In the beginning, it's all rainbows and smiles for independent filmmakers, but as they descend deeper into the abyss of making a movie, their optimism, rationale and sanity can all cease to exist. Today's most distinguished indie filmmakers sit at various points in their careers, but all can offer a wealth of advice to peers and up-and-comers alike — and their experiences might help you with your own production process.

An American filmmaker who grew up in London, Phil Traill (*pictured to the left*) is now based in Santa Monica, Calif. After writing and directing several award-winning short films, Traill shot his first feature All About Steve with Sandra Bullock and Bradley Cooper in 2009. His second feature Chalet Girl stars Felicity Jones, a young British actress on the cusp of American stardom. And, between film projects, Traill directs many comedy TV shows, including "The Middle," "Raising Hope," "Men of a Certain Age" and "Suburgatory." "I think every film is different but each one is certainly a struggle," Traill says. "Mainly, in my experience, it's because people hate committing and making firm decisions. I believe [Chalet Girl] happened because it was set in a ski resort, and snow melts so there was a genuine fixed time limit as to when we had to start shooting. That forced people to make decisions. So my new strategy is to lock myself into a start date of next April and to set up some things that absolutely cannot budge from then, so that people really have to decide to commit or not."

Lee Kirk made his directorial debut this year with The Giant Mechanical Man, a romantic comedy that stars Jenna Fischer and was extremely well received at the Tribeca Film Festival. While working on the film over the last four years, Kirk has also been acting and getting hired to write other projects to pay the rent, and he sees the experience of weathering downtime between projects as a time of testing for filmmakers. "[Ask yourself] 'How bad to you want this?'" Kirk suggests. "And if you stick [with your goal], then you probably want it pretty bad."

After writing his first feature, Kirk was challenged to find funding just as the financial crisis hit the economy. “Along the way, keeping the ball in the air really fell on my shoulders,” he recalls. “I realized that if I stopped reminding people about the film and talking about it that it would probably end up at the bottom of every stack. I realized that so much of the work is keeping your own enthusiasm for a project up. People have so many irons in the fire [and] they can get sidetracked if you’re not reminding them all the time. And you have to keep reminding yourself how quick and fun the creative process was originally to reinvigorate yourself. So when you sit down to write your project, make sure you’re passionate enough about it that you’re going to want to keep pushing it and working towards making it for a long time.” Kirk other advice for filmmakers is to remain flexible. “I didn’t see us shooting in Detroit or in the dead of winter,” he says, “but when the film started to reveal itself to me, I felt like I was allowed to change with it, and being flexible was important for me to keep my stress levels down.”

Successful comebacks are a rarity in the film business, so when Travis Fine took eight years off from filmmaking to fly commercial airplanes, he continued to write. He knew at his core that he would always be a storyteller. His return to the industry spawned The Space Between and Any Day Now, two features that each took about four months of preparation before shooting. Fine began his film career as a child actor and for his first 10 years in the industry he was in front of the camera, including a three-year stint on the TV Western “The Young Riders.” While acting work provided the most money, it wasn’t where he felt most comfortable, and since actors spend a lot of time waiting in their trailers, Fine began to write out of boredom. In 1994, he wrote a script that was optioned, which led to him getting hired to write episodes for TV series and directing the 1997 film The Others.

Getting people on board to finance his latest feature Any Day Now, which the film’s star Alan Cumming describes as a “weepy, gay, period drama with a Down’s syndrome child,” was a

definite challenge for Fine. “It’s not exactly the first thing film investors are looking to throw money into,” he explains. “The fundraising was challenging, and the other challenge was scheduling my two lead actors, who were both in contracts on television shows. But some of the situations I found myself in at 30,000 feet made anything I could face in the film business [seem] like water off a duck’s back. Having a very clear intention of the project I want to do and having an absolute start date, it becomes the impetus for the fire and the drive to get things made.”

Benh Zeitlin burst onto the film scene this year with his Sundance and Cannes Film Festival hit Beasts of the Southern Wild. While working on the script for years, he had filmed Glory at Sea, a short film that took home many prizes, including the SXSW Wholphin Award in 2008, and that helped him to gain traction and investment interest for Beasts. “You can’t be afraid to be broke,” admits Zeitlin. “This is ridiculously irresponsible advice, but my experience has told me that you don’t wait around for money and you don’t use up your creative energy making money. For me, always proceeding full-speed ahead with absolute certainty, piling up debt when necessary, keeps a forward momentum that eventually attracts financial help. So I get my life costs down as far as possible, and if I still can’t survive, it’s better to pack books or wash dishes or do something where I can think about my film all day and work at night. I’ve always found it incredibly hard to work a film-related job and then still be able to go home and work on my own films.”

Through his production company Super Crispy Entertainment, Jonathan Schwartz produced all four of Drake Doremus’s films, including the critically acclaimed love story Like Crazy (starring Felicity Jones, Anton Yelchin and Jennifer Lawrence). His savvy advice for up-and-coming filmmakers is very specific. “Get the script as good as possible,” says Schwartz, “because, at the end of the day, it’s the material that dictates everything.”