

# FINDING SOLACE

Through 10 months of work, 11 rewrites and six days of shooting, one director creates a film with the biggest Studio 22 grant of the year.

BY TYLER DASWICK

An anxious silence stifles the Louis Hall lobby. It's 5:30 a.m. on Jan. 30, and the remaining batch of crew members for one of Northwestern's largest student films slumps against the walls. They've been preparing for this weekend for two months—ordering equipment, gathering personnel, coordinating meetings and reviewing the itinerary over and over. Communication junior Zach Lorkiewicz, the film's first assistant director, paces back and forth across the muddy carpet. He crosses his arms, cups his chin and fidgets with his papers, but his feet maintain an even pace.

Communication junior Mark Davis, key grip, sits in the corner. I lean over and ask him what to expect for the day. He shrugs and offers up empty, work-gloved hands. "I don't know," he says. "I've never been on a set this big."

The movie is called *Solace*. This year's winner of student production company Studio 22's coveted Bindley Grant, *Solace* cost about \$8,300 and recruited roughly one-in-eight Radio, Television and Film undergrads (42 total crew members), more than any other student film at Northwestern. Director and Communication junior Mei Gao has been working on the sci-fi thriller since last summer, when she wrote the script. *Solace* explores the idea of memory theft, and while Gao cites decay and coping with tragedy as themes, she says she's "very open to people interpreting my projects."

The script underwent 11 rewrites before it went to Studio 22. Along with 10 other scripts pre-selected from a field of 29 by the 12-person board, Gao had 10 minutes to make *Solace*'s case for the \$7,500 Bindley Grant.



Pitching a film to Studio 22 is a tense, two-day affair. Before the board lets in the first student (who, coincidentally, would be Gao), Communication junior Marion Hill,

executive co-chair of Studio 22, stands in front of her 11 colleagues and spreads her arms out wide. She tells them to breathe in through their noses, out through their mouths. Everyone raises their arms and lets them fall again in 30-second meditations. Then the lights up front go dark. Hill retakes her seat and everyone swivels to face the front of the room. Gao enters.

From the outset, it's obvious that the petite, round-faced woman with the neat hair and stylish glasses standing before the board is not easily fazed. The Studio 22 board members sit in silence—questions are prohibited on the first night—but Gao marks her 10 minutes with a coolness

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and a meticulousness that will define her approach for the next two quarters. She pitches a sci-fi film in a dilapidated setting, and her presentation covers everything from production design (what the sets and props and costumes will look like) to cast to camera movements. Her influences are *Her* and *Requiem for a Dream*.

The 10 minutes evaporate, and Gao leaves the room to polite applause and the reminder that the board will see her again tomorrow night.

Ten other pitches follow, and the sheer scope of ambition in the RTVF department becomes apparent. Students detail their prospective budgets, color schemes, costume choices and even locations. One aspiring writer/director discusses his plans for a sports film. Two elaborate pitches, one about hip-hop and the other

a small-town neo-Western, play music in the background. Ambition of the project, feasibility and director experience should all combine to “provide a better educational filmmaking experience,” Hill says.

As pitches come and go, something else becomes clear: Everyone knows everyone else. Those who come before the board are friends outside that gray-washed room in Louis Hall. But as soon as the doors shut, Hill and Communication junior Dan Rufo, Hill's executive co-chair, lay down the instructions. It's all professional.

After the board hears all 11 pitches, Studio 22 convenes to decide on the “red flags” for each movie—major concerns that the prospective filmmakers must address the following night. How will the movie portray violence? Which film festivals are being targeted? Will the actors be Northwestern students or not? Everything needs to be accounted for, and the writers, directors and producers need to address these questions if they want a shot.

On the second night, discrepancies emerge between the front-runners and the also-rans. The Studio 22 board divides into its respective sections—Executive Co-Chairs, PR, Talent, Production, Finance, Industry, Outreach and Script—and forms a circle.

The students pitching have eight minutes at each section to detail their visions, and amid all of the fidgeting, careful eye contact and formal question-skirting, those who have it stand out. They field the hyper-detailed queries like they've known the answers for months. And Gao has been here before. During her sophomore year she won a \$1,000 grant from Studio 22 for her film *Improv*.

“The process informed a lot of logistical details about the project,” Gao says. “They ask you, ‘Who is your character? What's your theme?’ Those are things as a filmmaker you should be thinking about anyway, so that was very helpful.”

Gao has it on the second night of pitching—the picture of perma-calm from 24



Photos contributed by Jacob Stern



First Assistant Camera Jeremy Le (left) switches out a lens while Director of Photography Terence Yoon trains the camera on actress Elise Zell.



Gaffer Anneliese Sloves adjusts a single-bulb light.