Abstract

If a piece of art is most successful and effective when it is a homogenous work of a singular vision, then films should not be successful as an art form. Over the course of a film’s life, from conception to end credits, there are a myriad of people involved in numerous different stages. By taking the reader step-by-step through the making of my senior thesis short film *Non-Smoking Section*, my goal is twofold. First, it is to educate and inform on the basics of the filmmaking process, starting with Development, and ending with Post-Production. Second, by detailing the process, I hope to highlight the innumerable decisions and circumstances that conspire to alter the direction of a film. Hopefully, by the end, it is apparent how preposterous the odds are that a film even get completed in the first place, let alone if it ends up being a quality piece of work.

*Non-Smoking Section*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zU_IhX1NXwQ&feature=youtu.be

The following link is Private. Please do not share. Thank you!
“Filmmaking is a miracle of collaboration.” – James McAvoy

After spending the past five semesters learning the craft of filmmaking, I’ve come to the conclusion that film, in theory, just shouldn’t work as an art form. It should fail disastrously. There are countless opportunities and countless decisions within the process that can pull a story in a different, wrong direction.

Though math usually isn’t brought up in discussions of the fine arts, let’s talk numbers briefly. Not including ending credits, my short film, Non-Smoking Section, stands at a stout timecode of 00:08:26:04, which means my film is eight minutes, twenty-six seconds, and four frames. The film was shot at a frame rate of 23.976 frames per second, which, when you do the math (we’ll round up to 24 for practicality’s sake), means that the film is comprised of 12,148 frames. In the editing room (I served as the unholy triumvirate that is writer, director, and editor), each of those frames was a conscious decision, meaning there were thousands of choices inherently made. Also consider that the final cut of the film is the shortest version by several minutes, meaning that there were several thousand decisions that were left on the cutting room floor.

To put this in perspective, your average feature film is two hours long, which is a colossal 10,368,000 frames. The numbers can boggle the mind.

So, I consider it no exaggeration when James McAvoy, current star of the X-Men franchise, declares filmmaking a literal miracle, because the numbers aren’t with you. The odds are against you. There are infinitely more wrong paths than there are correct ones.
Thus, the purpose of this artist’s statement is to relay, in fastidious detail, the filmmaking process *Non-Smoking Section*, from the inception of concept to right now, mere days before the film is to be screened at the Fox Theatre alongside the other Bachelor of Fine Arts Film and Television Production senior thesis films. This is to showcase, as McAvoy put it, how creating a movie is not just a miracle, but a miracle of collaboration, the work of dozens and dozens of people.

**Development**

It’s July 2015, and I’m in Van Nuys, California renting a room out of a middle-aged couple’s house so I have somewhere to live while I intern at Bluegrass Films, a production company located on the Universal Studios backlot. For my senior capstone class, I’m supposed to have a draft of my senior film script that’s already pretty far along, and I don’t have much of anything, and the deadline is quickly approaching.

But, as is its nature, inspiration comes unexpectedly. I can trace the core of *Non-Smoking Section*’s script to three cornerstone concepts.

1) Thematically, the story deals with the power struggle between child and parent. I have witnessed in my life how parents and their progeny get into arguments and are unable to reconcile because neither is able to rescind their position. (e.g. “Because I’m your mother,” etc.)

2) While performing coverage (readings books and scripts and determining their potential to be developed into a film or television property) at Bluegrass, I read a throwaway joke in a script. One character commented that something smelled like gas, and another character embarrassingly admitted that the smell was, in fact, her perfume. I
can’t remember if this line stayed with me on a conscious or unconscious level, but, regardless, the insidious danger of undetected gas was established.

3) Finally, the narrative conceit of parallel storylines intrigues me. One of my favorite films, Gosford Park, utilizes this structure with the upstairs-downstairs dynamic between the wealthy British nobility and their servant counterparts. It’s a type of story structure that is intellectually engaging, especially when the two separate threads intersect with one another.

Given the three bullet points listed, the story eventually came to be this: A mother and her two teenage children, Craig and Emily, are moving across country and stop off at a roadside diner in the middle of nowhere. It comes out that seventeen year-old Craig has taken up smoking cigarettes. To stick it to his overbearing mother and assert his independence, he’s going to rebel and light up a cigarette right there in the diner. Mom, of course, being the good mom, is going to prevent him from doing so. Meanwhile, in the back kitchen, the cook and waitress search for a smell they can’t identify.

Now, the twist. What our family doesn’t know, but what the audience will come to find out, is that the smell belongs to a gas leak from a faulty stove in the kitchen. If Craig is successful in getting a flame from his lighter, the whole diner will explode. All of a sudden, a rather mundane argument is escalated to the nth degree and imbued with life-or-death stakes.

Though this synopsis was always the core foundation, the initial drafts looked quite different. Most notably, the scenes in the kitchen originally occurred the night before the family came into the diner, and were told via flashback. My BFA Capstone I: Pre-Production and Production professor Lisanne Skyler suggested that I have the
storylines exist concurrently. Flashbacks are tricky to pull off because they draw overt attention to themselves. When they’re employed when they’re not necessary, they break narrative flow and can pull the audience out. I also had a comedic grandfather character that was written out. He felt superfluous to the story, and, on a more practical note, it was one last character that I had to worry about casting.

**Pre-Production**

While technically Pre-Production proceeds Development, the two were happening at the same time. Once there was a semblance of a script with the major building blocks in place, it was time to start assembling all that would be needed for physical production. This includes anything that you need to actually shoot your movie: cast, crew, locations, equipment, props, wardrobe, etc.

The entire first half of fall semester felt like a race against the clock, as early on in September we were given our shooting weekends. Lo and behold, I was slated to shoot first during the second weekend of October, the 9th-11th.

BA Film and Television student Katie Healey became my producer, as she expressed interest in learning what exactly a producer does. She helped with every step of the Pre-Production process.

We held a successful casting call, where actors and actresses came and read parts. After the initial reading, we held callbacks for those that impressed. Through this process, we were able to find our actor for Craig, Emily, Buck (the cook), and Claire (the waitress). Surprisingly enough, Claire proved to be the toughest part to cast because, with the script still being actively developed, I was still trying to get a handle on what exactly her character was. Would she be comedic, serious, flirtatious? Casting an actor for a
character when you don’t know what the character is like hitting a moving target in the dark.

For the Mom character, our casting call was not successful. Casting a competent adult female actress was a problem I ran into with my junior film. For whatever reason, both myself, as well as my fellow classmates, have found this demographic the hardest to find. (My theory is that Tucson is not a film hub, and most actors or actresses seriously pursuing their art have long moved to NYC or LA before they’re adults.) Whenever you run into a roadblock with a looming deadline, you get a little more tense.

The classic adage “It’s not what you know, but who you know” came into play to relieve me of my problem. One of my production professors, Michael Mulcahy, wrote and directed a short film a few years ago, and he casted a woman named Harris Kendall for his ‘Mother’ character. Through Professor Mulcahy, I contacted Kendall. She came and read, and was perfect for the role.

Over the course of September, the various crew positions were assembled. Robert Upchurch, choosing to specialize in cinematography as opposed to writing and directing a film of his own, became my Director of Photography (DP). Classmate Bryan McAdams became my Assistant Director. The AD is tasked with making sure the shoot goes smoothly and on-time. It may be the director’s movie, but it’s the AD’s set. Other fellow film students would fill in the various slots of 1st Assistant Cameraman, Grip, Gaffer, Production Sound Mixer, Boom Operator, D.I.T.

A well-fed crew is a happy crew, and food can quickly become one of the most expensive parts of the budget. Apart from a handful of grants, these senior BFA films, which are a requirement to graduate, are self-funded. Healey reached out to local
businesses and franchises, and was able to obtain donations from Chick-fil-A and Einstein Bros. Bagels.

Assembly of the crew and work on the script were both coming along, but there was a major obstruction that grinded Pre-Production to a standstill: location. The script called for an empty diner in the middle of the day. Well, as it stands to reason, most diners are open during the day and are frequented by customers. Healey and I looked into every diner in the central Tucson area, and none of them could take on our Friday-Sunday production. It was the last week of September, so if something didn’t pan out soon, I would have to approach Professor Skyler about pushing back my production weekend.

On something of a Hail Mary, I contacted a local real estate agency about the abandoned Denny’s on Speedway and Dodge. They got back to me, and I was able to tour. The place was decrepit, but it would work.

The next step was to contact the owner, who, of course, was tending to his farm somewhere in the Midwest, and wouldn’t be looking at his phone frequently. Healey was able to get into contact with him, and he was receptive to our shoot. When he came back in Tucson, he even showed us another vacant Denny’s on 22nd Street and Alvernon that looked as if it could be opened up that very day. After ironing out the finer details (the finer details being a $600 overhead plus an addition $350 for a million-dollar liability insurance), we had a location.

Throughout September, Healey, McAdams, Upchurch, and myself would meet to discuss and plan, and we decided that for a shooting schedule, we would shoot the kitchen with the cook and waitress the first day, the family in the dining room the second day, and the scenes involving both the third day. Finally, the big weekend arrived.
**Production**

Call time for the crew for the first day of production was 7:00 am. It’s courteous and an industry standard to call crew before you call cast. If you were to have both come at the same time, the cast would have to stand around for one to two hours, doing nothing, while the crew set up. The idea is to call the talent at exactly the right time you need them.

Apart from a minor snafu with an actress showing up late through no fault of her own, the first day went smoothly. Though both director and actor will have ideas about how to approach the scene, the real fun lies in discovering things in the moment. As the writer, it’s surreal to see words on a page become a tangible sight.

The scenes in the kitchen are intended to be comedic as the two unaware workers try and locate the source of the smell. It made for a fun day.

The second day involved the family, and we had to keep a tight schedule. This was the meat of the story, which meant there was a lot of script to cover. While there are comedic moments, there are more dramatic moments with the family as the tensions of mother and son come to a head.

Though the third day seemed to have the least amount of shots to cover, we were racing against the setting sun at the very end. On a film set, you’re perpetually behind schedule. It’s just a reality. Luckily, though, we were able to get everything we needed for the weekend.

**Post-Production**

At the end of the fall semester, we were required to have a rough cut of the film.
Once you have your footage, you have to sync your video and your audio. The next step is to assemble your selects, which is just all of your good footage that you can imagine you would use, and put it in order in an assembly cut. A rough cut is a more refined assembly cut, where the film is starting to take shape.

Fall semester ended, and spring semester came around, where the sole focus is on post-production.

The toughest challenge with editing _Non-Smoking Section_ was finding the correct way to cross-cut (edit back and forth between multiple scenes that are usually happening simultaneously) the film between the kitchen and the diner, especially in the climax. Audiences need to be reminded how what’s going on behind-the-scenes in the kitchen while the family has their argument, but going back to the kitchen too many times disrupts the narrative flow and pulls audiences out of the movie.

My intent, dating back to the development phase, was for the two storylines to dovetail; as the two characters in the kitchen discover the gas, I want the son to have his thumb on the lighter, ready to flick it. With suggestions from my Capstone II: Post-Production professor Jacob Bricca, that sequence was probably cut half a dozen different ways. An entire scene actually had to be completely deleted, as it no longer served the film anymore.

There are three phases a story goes through in filmmaking: when it’s a script, when it’s being acted out, and when it’s being edited. Each phase, once completed, is subservient to the next. For example, if a line is dialogue is written, but it doesn’t sound right coming out of an actress’ mouth, then the script is forsaken, and the line is lost. If a
scene that was shot no longer works in the larger context of the film while editing, it’s removed. Original intent bows to practicality.

A happy medium was finally reached with the cross-cutting (I was first to shoot, but last to be finished editing), and I was picture locked.

After picture lock comes sound editing and color correction, which was the sole focus after spring break. For sound editing, I collaborated with Galen McCaw. By and large, the purpose of sound editing is to recreate. There are a myriad of different ways that production audio can be compromised, be it from a passing car, or an air conditioner, or the rustling of the microphone. The recreation of sound effects is called foley, while an actor having to rerecord lines is ADR, short for automated dialogue replacement. While a good amount of production audio was clean, Non-Smoking Section required quite a bit of post-production sound work. The toughest part of creating artificiality is making it sound real.

A challenge Galen and I encountered was differentiating the spaces with sound. The kitchen and diner should sound different, but also should share some sound elements since they exist next to each other. In the dining room, there was the rattle of air conditioning and diegetic elevator music. These elements were also present in the kitchen, but were softer, more removed. To match the grimy, industrial kitchen, the hum of an unknown machine and the drip-drop of an unknown liquid were added.

Today’s ultra high definition cameras produce a flat, washed out image in order to provide the greatest possible range in post-production color correction. Upchurch served as my colorist in addition to being my DP, and we decided to go for a natural color
palette to match the film’s realistic world. The colors had to be saturated, and the industrial steel blue of the kitchen and the brown of the dining room were accented.

Finally, after numerous finaglings of color and sound, and after I slept two nights in a row in the film building to ensure the film would be completely on time, it was done on Friday, April 29.

**Conclusion**

I’m nearing the end of this ten-page limit, but I could have written at least twice as much as I’ve already written to effectively relay the decisions in character, lighting, framing, editing, etc.

The point of this artist’s statement is to show what exactly goes into making a film. As a work, a film is most successful when it is of a singular vision, when all of its various parts are of a complete whole. As I’ve attempted to relay, there are a myriad of different people and stages involved, all of which have their own slightly different take on how the film should be. I’d say nearly a hundred people have been involved with *Non-Smoking Section* in the past 10 months. For better or worse, it takes a village.

And how many times, in the past 10 months, could the film have taken a different path? What if the diner location had never come through? What if I had a different Director of Photography? What if I hadn’t listened to a professor’s advice, and gone my own way on a certain editorial or narrative decision?

Through some kind of special alchemy, it all works. Thankfully, *Non-Smoking Section* is the (hopefully) successful result of a journey of a thousand steps.

Enjoy the film!