dollar of his salary.

This kind of reporting gains traction because it plays into the governing narrative that Hollywood has no sense of value, that Hollywood's denizens are paid too much and don't care, as long as they line their own pockets. There is some truth to that perception, but it's a facile truth. My experience of people in the entertainment industry is that they are no more profligate than people in other businesses. Did someone just say "MF Global"?

So even though a "most overpaid" list makes headlines, it doesn't get at the truth of what's going on. In contrast, here's Cultural Weekly's list of Most Underpaid People in Hollywood.

3rd Most Underpaid: Actors. That's right, actors, the same category Forbes singled out. But while Forbes focused on the 1%, I'd like to focus on the 99%. According to the Screen Actors Guild, the average member's acting earnings amount to less than \$13,000 per year. Unfortunately, we're not only talking about day-players and people who are better suited to the wait-staff jobs they hold most of the time.

I've spoken to talent agents at all the major agencies recently, and they tell me that studios are offering name actors scale deals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. These are actors you would recognize, whose presence adds value to a movie – in some cases, they are Academy Award nominees. (The agents asked me not to reveal specific actors' names, because they don't want it known that their well-known clients have had to accept scale deals just to pay their bills.)

2nd Most Underpaid: Independent filmmakers. They work for little or no compensation, and make their films almost entirely on spec. Even when they do get paid, it's peanuts. On an indie movie with a \$1 million budget, the writer-director might get \$50,000, for three or four years of work. That's less than the average actor's annual income. Yes, these filmmakers have taken a chance, and they have convinced friends, family and investors to put up some money so they can realize their dream of making a movie, so they should put their own income at risk too. I'm fine with that.

But when the movie's sold, often for pennies on the dollar, the distribution company gets the

filmmaker's work effort, and the filmmaker rarely, rarely, gets any compensation. That's almost a labor law issue.

Most Underpaid in Hollywood: Producers. Most of the time they are expected to work for free. That's because most of a producer's work entails trying to get a project ready for green-light. Unless the film or TV series is made, the producer gets nothing.

A few producers are fortunate enough to have studio deals or work for production companies, and these producers earn a healthy salary. Certainly, when a project gets made, the producer's income can be handsome. But, by my calculations, 95% of projects that are "developed" (Hollywoodese for working on a script, getting directors and actors involved, and trying to make the budget fit available funds) don't get made. Meantime, studios and financiers reap the benefit of the producers' heavy unpaid labors – without which, studios and financiers wouldn't even have projects to consider.

I'm not complaining on a personal level. I'm a producer and I love what I do, and I do it with both eyes open and in full awareness that independent producing can't pay the mortgage.* But I make the point because there will always be far more underpaid people in Hollywood than those who are overpaid. Dreaming the dream, and imagining what a project could become, makes one far more likely to be in the 99%.

*As I've written previously, [don't send me scripts!](#) I'm not reading anything at the moment. Thanks.

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