2

Why 43-Minute Shorts Never Really Work (Script Structure)

Perhaps you're wondering what the difference between *story* and *structure* is. Simply put: Story is the WHAT and structure is the HOW (pacing/tempo). When you build a house you start with the what—four bedrooms, three baths, terrace, and kitchen. Then you move on to the how—your architectural design. We are at the design part of your script.

RESEARCH IS KEY

What can be one of the first steps you take to research and write a great script? Action. Throughout this book I am going to be repeating ad nauseam that you need to do your homework. Researching your story, your producer, your crew, your post, and your film's life once it's done is paramount to your success as a filmmaker.

Talmage Cooley is a great filmmaker who has had significant success with his odd storylines. *Pol Pot's Birthday* is a dark comedy that manages to be well written, beautifully shot, perfectly cast with a solid run time and payoff. His second, also very

accomplished short, *Dimmer* (Sundance FF 2005), follows a blind street gang who terrorize their town on their bicycles. Talmage knows a thing or two about taking a story and laying it out successfully and the need for relentless research to accomplish this:

> "The biggest tricks to researching your script are watching a ton (not two or three but at least a hundred) of films that may have something in common with your film or may not. And photo books are one of the best resources of all, because they're the last 100 years of people documenting real life. The third thing, depending on where your film is set and what it's about, is to visit locations that are like the location you envision. If you have a scene set in a hair salon, go to a hair salon. Take pictures, and watch how things happen."

Action=Success. And the action that every filmmaker needs to take, whether you're making a narrative, documentary, animation, or experimental piece of work, is to research what has *already* been done, and researching what people actually do in hair salons (you think you know from memory, but you don't). Researching how twenty-seven-year-old women who work on Wall Street really dress in New York City. Researching the history of hand-drawn animation. Researching your grandmother's life story beyond what your mom has told you when she's had a little too much sherry.

By carefully researching your story you will save yourself time and money during production. This is critical. No matter what genre you're working within, when you thoroughly understand your characters and story, you'll be able to make the best film you can—even if it's not exactly how you originally envisioned it. It's a phenomenon that occurs in film all the time. You're making one film, yet another, different in many ways from your initial concept, emerges. If you're able to be flexible in everything from

the plot points of your story to assembling the right cast and crew to last-minute changes in locations, to edits in post-production, it can often mean the difference between success and failure. Flexibility and adaptability relies *heavily* on knowing your story inside out.

Interesting & Fun Research Action

- Do an Internet search for Sundance shorts and *watch them.*
- Do an Internet search for filmmaker blogs and sign up for the ones that speak to you. Do the same for filmmaker newsletters. (Check out Resource Guide at the back of this book for ideas.)
- Start queuing up every short film compilation Netflix offers and *watch them.*
- Buy the last few years of Academy Award–nominated short film compilations. They've done it for 2009.

HOW SHORT IS SHORT?

Your script needs to be solid, economical, and fresh. Form follows function and short films, like short stories, have their very own style and pacing. No one could have written *Anna Karenina* in fourteen pages and most are not expecting *In the Mood for Love* in eight minutes.

The first item on the agenda is KISS—Keep It Simple Sister. So often I watch shorts that have complicated plotlines, multiple characters, and shifting locations, all crammed into twelve minutes. The short is so confusing you can almost see it on the actors' faces as they say their dialogue. The short film is successful

economical storytelling. There are major aesthetic differences between Brent Green (*Hadacol Christmas*), Madeleine Olnek (*Hold Up, Waiting for Phyllis*), Joshua Leonard (*The Youth In Us, Beautiful Losers, The Blair Witch Project, Spectacular Regret*), and Carter Smith (*Bugcrush, The Ruins*) as filmmakers, as people, and in terms of what their ultimate filmmaker goals are. Yet they all have something in common—they have made films that have not only played at most of the major festivals but also received great critical acclaim.

Brent makes incredible 8-minute animation in his garage with a crazy Santa Claus as his protagonist. Madeleine shot her 8-minute DV film on the streets of Manhattan with three talented improv actors. Joshua wrote a beautifully tragic 12-minute story and wrangled two gifted actor colleagues to star in it. Carter, already a renowned fashion photographer and music video director, made an exceptional, creepy, gay horror film that was exquisitely shot, with teenagers who were at the beginning of their acting careers.

Bugcrush was 37 minutes long, an almost unheard-of length for a narrative short film. Smith shares:

> "*Bugcrush* was never a feature in my mind. Yes it was 37 minutes but that was all it was ever meant to be. It was based on a short story and I only wanted to make a short to get my feet wet. I wanted to show people that I had the skills to make a feature by creating a compelling *longer* short film that had three complete acts within the short film structure. I would hate to go back and tell that story again in a feature form—I think it would suck."

The bottom line with all of these films is that they are all economical in their storytelling. There isn't a scene that is clearly the director's favorite shot that he or she couldn't let go of in the edit suite. Every scene moves the story forward. Every single

one, whether they were 8 minutes or 37. Director of photography Geary McLeod shares:

> "When filmmakers miss their mark it's hard to pinpoint why it doesn't work but I do know what that feels like—especially in a short film. You need to be concise. You need to figure out *exactly* what story you are telling. It's such a specific genre. Excess doesn't work. Every single frame has to work, it has to move the story forward. '*Economical*' is what short filmmakers need to remind themselves. Usually with a short film, it's your first time making a film, and you think, now this is the time to be self-indulgent. But it really isn't."

When I reached out to successful filmmakers about short film structure they all said you have to *understand* the form of shorts. Talmage Cooley (*Pol Pot's Birthday, Dimmer*) adds:

> "The easiest way to make this point is to make the analogy that a poem is structurally very different from a novel. You have to study the form and the syntax of short films to make sure that you are working in the right vernacular for that form. For example, with a poem there are certain expectations the audience has, there are certain limitations based on its length, and with a novel it's a whole different thing. And what I see all the time with short films is people trying to make a three-act story structure, and there's just not enough time to develop an emotional relationship to the characters in 10 minutes."

You may see a three-act structure in a longer short such as Smith's *Bugcrush*. However, the storyline, you have to admit—high school teens going on psychedelic trips using exotic bugs who lure another into their party with dark ulterior motives—is a fresh twist. Smith based his script on a beautifully crafted

short story (written by Canadian artist Scott Treleaven) that lent itself to a three-act structure.

My advice for filmmakers trying to get their film onto the festival circuit? The more economical (read shorter) your film is, the easier it is to program. Short shorts can go in front of features or can round out a program and the mistakes you might make (shaky camera, not the greatest performance out of one of the actors, or shoddy set design) are *a lot* easier to forgive if you've managed to be economical *and* tell a great story.

Think about it. Most festivals have only a handful of programs dedicated to short films and most programmers want to help as many filmmakers as possible. If your pretty good short is eighteen minutes but includes about three minutes of fat and we're looking at two also pretty good shorts that total twelve minutes run time *sans* fat, guess who we're going to choose? Correct. The two films that respect the word "short" in short film.

As I noted earlier, between 2002 and 2007, less than five *narrative* shorts that were over thirty minutes screened at Sundance—*out of over five hundred* submitted I remember one was a gorgeous, dreamy non-linear film called *The Migration of Clouds* by Patrick Scott, and of course Carter Smith's *Bugcrush*.

We could often find a slot for an 8–12 minute film, but your 28-minute opus is going to sit on the "board" and probably not make the cut. It's a numbers game. As you've been told for years, bigger is not always better.

And I ask you—if your script is forty pages long (sometimes even twenty-page scripts fall under this spell), are you really developing a feature script, and will your short film based on this script actually look like a scene from *that* movie as opposed to a stand-alone piece of work? Don't do it. It's the hardest way to create a short—it rarely has a satisfying ending. Why? *Because there are fifty bloody minutes missing*—unbeknownst to the audience, who only sit there wondering where the ending to your film is. In the programming world, we often call these films

"scene selects." They're not a whole film but a *selected scene* from a longer movie that you haven't shot yet. And since festivals are in the business of showing films and not scene selects . . . well, you get the picture.

Now what this doesn't preclude you from is taking a section of your feature script and re-creating a short story from it (as you lie in bed at night dreaming of someone giving you money to turn it into a feature. It could happen). Filmmakers successfully do it all the time. *Gowanus, Brooklyn*, written and directed by Ryan Fleck, went on to become *Half Nelson* (starring Ryan Gosling, Jeff Lima, and the brilliant Shareeka Epps). *Gowanus* was a self-contained story, with a great cast (Shareeka was also in the short) and a satisfying ending. Do some research. Find out what feature films began as short films and *study the form* and storyline of the short versus the feature.

CHARACTERS

As someone who's watched more than 15,000 films, I can tell within the first two minutes whether you really cared about the characters. Whether you made this film for yourself, because it came from your heart, because these characters had to be born, or because you thought it would get you into Clermont-Ferrand or Sundance. You and your pals may think you're being clever, but the truth always eventually comes to light.

I spoke to many filmmakers, festival programmers, and executives about this very topic. I want to be generous in this arena. I realize that we are bombarded daily with ultra-slick imagery, implausible plotlines, and celebrity cameos. You're out there watching short films either online or in festivals and you think, "I could do that." Yes, yes, you could. But not only has somebody *already* done that, but making it again, because you think this is the sort of stuff film festivals like, will not give you the tools you need to be a successful filmmaker. You need your own

vision. This isn't just true in drama and documentaries. It's doubly true in comedy. Yes, we are all subjected to the formulaic comedy storylines and they're packed with familiar faces and big budgets, but you wouldn't be watching them if they didn't have one really special character that stands out. Someone created that character. And here is where I will agree that if they can do that, *you can do that.* A great book to check out is *The Tools of Screenwriting* by David Howard and Edward Mabley.

Creating characters is simple. What do they want? Who or where do they want it from? And how do they get it or do they get it at all? Why do they want it and, if they do get it, at what cost? Want, Where/Whom, Why.

You, as the screenwriter, need to know this more than anything else. I always tell my clients to write up a paragraph biography of each character. Have fun with it! Play around with them. This is the most control you're going to have making this short—writing the characters. What kind of underwear do they like to wear? What kind of ice cream is their favorite? Did they love their mom more than their dad?

The most believable characters in a film have a solid backstory that a capable actor allows to shine through with or without matching dialogue. This still holds true in animated films. When you're making a documentary *you already have the backstory,* and this can inform what kind of documentary you will create. And even if you're making a home movie, you must have an idea of how you want your story to be revealed.

DIALOGUE

I have actor friends who describe some of their work as being Exposition Fairies. This is the character who explains what the story is going to be about in order to help the filmmaker save time or money. Don't have $5k to show the audience how the guy jumped off the roof of a skyscraper? The actor won't do a full

rape scene? Lead character is messed up from his parents' divorce? Have someone talk about it. If you've watched as many episodes of *Law & Order* as I have (yes, I've watched all of them, in back-to-back marathons, probably while I was supposed to be doing something else), you know exactly what an Exposition Fairy is. It's the cop (or best friend, or school principal, or computer geek) who walks in at the beginning of Scene 1 and tells the real detectives everything the writers don't have time to show you in 47 minutes. *She's been dead about a week, no I.D. but we found a wad of cash in her purse—all hundreds, and she's got a bar receipt from that fancy new restaurant down the street where mostly high-priced call girls and Wall Street guys hang out. Judging from the time on the receipt she left around 9 p.m. She's been raped and strangled to death with her pantyhose. We found a few fibers under her nails that we'll have sent over to forensics.*

Perfect. We now know what happened, who the detectives should interview first, and for sure those fibers will lead us to a guy who has done this before. We wait for the rest of the drama to transpire.

However, in screenwriting, if you write as if you have an unnatural affection for the Exposition Fairy characters, people may call you lazy or worse, boring. Be selective, *verrry* selective, on who in your film carries the exposition dialogue load and how necessary that load is in creating your story. If you have people *talking* about what your story is about as opposed to *showing* us what this story is about, then, my friend, what you have is a short story for a book, not a short film for the screen. Get busy and get creative.

Creativity and Your Budget

The old adage—write the film you want to write, shoot the film you are able, and edit the film you have—is true in both features

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and shorts. When I watched Joshua Leonard's *The Youth in Us*, the story was almost irrelevant. Why? Because I was visually captivated by the camera work, the production design, and most importantly the performances. I watched *The Youth in Us* in my living room on DVD, and then again I sat in the Eccles Theatre in Park City and watched it on the big screen; it had such a profound impact on me both times (and, yes, I cried *both* times).

Joshua shares his production values philosophy and the behind-the-scenes production realities of one of the truly pretty moments in *The Youth in Us*:

"There's a flashback sequence that takes place in a snowy forest with deer, so originally we were going to shoot in a forest with snow machines, two young children, deer wranglers, until of course we realized that getting live deer was well over half the budget of our entire short film. Five grand a deer [laughs]. So my DP Horacio Marquínez and I started reconceiving, and that was based on shooting in a sound stage that we could get for free. Also working with my production designer, David Courtemarche, figuring out what was viable and how to take advantage of our budget restraints and not make it look like a compromise.

"What I find with short films is that one of the greatest detriments to production is to try and make it look like something you don't actually have the resources to make. It always shows through and it's always fucking distracting. Not that you can't do a WWII short, but you have to figure out under which paradigm you're working, resource wise, and try to make it really doable, not trying to replicate something that's in your head. When we get into the production quality on something—if you're making a WWII short and you can do it in one dirty room and you tell a

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> great story, no one's going to fault you that you weren't on a battlefield with 600 extras. But if you try to do it on a 'battlefield' and it looks like a playground and your seventeen extras are in mismatched costumes, it calls too much attention to itself. Reconceive the world, because at the end of the day, the story is most important."

Joshua's story worked creatively, without the flashbacks. However, this was one of the most crucial scenes in the film for him. The scene was successful because at no point were you, the audience, supposed to believe this was a *real forest,* with *real deer* or *real snow.* Josh blended in some magical realism using taxidermy, fake snow, and brilliant set design and lighting. By doing some creative research he was able to make that scene work . . . without the live deer at $5,000 a head.

Meredith Kadlec, Senior Vice President of Original Programming at here! Networks, had this to say on the subject:

> "Don't fall into the trap of trying to prove how MUCH you can do, rather than how WELL you can do it. Don't write a script filled with tons of characters, crazy locations, etc., thinking you need to make your short film feel 'big.' It will be impossible to shoot and you'll be spreading yourself too thin for no reason. Spend more of your energy on *rewriting.* Shooting a truly brilliant script will do a lot more for your career than will the fancy production bells and whistles you load onto your credit cards."

WHAT'S THIS MOVIE ABOUT?

Am I four minutes into your 10-minute short and still don't know what the film is about? Back to the drawing board, my friend.

There is nothing more irritating than watching people do stuff for reasons unbeknownst to the audience until the film is almost over. You not only lose your audience but all the hard work of your actors is left floating in the galaxy. Why? Because we were so busy trying to figure out *why* they were doing or saying what they were doing or saying that by the time this is revealed to us we've *forgotten* what they did and what they said. (This is often the sad case for those films laden with Exposition Fairies.)

This is a common error many short filmmakers make in creating the setup for the rest of the film. A note my colleagues and I often wrote when taking notes on a short film submission was: *Took too long to get there. And when it got there the payoff wasn't worth it. You* might think something is cool or interesting enough to keep your audience wanting to know what happens next—but maybe it isn't. Cool photography or stellar editing does not a good movie make.

When structuring your script you need to grab the audience's attention in that first minute or two. If your film is a slightly longer doc (more than 15 minutes), you've got around 3 minutes to get us interested enough to watch the rest of your film. But you also want to be careful how you grab our attention.

This is where I believe making a short film is far more difficult than making a feature. You simply do not have the time to create a multi-layered, multi-character-driven work. Flashbacks (or flash forwards) eat up time, slow opening scenes eat up time, complicated relationship setups eat up time—and this is a short film.

Where some filmmakers have succeeded is by setting up the story under opening credits. Sometimes it works (like with Leonard's *The Youth in Us*) but *most times* it doesn't. I hate opening credits in a short film unless you are truly setting up the story. If you lay opening credits over slick photography because you thought it would be cool or you didn't know what else to do with all that b-roll your DP shot, cut it out now. When I asked

Kim Yutani, Sundance Shorts Programmer and Director of Programming at Outfest, what she wished every filmmaker would do, she told me one of her wishes:

> "All I want to do is watch your movie. It shouldn't have color bars, a minute of black or opening credits—nobody even knows who these people or production companies are! And I shouldn't have to scroll through a menu. I should be able to put your DVD into my machine and your movie should start playing. Period."

I know, I know. You spent four hours figuring out how to create a cool menu in DVD Studio Pro. But remember, from moment one you want your film to tell your story. Do you really want your story to begin with cliché filmmaker self-indulgence?

Filmmaker Danielle Lurie (*In the Morning*, Sundance 2005) shares:

> "The best thing you can do for your audience is to give them something delicious right from the start. Something shocking, something unnerving, or if you're really good—something they've never seen before. Then they're hooked, and are in for the next five, ten, fifteen minutes. People watch shorts because they are short—if your short lags in the beginning, it's not going to feel short and people who signed up to watch something short will feel cheated; on the flip side, if your film hits the ground running from second one, your short will seem even shorter than it is and you'll be home free. Most filmmakers are under the impression that for a short film to work, it needs to have an excellent twist at the end—and I agree with that for the most part—but what's even more crucial is that there be something exciting to hook them in the beginning—no matter how great a twist is, if the audience has left the theater it won't matter. In my short film, *In the Morning*, the first climactic moment was initially written to happen a few minutes in, but I decided to start with it instead in order to get my audience hooked right away. I rearranged the story so that I placed this exciting scene in the first ten seconds and then used flashbacks to it later in the script which I think kept the audience more engaged than they would have been otherwise. My short was ten minutes, but people always said it felt half that length."

But do not rely on flashbacks to tell your story if your story doesn't work without them. With my programmer hat on, I would say that both *In the Morning* and *The Youth in Us* would have worked with or without the flashbacks because the story was *already* there making the flashbacks a creative choice and not something pertinent to the audience understanding the film.

I cannot stress enough how important short film structure is to your success. As a short filmmaker, you are bound by a time limit. You can take 10 minutes to cultivate a character in a feature. In a short that's most (if not *all*) of your allotted time. Break down your script in a similar fashion to breaking down a feature script. If your film is 12 minutes long, at what point in the script do you show us the story's main arc? Believe me, it's not on page 7.

When I first wrote the script for *Dani and Alice* there were four pages of setup. Who these characters were, how they got dressed for the evening, what perfume they chose, blah blah blah. After sending it out to a few friends for notes they all came back saying, "Start the story faster. Cut out the fat." Keeping in mind that this is a *visual* medium, I gave the audience *visual cues* as to who these people were in minute 1. I moved the drama to that first 2 minutes. You already *knew* who these people were based on how they were dressed, who was driving, their body

language, and of course, through the dialogue. Plus, adding all that setup I originally planned for would have added a minimum of another half-day of shooting that my budget could not support. That film wouldn't have played at ten festivals never mind over 100, had it begun with those first 4 self-indulgent minutes.

WHAT MAKES STRUCTURE RULES DIFFERENT FOR DOCUMENTARIES?

With docs, filmmakers often make a similar mistake, believing that they have more time to allow the story to unfold than they actually do to keep the audience's interest. Diane Weyermann notes:

> "Something that can get lost in documentaries is that, certainly for beginning filmmakers out in the field, they think they have a really compelling story or subject, and they go out and film it in this straightforward documentation way. But that's also a real issue that filmmakers should consider very deeply *before* embarking to make that film. You are a storyteller, a filmmaker, you are using a visual creative medium, how do you take that story and move it beyond pure documentation into filmmaking storytelling with full use of the visual aesthetic to engage people. Editing, music, the look of the film. I think that to the extent that docs have become more popular in the last eight to ten years is largely connected to what I believe is the storytelling and aesthetic qualities that have been brought to the field. There is no longer this feeling that docs are like medicine, they're good for you, or perhaps they're educational, but that they're not interesting, engaging, surprising, or emotionally moving in the filmic storytelling ways. How it's shot, how it's edited, constructed, how graphics are used; there are so many different *important* elements to focus on."

A truly great gift that documentary filmmakers shared with me is that more often than not, they began to make a documentary about one thing but once in production (or even later in the edit) they realized their film was about something else entirely. Tia Lessin (*Bowling for Columbine, Fahrenheit 9/11, Trouble the Water*) is an extraordinary documentary filmmaker and producer who experienced this while making *Trouble the Water*, which won both the Sundance and Full Frame Documentary Grand Jury Prize (www.elsewherefilms.org):

> "The heart of any good story—whether fiction or nonfiction—is strong characters and during those first few days of shooting in the aftermath of [Hurricane] Katrina, my partner Carl [Deal] and I were looking for characters that could lead us through the story. We were focusing on soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard who were returning from Baghdad so we could make the connection between the Iraq war and the failed government response along the Gulf Coast. Our eyes and ears were open, trying to respond to what was going on in the moment, so when Kimberly and Scott Roberts approached us at the Red Cross Shelter across the parking lot from the National Guard Armory we redirected our cameras and our story.
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> "Part of what was appealing to us about Kimberly and Scott as characters was they belied the stereotypes we were seeing on TV at that time—racist depictions of New Orleans' African American residents as either rampaging, criminal looters or helpless victims. Though they called themselves street hustlers, Kimberly and Scott are also talented, resourceful, and deeply sympathetic people. They are no one's victims.
>
> "After a couple of days, Kimberly showed us the raw home movie footage that she shot the day before and the day of the storm. Carl and I felt surprise and outrage, and were moved

to tears and, thanks to her real-time voiceover, to laughter; we knew that her home movies could fill in the blanks before the storm, and our footage could tell the story in the aftermath. We didn't know how their story would turn out, and that was part of the appeal."

And when you're trying to get your documentary into festivals, Basil Tskiokos, Artistic Director of NewFest (www.newfest.org) and Sundance U.S. Documentary Features Programming Associate, shares:

"Documentary or narrative, the biggest challenge for any film is the story, and the danger when making a documentary is, since it's 'true,' finding the story, or better yet, finding the right way to tell the story can be very elusive. Filmmakers can get too close to their subjects and lose objectivity, or they can simply allow themselves and their films to meander. Beyond this, of course, is the tendency to rely too much on talking heads, a trap most beginning documentarians fall into."

Know Your Story Better Than You Know Yourself

Prolific filmmaker/performance artist and author Miranda July has created over ten marvelous short film works. She had captivated audiences with her non-linear performance film art for decades and was trying to get her feature made. She was rejected twice at the Sundance Screenwriters Lab before her script was selected and subsequently she debuted it at Sundance in 2005. *Me and You and Everyone We Know* won the 2005 Sundance Special Jury Prize, the coveted 2005 Camera D'Or at Cannes, and many other awards. She also wrote the

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short script *Are You the Favorite Person of Anyone?* that we featured in the 2005 Sundance Festival in the Short Film Competition. Miranda talks about her creative process:

"I had been writing and performing [both sides of] dialogues for a long time [in my performances] when I began to write a feature script for the first time. So dialogue came easily, and I performed it as I typed it, all the parts. And when I began working with my DP Chuy Chavez, I acted out the whole movie for him, like a one-woman show, so he could feel what was most important to me in each scene.

"Also, if you have connected with an audience live, in person, then you have a very visceral knowledge of their attention, and *what it feels like when it wanders*. That's very useful knowledge to have.

"Most importantly: Performance is the realm in which I feel most free—in part because the medium is inherently experimental—but also, at this point, because it is cheap or free, and does not revolve around critical success in the way a movie or book does. It is good to have an arena that is free of all that. The feature film I am working on now evolved out of a performance, which is the only way it could have happened I think. I had to return to a creative land that pre-dated *Me and You and Everyone We Know.*

"As well . . . so many of the things I did in *Me and You* weren't new to me: working with children, directing myself, the whole process of writing, shooting, editing, scoring. I had done all that many times and it was really only a matter of scale when I did the feature."

Genius. She knew exactly what she wanted before she got on set. She made a film about something she knew a lot about. Learn from that—it's one of the most important elements to being

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a great director. Know more about your story than anyone else involved.

When I was prepping *Dani and Alice,* I acted out the entire script with fellow filmmaker Trish Doolan (*April's Shower, Bug in My Ear, What's True*), who is also a trained actor. We played all the parts, moved furniture around in her living room creating the entire set. By doing this work, I went back and made the script even tighter once I realized what no longer needed to be there. Remember our key word, "economical." And more importantly, once on set, when camera moves had to be condensed due to time restrictions, *I knew what the essence of the scene was,* so it didn't matter if they were sitting, standing, or in a stationary car.

And don't think that only applies to professional filmmakers. If the *only* person willing to speak on camera is Aunt Judy, then you need to be prepared to steer her in the direction you want this home movie to go and have fun with your editing by highlighting exactly how cool she really is.

I'M GONNA GET DISCOVERED!

One sign of talent that agents look for is the ability to recognize what an appropriate subject for a short film is. It shows good judgment. If you get incredible performances and it looks great but the story is unsatisfying in a 15–20 minute format, does that inspire faith in your ability to make the thousands of decisions required for a two-hour feature? No, it doesn't.

Oh, but you cry, "It's a calling card film! I'm trying to get a manager or agent to see that I can direct this kind of high concept film."

Yes, there are agents out there looking for up-and-coming

directors who can manage these kinds of films. *However,* you still have to have believable characters doing believable things in a believable world. These people are not idiots. There are thousands of you out there sending in demo reels. They are looking for that filmmaker who can not only make a great genre film but is also a great storyteller. A great storyteller with an *original* vision.

Like I said, if you make a film that looks like you followed Wong Kar-wai around for a year, the agent is going to move on to someone who has taken a risk creatively and has their own vision to share with an audience. I mean, it seems obvious to me—Wong Kar-wai is already making films, great films. You coming along and making a similar, if not the same film, seems . . . well it seems kinda redundant (read dumb). The truer you stay to your vision, the more likely someone in a position to help you further your career, like an agent, will be to take notice. Craig Kestel is not only an agent at the William Morris Agency, which is one of the largest talent agencies in the world, he is also a huge champion of the short filmmaker. Craig adds his perspective:

"I can't speak for all agents but when I'm watching shorts I'm not only looking for those that are glossy, studio-friendly productions or what we perceive as studio-friendly productions. Actually it's usually not. I have to connect to the character, or the look, or the style. One of my clients, Dito Montiel, made an experimental short which was shots of the New York City skyline with recited poetry and if you see his first feature *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints* [starring Dianne Wiest and Robert Downey, Jr.] that won two awards at Sundance, you can see the threads of his short film style in his feature. There's an example of experimental shorts translating well into a great independent feature, and now he's making his first studio feature. Another short I flipped

for was *Gowanus, Brooklyn*, that also won Sundance, that Ryan [Fleck] and Anna [Boden] were able to translate into an award-winning independent feature *Half Nelson*. A lot of feature filmmakers' style points to their first short film. For me it's just more about style; it's the reaction to the first film, and the storytelling. I'm into glossy, cool things too, but at the core of what I'm attracted to—it's the story."

So now you have your story and the structure to your film. It's time to find a producer and crew up.

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How to Avoid Kicking Your Producer in the Throat

The producer on a film, any film, is the most important person involved. Yes, you're the director and it's your vision, but *nothing* happens (and if it does it usually doesn't happen *as well*) without a solid producer overseeing your project. I've met some incredible creative producers who helped the filmmaker craft a successful film by not only becoming a creative partner but also by being physical producers as well, someone who takes care of the *hundreds* of details required to create an accomplished work. In shorts, since you may only have one person producing your film, you'd do yourself a huge favor by choosing someone who can do both.

Filmmaker Abigail Severance (*Siren*, Sundance 2002; *Come Nightfall*, Sundance 2003; *Saint Henry*, Spotlight Award—Directing 2005; *The Summer We Drowned*, Screenwriting Lab selection FIND 2007) shares her experiences:

"Producing a short film is a strange job because it carries very little of the glamour of filmmaking that people associate with movies, Hollywood, etc. When I asked a friend

who had produced one short for me to do the same on my new film, she said kindly but firmly, 'Oh you mean be your key set PA? I love you, but no thanks.' Finding a good producer who is willing and able to organize volunteers, get stuff donated, and still have the Big Picture in mind is difficult. Then on my third short *Saint Henry*, I found a great, energetic creative producer who was *very* green when it came to the actual production side. About three weeks before the shoot, I was in a panic because so many things had yet to come together. Since most directors are in a constant state of panic at that stage, I couldn't get her to take my particular panic seriously so I asked an experienced producer friend to meet with us and she spent three hours running through a list of forty-seven items that needed attention. By the end of the meeting, my sweet, energetic producer was white as a sheet. The magnitude of work had finally dawned on her. To her credit, she panicked only briefly, then kicked into high gear and pulled everything off. Not as cheaply as I would have liked, but she got the work done. Often we are dealing with people who are trying out the idea of being a producer but don't really know the nuts & bolts and short film producing is ALL nuts & bolts."

Over the years at Sundance and other film-related jobs, I've had the pleasure of meeting many film producers who believed in the director, loved the script, were able to help the project get financing and casting, and facilitated post-production. Some were already feature producers who sensed that the filmmaker had a great feature script they'd eventually like to produce once the director had earned some chops making a short. This is a great scenario because the producer and director get to practice working together on a small scale before throwing themselves into the grueling two-year feature film process.

Now, I've also met producers who did nothing but hinder a project. They lied about their connections, they undermined the director's vision, they made it seem as though the project couldn't have happened without them, and finally, they were awful to deal with at the festival (or with the crew, the vendors, the talent, and the post houses). They spend a lot of time talking and very little doing. Do not be fooled.

HOW TO SPOT A BAD PRODUCER FROM A MILE AWAY

I personally have never had a "bad" producer. I thought the best way to find out what a bad producer looks like is to ask a *good* one. Steak House, of Steakhaus Productions (www.steakhaus.com), who has produced over ten shorts including *Phase 5* (Sundance 2003) and *Billy's Dad Is a Fudge-Packer* (Sundance 2005), alongside five features including the indie feature hit *By Hook or By Crook* (Sundance 2002) and *For the Love of Dolly* (Wolfe, released summer 2008) tipped me off to some telltale signs of a bad producer:

"Well, here's what I would say—you want someone who is honest. The telltale sign of a bad producer that is easiest to see at the beginning is lying. You catch people in these weird little lies, exaggerations and stuff like that. Okay, granted, everyone tells exaggerated stories a little bit, you ramp up a story, that's just talking. But when you catch people in straight-up lying the one thing I've learned is to stop it early. A week goes by and nothing of what they claimed they could accomplish got done. Another week goes by and still nothing's done? They are never going to do anything for you. But, let's be clear. If they tell you they can't do anything for you until March and you're calling every day in February . . . be realistic on your side and on their side."

Filmmaker Madeleine Olnek (*Hold Up, Make Room for Phyllis, Countertransference*) produced her own short *Hold Up* and has also worked with additional producers on other projects. Madeleine shares her thoughts about the differences between a good producer and a not-so-good producer:

> "The most important thing a producer should have is an eye for detail. An eye for detail, a memory of detail, because the ability to be proactive is enabled by knowledge, comprised of details. A good producer also understands the enormous pressures a director is under and does everything they can to take extra stresses off the director, so they can direct the movie well. I think good producers are 'hands on' people; there is a lot of legwork involved in producing a short. Getting someone to produce who sees their task as delegating, and the to-do list as 'errands' (when getting those things done absolutely affects the quality of what ends up on the screen) is just someone who is going to put more on your plate. When people are, essentially, being paid in credits, it is very hard to find people for the producer to delegate their job to who are competent; competent people quickly size up the fact that they are doing the work just for someone else to get the credit and they evenually quit. And usually these delegatory types of producers exacerbate the situation with intentionally high-profile entrances and parade around the set for five minutes (as if that does anything) on their way to martinis (which they let everyone know about). And if a producer is not really going to be involved in a hands-on way in the everyday nitty-gritty of getting a movie together, what's the point of them working on the movie? You'd be better off doing it yourself and getting credit for the 'errands' you will inevitably be running anyway."

HIGH-PROFILE NAME PRODUCERS

I have watched many filmmakers holding out for the big-name producer only for that producer to, months down the road, have to pull out because something bigger has come along. If you're going the "name" producer route make sure you have solid backup.

It is possible to get a seasoned producer to take a look at your project. This is another arena where networking comes in. Ask around in the network of industry contacts that you will develop (or are in the process of developing, as this community will expand and contract constantly) and start interviewing people. No, you're probably not going to get Effie T. Brown or Allen Bain straight out of the gate. But try to.

Aim high. Higher, dude.

And, yes, I said start *interviewing.*

When I was in the market for a producer I found that even people much higher up the food chain than I were very excited to meet first and discuss the project to ensure we were a good fit. In fact, it would seem unprofessional and naive for you not to want to set up a "get to know you" interview before forging ahead in such an important partnership.

Generally speaking, the more seasoned the producer you attach to your film, the more producing you are going to have to do yourself. So you should make sure to have another producer on board who can address the details of your shoot. No, seasoned producers are not slackers. However, they are usually very busy and not available to find out if you can get a free camera package or investigate the best location for you to use, or to help with the breakdown of your budget.

I got very lucky and had the undeniably gifted Effie T. Brown as my producer on *Dani and Alice.* I was having drinks with Effie and Susan O'Leary, who was then the Director of Fox

Searchlight's director's lab, *foxsearchlab*. There was always free Absolut vodka flowing in the Red Room during the Los Angeles Film Festival the year I was programming there (during my Sundance off-season). Late into the evening I was sitting with Effie and Susan, and Susan was relentless about me taking action on my own filmmaking aspirations and so I just blurted it out, "Yes, yes, I'll make it this year . . . will you guys produce it?" They both gave me a resounding YES. Susan invited my script into the *foxsearchlab* and Effie came on board as the producer. (Thank you Absolut!) Effie shares her wisdom:

> "I would give you the same advice on a short film as a feature film. It's the same relationship. People don't realize that making a short film and making a feature are the same amount of work. And oftentimes making a feature is actually easier, because you have more of a budget for it. When you're looking for a producer, know that you're going to be in bed with that person for at least a year. So you need someone with a like mind, a like vision, *and* a like temperament. No matter how fabulous you think you are, there will always be a crisis. And you need to turn to someone who can handle the crisis with you. It's a combination of creative vision, temperament, and crisis management. Those three things are really important in a director. *And* probably more so in producers. When I was coming up, I was a line producer, and as a line producer I was beholden to the plan that I was mapping out and *not* beholden to the creative vision. So my relationship with directors was often, at the beginning of my career, antagonistic. Then as I climbed up the ladder, I realized that while money dictates creative, creative also helps you with your bottom line."

By using Effie's name and contacts alone, I was a million miles ahead of the game. By having Susan's support at *foxsearchlab*, I was able to shoot on 35mm. As I noted, when you get a big-name producer you may also need to find another producer(s) to do the heavy lifting (budgets, locations, etc.). I found top-notch Christo DiMassis and Roger Mayer of Brooklyn Reptyle Productions and an outstanding production manager, Tracy Lynn Smith, through Jacques Thelemaque at Filmmakers Alliance (www.filmmakersalliance.org). Effie and I agreed that we couldn't have made that film without those three pulling in favors, working twenty-hour days, and keeping the rest of the crew laughing and motivated. And of course, having director of photography Geary McLeod pulling in favors of his own, and his very capable camera crew making magic on-set was invaluable.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF THIS IS THE RIGHT PRODUCER?

The first thing I'll tell you is there aren't many (any?) producers I know out there who help directors finance their shorts, and by this I mean they are not going to find you cash money. However, they should be able to get you donated stuff and a free or close-to-free crew, but the actual cash you need to go into production will be all on you.

Good places to start looking for a producer is by inquiring with other filmmakers and checking out your local filmmaker group (e.g., IFP in New York provides immeasurable support and references for budding filmmakers, as does Filmmakers Alliance in Los Angeles). Most cities, big and small, all over the world have some sort of filmmaker networking organization.

Film festivals are another great place where you can meet producers who have already accomplished what you are trying to: get a film made that gets selected for a festival. Just make sure to talk to the director they are there with. Maybe that film got made with very little help from the person who was given a producer credit and you'd want to know that before asking them to come onto your project only to find yourself alone doing all of the work.

MAYBE MY BEST FRIEND JACK CAN BE MY PRODUCER!

The relationship between a producer and director can get contentious. Okay, it's pretty much always a little contentious, no matter how much love you share. You want a crane shot, which they know you don't have and will not be able to find the money in the budget for (plus crane shots in shorts are crazy, uh, I mean *unnecessary*). You think shooting digitally instead of 35 mm will cramp your creative style and they know that it's your only choice budget-wise (more on this in Chapter 4). You want to keep the beach scene at dusk and it's their job to break it to you that scheduling-wise that's impossible. Maybe you're thinking to yourself, "I'll look within my group of friends and find someone who really believes in me and my movie."

Hmm, I made this very decision with *Dani and Alice* when I begged my friend Steak House to come on board. I thought she'd be great, having been a line producer for many years. I loved her energy, talent, and sense of humor no matter how challenging things got. However, bad timing on both our parts made this a match made in filmmaking hell. Fortunately, our love and respect for each other made the make-up easy and we'll be friends forever. Steak talks about some of her wisdom gained from ten years and ten-plus short films alongside several independent features wisdom with us:

> "I like to call it 'crushing my sparkle.' I avoid working with people who crush my sparkle and directors should also be looking for producers who don't do that to them. Essentially, you're looking for someone who has *time* to devote to your project. Someone with a DIY [do-it-yourself] sensibility. Someone who is not afraid to ask for things, to make those cold calls to get stuff for free, because you're probably not going to get some super-experienced producer to help you accomplish this kind of work at this stage in your career."

Finding an impartial objective person to share this creative vision with you is a *must*. If you think one of your friends is the right person for the job, go out and ask another filmmaker who also thought that and see if they're still friends with that producer—if they can even stand to be in the same room together. Or if that producer is still among the living. Or if your director friend still gets a tic in her face every time someone puts on their slippers (see page 58).

It's imperative to be realistic with your expectations as to what a producer can and cannot do for you and your short film. Keep in mind that filmmaking is a business for most producers. As the director you have a lot more to gain (and lose) than anyone else on this project, as Steak reminds us:

> "No one cares about your project as much as you do—no matter what they say. That's another director delusional moment, 'Oh everyone is going to work as hard on my film as I am.' No. No they're not. Only the director is going to work that hard. Then the producer, then the director of photography, then the editor and so on. But as a director it is *you* who is going to follow this movie all the way through because with a short there's not a lot for the producer to do after the principal shooting. Maybe as your producer I can get you a discounted telecine or hook you up with a few editors I know, but most of the post-production will be done by you or if you have money to hire a post supervisor, by them."

I CAN BE MY OWN PRODUCER!

Uh, no, no you can't. And, besides, why would you want to if you've got people willing to help? Believe me, when I watch a film where

the director lists themselves as the writer/director/producer/editor—it shows. There are things missing . . . like, ahem, good performances. How can you focus on actors when you're constantly being pulled out of your director role putting out production fires?

I could list the thousands of filmmakers who were emotionally scarred for life from producing their own film but instead I'll keep it real by reliving the production of my last short, *Happy Birthday*.

I had this great idea for a short that I wanted to get done before 2007 ended. I enlisted some help to get the first draft of the script done and then I contacted the actors I knew I wanted to cast. I thought, "I don't need to find a producer! I'll do it all myself! I'm writing a book about it for crying out loud, I can do this!"

Nonsense.

It's the job of the director to DIRECT actors. Seems simple, but we all seem to forget that that is our actual job. And on a good set, it's your only job. There is no more collaborative work than filmmaking (except launching astronauts to the moon), and if you think you can do it all yourself—think again.

Wait! What Does A Producer Do?

J.D. DiSalvatore, an award-winning producer, has made her share of short and feature films (*Gay Propaganda, Shelter*). She has a great Web site dedicated to indie film gossip (www.thesmokingcocktail.com), and when I asked her to answer the question, "What Does A Producer Do?" she responded with her tongue-in-cheek version of what she does for a living:

J.D. DiSalvatore's "What A Producer Does" List

- Find good scripts (this task resembles any Indiana Jones movie when he's looking for buried treasure while being chased by Nazis).

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- Convince someone with money to invest in the script (it helps if one took drama in high school, as this involves a lot of dog and pony show tactics and tap dancing).
- Listen to a director throw phrases around like, "My vision," usually with the request for some profoundly expensive and useless piece of equipment.
- Try not to develop a Xanax addiction while waiting for your funding from investors to drop into your bank account.
- Find your screenwriter at noon facedown in a glass of gin at Musso and Frank's mumbling, "They're ruining my script."
- Ask your lawyer to ask their lawyer what it felt like when his soul slipped out of his body, and what it was like to actually meet Satan.
- Tell the actresses they're pretty.
- Tell the actors they're pretty.
- Tell the studio executives they're pretty. And smart. They really like that.
- Smile and nod when studio executives give you notes, generally trying to change your pensive tone poem on social inequality into a musical version of *Porky's*.
- Smile and nod when one of your investors insists on having their boyfriend in the movie.
- Listen to the director yell and scream when you pass the above message on.
- Hire and negotiate everyone's contract (which is why my hair is gray).
- Listen to more of "my vision" with a request to shut down several streets of downtown LA–*for a full day.*
- Send expensive bottles of liquor to all your vendors.
- Try not to say ANYTHING when your film executive says, "No, I've never heard of *Citizen Kane.*"
- Tell your DP there's no more money in the budget for the camera department.

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- Tell the art department there's no more money in the budget for them.
- Tell the visual effects department there's no more money in the budget for them.
- More of "my vision" when the director wants "one little scene" and "only needs it shut down for a few hours" when referring to LAX on a Friday afternoon of Labor Day weekend.
- Repeat to yourself "I will not cry, I will not cry," when the driver forgets to engage the emergency brake and the entire prop truck slides off the cliffs of Malibu Canyon into the Pacific Ocean.
- Try not to develop a Xanax addiction when your lead actor finds out about the SAG clause that states he doesn't really need to do nudity.
- Tell the Teamsters you're only shooting a $40,000 mini dv film with money your mom gave you.
- Send expensive bottles of liquor to the buyers at all the distribution companies.
- Hold your editor's hand during the first three weeks of post while the director does his/her cut, while reiterating, "I know, you'll get it soon, and *you'll* be able to do it right."
- Persuade director not to cut out all the scenes with the actor that wouldn't sleep with him/her on set.
- Try not to develop a Xanax addiction when you find out your investor's boyfriend, who you cast in the movie, has run off to Mexico with one of the *other* actors from set.
- Tell editor to remove all scenes from film with investor's boyfriend. And the actor he ran off with.
- Send every PA and intern you have to the Chateau Marmont bungalows and pull your composer out of his ten-day coke binge, send the girls home, and tell him the soundtrack is due.

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- Get the audience drunk on champagne at your first screening, prior of course.
- Tell film festival programmers they're pretty.
- Try not to develop a Xanax addiction when your film print comes back with the entire sound off by three seconds.
- Trade gossip about Drew Barrymore to *US Weekly* in exchange for a mention of your film's theatrical opening.
- Convince your lead actor to get caught in a DUI or prostitution scandal just prior to your film's release. Photographed with Paris Hilton, also a plus.
- Strongly suggest to your prettiest actor that he "drop the soap" when he hand-delivers the preview DVD of the movie to Perez Hilton.
- Send anonymous e-mails to reviewers who panned your film asking them what the highest grade of public school was they completed.
- Try not to develop a Xanax addiction while waiting for the first Box Office results.
- Try to close your next movie deal before said Box Office results hit the trades.
- Repeat above steps.

Now, what happened in pre-production, production, and post with me as the main producer could have easily been avoided had I had someone in that essential role. When you're thinking in a vacuum, making all the decisions yourself, you tend to lose sight of the details. And as we've learned, filmmaking is *all* in the details. Instead of burning myself out on the phone, in meetings, and schlepping equipment all over Manhattan and Brooklyn, I could have been doing the only job I was actually there to do on this film: Direct the actors and quality control the end product. Sure, I know a lot about filmmaking and could certainly

produce *someone else's* work, but in the future I will never work on my own film without another producer on board from the beginning. Ever.

If you watch *Happy Birthday* you'll see that I was able to make a fun short with great performances that played all over the world, garnered both DVD release and broadcast distribution both here at home and internationally. But this was only because producer Jon Johnson came on board, scouting locations and finding private money, and my fantastic first AD/production manager, Marina Guzman, took over as producer once it became clear that I was wearing one hat too many.

Listen to people who know more than you, have done way more than you have, and are really, really, really successful at it. Making a short film isn't a personality contest, but if you don't heed your grandmother's advice, "You get more bees with honey," you may find yourself very, very sad and very, very, *very* alone by the time you get to post-production.

I say this from experience—don't be a know-it-all. A director is set up to be the captain of the ship from the outset, and for some of us that means having to know everything! But what if you don't? (I mean, how could you?! This is your first movie!) So there I was, thinking (and acting like) I knew everything about my film there was to know—but luckily I had that arrogant attitude quickly adjusted by Effie during pre-production (let's just say there was a slipper involved—flying across the room barely missing my head). She was, of course, right, and I needed to step back and listen to someone who had done this many times before with fantastic results. Effie talks about the director/producer relationship:

> "It took a while, but I finally learned that it always gets to the point where when you don't have the answers, instead of freaking out, you just say, 'I don't know. Let me go find out about that.' That's the thing that saves my ass every time.

> Admitting I don't know everything and going and finding out those answers. And, of course, being a good producer is being able to tell people something in a way that they can hear it. I learned you can come at somebody from a different entry point without being aggressive and still get your point across without making them feel defensive or challenging their creative vision. It's communication and human psychology. You have to be able to read people. . . . I can't stress enough, it *really* is like dating. When you find someone you work well with, you just stick with it. It's like a marriage that works."

Heed the advice in this chapter and I can almost promise you and your project will find the right producer.