

HOW NOT TO MAKE A SHORT FILM

SECRETS FROM
A SUNDANCE
PROGRAMMER

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Keep It Fresh (Script Story)

INT. WRITER'S OFFICE—DAY

An older white man with a beard sits at his manual typewriter. He begins a story about an artist living in the eighteenth century. The artist finds himself in love with the wrong woman, who finally betrays him by killing him in his sleep. The writer types away until he realizes that he has entered his own story and this woman is now (surprise) in his office seducing him with her eyes and low-cut dress. The writer falls for her as did his character. [*And guess what?*] She kills the writer.

What?

The stakes are never higher than with the script. Don't make the mistake that many novice filmmakers do, which is to ignore story in favor of shooting a bunch of big Hollywood production value shots, stringing them together, and calling it a film.

I have to assume that if you're reading this book you already have an idea of the story you'd like to shoot. Perhaps your original idea will change after reading this book. Regardless, what you have to do is make sure this script is good enough to shoot, the length matches your story, AND that your story is a short one.

A great short begins with a solid story and characters. You need to know who these people are, what they look like, what kind of underwear they wear, what you'd like to happen to them, and most importantly, what they want and what *they'd* like to happen to them. Yes, you should make sure the wardrobe matches the character—often a simple outfit tells us who this character is in that first ten seconds we meet them. As does the job they do, the person they're sleeping with (or not sleeping with), the language they use, and the breakfast drink they choose. People are not stupid. If your character walks out of his bedroom in boxer shorts and ratty Rolling Stones T-shirt, makes coffee, and lights up a cigarette, an audience member in Nigeria will understand the essence of this setup. (But remember, if I just used that as an example it means I've seen it a hundred times and you should seek out a fresher way to *show* the "Guy with a Dream but No Willpower to Achieve It" character.) When you *know* your characters you'll understand exactly how to get "who they are" across to the audience.

HOW TO LOSE YOUR PROGRAMMER/AUDIENCE FROM SCENE ONE

Over the years I have watched more films than I (and my colleagues) care to remember with the following story lines:

The Tragic Buddy Film

Two soldiers (pick a war—Iraq, Vietnam, WWII, WWI—I’ve seen them all) struggle through the snow/rain/mud/forest/desert. One is wounded/angry/desperate and the other is proud/quiet/rebellious. There are flashbacks to battle, letters or pictures of girlfriends pulled out of pockets, and they usually run out of water/food and end up barely escaping the enemy by hiding out in some dirt hole or farm basement. Or, worse, they are each from opposite armies (British vs. Italian, German vs. American, etc.) and have to help each other stay alive. Whatever.

The Latino Drug Lord/Black Gangster Film

I put these together because they are essentially the same film (sometimes it’s the Irish Good Old Boys with Guns film). I’ve seen this film several hundred times and from the opening sequence I know exactly what’s going to happen—and, my friend, so do all of my colleagues.

Two guys, one a “good- looking natural- born killer,” the other his “not- so- committed- to- the- cause, not- that- great- looking best friend.” They either steal money/drugs from other criminals, find a bunch of money that belongs to other criminals, or they are the avenging criminals trying to get their drugs/money back. The twist on this one is when the “not- so- committed- to- the- cause best friend” is the “little brother who is about to graduate from high school but gets shot by accident instead.” The Hughes Brothers have moved on—so should you.

The Poetic/Lyrical Non- Linear Ode to Ex- Girlfriend

Plenty of old photos, Coldplay (unlicensed of course) underscores the entire film, shots of the ocean, steel- gray skies, a laughing couple playfully wrestling in the sun at Griffith Park, maybe even eating cotton candy at Coney Island. CUT TO: lonely guy or girl watching TV alone, walking along wetted down streets smoking, wandering aimlessly in and out of all the old favorite places they used to go.

Do what the rest of us do when we have a hard breakup. Write bleak poetry (that you show no one), compose raging e-mails (saved as a draft and never sent), find a good therapist, and call Tony Robbins.

The *Cold Mountain* Film

This is the period- piece film. There are the slave woman and man tucked away in their beds conspiring about their imminent escape. Or it’s the Black slave woman who is in love with the white master (or the other way around, or it’s the white woman and her Mandingo). Could be about Jesus Christ, could be about the Apache slave trade. Doesn’t matter—they don’t work.

It’s extremely difficult to nail a period piece with millions of dollars (just ask the producers of *Alexander* or *Marie Antoinette*). So your film shot in the park by your house, the Palm Springs desert, or beneath the Brooklyn Bridge is set up to fail . . . miserably. I remember programming just one short with this setup. It was *Red Mud* (*Rosso Fango*, Italy) and it had a huge budget (over \$50,000), was an international selection with government financial backing, was shot on 35mm, and had a very slick twist.

I am also reminded of *The Last King of Scotland*. Forest Whitaker and James McAvoy are brilliant actors; the script is great and based on a true story. The film was shot in Africa and the UK, where the story takes place. Slowly, over 121 minutes, the character of Idi Amin is revealed. The filmmaker and producers had access to shoot in Uganda, had the means to re-create an entire era and had true professionals working in production design, research and wardrobe. And *still* there are no less than twelve sightings of factual and anachronistic errors in the film listed on IMDb. Millions of dollars and countless top- notch professionals later, there were errors. Do you really think your \$12,000-budgeted WWII short is up for the challenge?

The Prostitute (Homeless Man, Curmudgeon Who Lives Next Door) With a Heart of Gold Film

A fairly drab house wife who hates her kids, her husband, her job, her colleagues, and ultimately herself meets up with one of the above. Sometimes it's a man with the same storyline only he has already lost his wife, kids, job, and will to live. Along comes a prostitute, or a homeless man, or the nosy old lady next door who teaches them how to be grateful for what he or she has. After a four-minute conversation, the woman becomes the dream mom, wife, mother, and employee or the man gets his wife, kids, job, and self-esteem back.

Okay, for one thing, if and when this does happen in real life, it is only interesting to the person it happens to (save a few buddies at the neighborhood bar who listen "politely" to this lifechanging moment). Unless, of course, I'm watching Oprah. And if I am, it's why I'm watching Oprah. I want to see the real people telling their real stories. If you really feel the need to make this kind of film—make a documentary (but first read the section below on documentaries).

The Dream/Suicide Film

This is possibly one of the most excruciating short film ideas ever. Your protagonist is dead and he doesn't know it; is contemplating suicide but her daughter runs into the room with her report card so the lead drops the pill bottle behind the couch; OR, worse, the protagonist dies a horrible death only for the audience to be "shocked" by the fact that it was all a dream. But the ultimate worst story idea in this genre is when the lead kills someone accidentally (usually a child while he's driving drunk or angry), is *then* killed accidentally by the ghost of the dead child, and the two live in some sort of experimentally shot purgatory forever. I've seen this film way too many times and it rarely hits its mark. Stop yourself.

The Rip-off Film

Oddball guy, gets pushed around at school, laments over not having a chance with the popular girl, has an even more oddball best friend (male or female, usually overweight and smokes) who encourages him to try out for the football (baseball, chess, polo) team to get the girl's attention. Coach is a madman megalomaniac who brings him on only to see him get his legs broken, his mom drinks vodka in her morning coffee and smokes in the broom closet while his dad polishes his guns, teaches English literature at the local college, and tells his son he's a moron every chance he gets. Guy gets winning goal (home run, checkmate, whatever), gets the girl, and learns to tango. WTF?

Let me make one last plea. In the five years I was at Sundance I think we showed maybe three or four narrative shorts that included one of the above storylines—in *five years*. You're already working with a less than 2% chance of getting into top-tier fests—don't further lessen your chances by copying someone else's work. Seasoned producer Vanessa Coifman, Executive Vice President of Production and Development at Senator Entertainment, who produced, among many other films, *Fireflies in the Garden*, which premiered at the 2008 Berlinale International Film Festival (starring Ryan Reynolds, Emily Watson, Willem Dafoe, and Julia Roberts) took a few moments out of her hectic schedule to give her take on this. Vanessa clearly outlines the deal with the devil you want to avoid:

"[A rip-off of someone else's work] is obvious immediately. You *know* when somebody's trying to be something that they're not. And if you can mimic them, there's probably work for you out there, but it'll never be something that you want to do. You'll become a director for hire, for people who want a film to *look* like Wes Anderson. You're going to fall into a hole that you're never going to be able to step out of. You *must* start with your own voice."

My friend, believe me when I tell you it is painfully obvious that you have watched *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Color Purple*, or *Schindler's List* twenty times. Guess what they were? Feature films. Guess what you can't make them into? Short films. Guess what neither programmers nor audience members want to see? A scene, entirely out of context, that is a rip-off of one of these films. Don't do it.

The Cancer/Crack Addict Parent/Holocaust Documentary

All of a sudden during lunch one Friday afternoon, Bubbe starts telling you the story of her escape from Europe during Hitler's terrorizing reign. You run, grab your camera, and voilà, you have a compelling documentary about the Holocaust. No, no, you don't. You have your grandmother telling her incredibly poignant story beside an open window (with traffic and pedestrian noise intermittently drowning out her voice), lit with a 60-watt light bulb (making her look like she's auditioning for *Dawn of the Dead IV*), and of course the light bulb is flickering—which is impossible to fix in post, where she forgets she's on camera and often walks out of frame to get more tea or talk to your aunt Ruth in the other room (who has forbidden you from turning the camera on her). Or you find out that you have cancer and want to document your journey. Or you learn that the women of the neighborhood are losing their Community Garden to the greedy corporation that owns the property and won't sell it to them. Or you run into some crack addicts living on skid row who allow you to follow them around while they get high.

I'm not going to be flippant about these documentary stories, but I am going to be honest. If it is unbelievably difficult to make a good narrative short film, it can be said that it is just this side of impossible to make a *compelling* documentary short film. Yes, Bubbe is an incredible woman who raised your mom perfectly, who in turn was able to raise you well. Yes, going through radiation and chemotherapy is undeniably difficult and your journey will inspire all those around you. Yes, crack (meth, cocaine, alcohol) addiction is ruining lives worldwide. Just know that these topics affect millions of people, which means there are hundreds (if not *thousands*) of filmmakers making these documentaries—so yours better be beyond compelling. It better be heart-stopping and breathtaking.

Do an online search for Jonna Tamases' *Jonna's Body*, Cynthia Wade's Oscar-winning *Freeheld*, Selena A. Burks' *Saving Jackie*, Hanna Polak's *Children of Leningradsky* and Gina Levy and Eric Johnson's *Foo- Foo Dust*. These are just a few of the powerful short documentaries I have seen that cover familiar territory with spectacular results. Once you start searching, I guarantee that you will find many great films that will put into perspective what a truly great documentary short can accomplish.

With docs, you tend to have a lot more leeway than narrative, experimental, or animated short films in terms of running time. The audience is required to become emotionally invested in real people, saying real things. This takes time. Sure, I've seen lovely docs that are four minutes long; however, their subjects, their stories' purpose only needed four minutes to be revealed and are often far lighter in tone than most documentaries.

As both a programmer and an audience member it is difficult for me to decide when a doc sucks. This is someone's real life up there on that screen—who am I to judge? Well, what I've learned along the way is that I'm not judging the subjects themselves; I'm judging your ability to reveal them in a cinematic, honorable, and honest way. First, you need to deeply explore what and whom you have chosen to document and then—most importantly—be able to show us, your audience, why you've chosen them.

I spoke with Diane Weyermann, one of the few people in this industry I consider a mentor. Diane has been a supporter of documentary storytelling since her early work at Open Society Institute and the Soros Foundation. She was also instrumental in the development of the Sundance Documentary Fund. Over the course of her career, Diane was involved with the production of over three hundred documentaries around the world. Her present position is Executive Vice President in charge of Documentary Production at Participant Media (www.participantmedia.com). Participant has executive

produced or coproduced several extraordinary works, including *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Darfur Now*, *Film, Inc.*, and the narrative films *Charlie Wilson's War* and *The Visitor*. Diane took a few moments out of her hectic schedule to talk with me, and she shares:

“Sometimes the most universal stories are those small stories. It doesn't have to be a big massive issue-related story, it can be small as long as it has that larger resonance. I would say that there are a lot of personal stories out there that may not work as films because they are simply too personal, too myopic. If you want to tell a family story, that story has to transcend your specific family relationships. I would also say you have to look at the body of work that exists and as [Roberta] indicated there are many *many* films about a grandmother who survived the Holocaust. What makes this film different? What are you bringing to the subject that we haven't yet seen?”

When writing the treatment for your documentary ask yourself repeatedly, page by page: What am I bringing to this subject that we haven't yet seen?

And the documentary conundrum of what to shoot and when to turn the camera off is a huge one. You may have a storyline in mind, but during the shoot things could shift dramatically due to an unexpected moment.

When I spoke with director of photography Alison Kelly, we were able to talk about the backstory of a documentary that she'd shot. It was clear to me that she'd turned off the camera to protect one of the subjects, who was under the influence of alcohol. I asked her how she deals with the dichotomy of having a job to do and having morals and personal integrity to uphold. She explains:

“I think you have to use yourself as a guide. There are people that I have worked with that have a really different threshold for what is appropriate, and I think there are people who are much more motivated by what they see in a situation as the potential for commercial success of their indie documentary—by the same token, if the subject is okay with that, I'm not going to judge them for being okay with it. I just know that if it were me, I would have felt like a total asshole if I let that go down. But I've certainly come across people in the film business that not only would have let it go down, but have instigated the situation to make it more dramatic. I think people are so conditioned to feel okay with invading people's space and lives. We see it on TV all the time. The key thing for me, in doing a doc, is that you need to (even more so than with narrative work) be able to trust the team of people you're going in with. Because you're going into a real situation, into real people's lives, and if you don't feel these are people that you share a common respect for space and other people's lives, then you shouldn't be doing it. I've actually turned down jobs because I knew I would be put in a situation where I would feel like I'd have to turn the camera off and leave the room, just because of the way the person was handling the whole thing—why put yourself through it? I would say the most important thing is just to trust your gut. Every time I haven't trusted my gut I've regretted it. I've been in a lot of people's homes

and lives, and particularly as a doc shooter, you get looked at, as the one holding the camera, as the one who has the control. But in reality the entire crew *is* the team and if you have someone on your team that is just generally not a decent person, it's the shittiest feeling because they [the subjects] look at you as a team. And that one weak link can bring the whole team down."

Experimental

Story and structure are equally as important in experimental filmmaking as they are in live- action narratives and straightforward documentaries. The main difference between narrative and experimental is that experimental films are often more poetic than dialogue driven, have certain aspects of filmmaking that are outside the mainstream box (repetitive editing, non- linear storytelling, lengthy shots with minimal movement or action), and most notably, an emphasis on sound design.

I learned a lot from Mike Plante (one of the programmers of Sundance's experimental section, the New Frontier) over our four years together at Sundance programming shorts. You have to check out Mike's Web site, www.iblamesociety.com. During this eye- opening time, experimental filmmaking became one of my favorite genres. So much creativity (and time!) is put into successful experimental works it's awe- inspiring.

I also learned while following experimental filmmakers' careers that most of them are working with the tiniest of budgets that are self- financed, or financed through small grants, and that you're working with a minimal crew or oftentimes alone. It just cannot be easy to go up to your family and say, "I want to make a 15- minute short film of tugboats crossing the bay. Will you give me \$3,000?"

But if the insertion of experimental work in mainstream media is any indication of times to come, I think doing this might get a little easier—because it's everywhere. Once you start looking, you see it in mainstream filmmaking, commercials, Website marketing—that out- of- focus look, the painting or scratching on film look, the non- linear rapid editing and the use of asynchronous sound work.

Some remarkable filmmakers who have incorporated their experimental sensibilities in their feature filmmaking are Kathryn Bigelow, Isaac Julien, Gus Van Sant, Susan Friedman, Chantal Ackerman, and Peter Greenaway.

Experimental work within mainstream filmmaking happens often without the audience ever knowing what the impetus was for certain spellbinding shots or editing techniques. *Se7en* (which stars Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt) owes a huge amount of thanks to Stan Brakhage (a prolific experimental filmmaker and professor) for its outstanding opening credit sequence. Who knew? Mike Plante remarks:

"You'd be surprised how much story and emotion you can get from something experimental—a flawed term since those films are much more planned than experiments, but it *is* a catchy word. If you go to film fests around the country that show truly diverse work, then you start to realize that underground and unusual film work is everywhere, people working from their bedrooms separate from the mainstream world but, in a way, together."

Shirin Neshat—*Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), *Fervor* (2000), *Soliloquy* (1999), *Possessed* (2001), *Pulse* (2001), *Passage* (2001), and *Tooba* (2002)—is an award- winning artist, filmmaker, and author whose works have been featured at some of the most prestigious galleries and festivals all over the

world. Shirin shares:

“I’m not sure if it’s an experimental filmmaker’s responsibility to educate the mainstream audience because really a filmmaker’s task is simply to *make* his or her film however experimental that might be. There seems to be always an audience for such films, even if it’s a small one. Having said that, while making my films, I constantly had to ask myself and others, whether a certain meaning of the film was transparent or not. Through the various test screenings, I was surprised how often many, including non-mainstream audience, missed some of the most significant aspects of the narrative. This of course was very helpful for me to go back to the editing table and consider the problem. So at the end, you as a filmmaker hope to make a film that maintains the right balance in between being accessible to the public while remaining somewhat enigmatic.”

Yes, the use of various abstracting techniques can be exquisitely beautiful and thought-provoking and depending on your goals they can even bring in the dollars—but if your work looks like all you did was copy Stan Brakhage’s work you’re in trouble. Considering he was one of the most important American filmmakers of the twentieth century, yes, you should be studying his work. But just make sure yours isn’t anything one would consider an exact copy.

I know it doesn’t seem as easy to research experimental work as it is linear narrative or documentary; however, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco has a great Web site and is the distributor of more than 3,500 experimental works including those of Stan Brakhage (www.canyoncinema.com). Do your research.

ANIMATION

As you’ll learn later, in Chapter 10, I have an undeniable emotional attachment to animation. All those Saturday mornings spent as a child watching Looney Tunes or imagining myself to be Wonder Woman could be the cause, but I think, in all seriousness, what really captivates me is the sheer genius and ridiculous amount of time and creativity it takes to create great animation. As with experimental work, I am awed by its impact. However, like all artistic work, unoriginal storylines or technique can befall the animator. I reached out to Chris Robinson, the Artistic Director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival. One of the largest animation festivals in the world, the OIAF receives over 2,000 submissions every year and they program somewhere around 150. Chris shares his views with us:

“First off, and maybe I’ll be ostracized for this, but animators are way more down to earth than the majority of live-action filmmakers I’ve met. Some of it is a confidence thing. Animators, at least the indies, are working *directly* with their art. They’re often alone. So, they’re confident about who they are and what they’re doing. Their film, good or bad, is *their* film. I wish that more animators who submit to Ottawa actually went to the festival first (and if not Ottawa, then they should go to some of the other respected animation festivals). Seeing the work and meeting other artists of your ilk—especially in such a marginalized art form as animation—is absolutely essential.

“Also, while it is changing to some degree, there seems

to be more of a satisfaction with making short works [within the animation filmmaking community]. In live action, the short film is generally just the stepping stone, the farm team along the way to the big league of features. In animation, short works are viewed as a legitimate art form—like the short story.”

Hmm, maybe that’s another reason I have such an affection for animation—it is quite comfortable in the short form genre without needing to aspire to feature length. From the 1- minute moments to epic 35- minute works, good animated films carry enough weight to satisfy at any length.

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

Some people will say otherwise, but I think you’re on the wrong track if you don’t choose a story that you have some personal connection to when you’re directing your first film. If you don’t, it will be tremendously difficult. Give yourself a break on your first kick at the can. There will be hundreds of things you need to worry about both on and off set, and it’s important to have an intuitive grasp of the story so these other tasks get your best work. (And another reason to stick with what you know: A veteran programmer or an average audience member can *feel* when the filmmaker isn’t realizing *his* vision but instead one that he thinks will garner the most attention. It’s a sixth sense that film lovers and curators develop very quickly.)

Michaline Babich is a great filmmaker and television producer (*The Big O*, Feature Doc Competition Los Angeles Film Festival, 2001; *Kiss and Tell*, Short Doc Competition Sundance, 2003; *Million Dollar Listing*, on BRAVO; *Gimme Sugar*, on MTV’s Logo 2008). In 2006, after several award- winning television documentary series, she decided to make her first narrative short. “Great,” I said, “what’s it about?” Gay. Male. Sex.

Now, the last time she’d had sex with a man (she has been a lesbian since birth) was in the last century and, as far as I know, she’s never had sex with a gay man. Suffice it to say, she was a nervous wreck on set. She’d have all these great ideas, then was filled with anxiety as she turned to her actors to find out if they in fact would do whatever it was she was rewriting on the fly. It’s only because she’s a seasoned television supervising and executive producer and is used to bluffing that she was able to pull it off and not lose the confidence of her crew and actors.

Ultimately the film did very well on the festival circuit and in distribution, but when asked she says:

“You have enough things to worry about while directing your first film. Do something you know. So you can focus on the camera, on the actors, on the performance. Your crew and actors have to trust you. Make it easy on yourself. Trust me, it’s going to be hard enough. During my shoot I was a prime candidate for Botox, Xanax addiction, and alcoholism.”

HOW DO I KNOW THIS SCRIPT IS WORTH SHOOTING?

I’ll admit something here. I *always* think my first draft is genius. Many of my friends think theirs are too. It’s the nature of the beast. That’s our job as artists—to believe in the art we create. However, the truth is I don’t know a single filmmaker (including myself) who actually shot the first draft of their script. That first draft is there to act as a guideline for the genius you will eventually film. Now, there are several ways to get your script into shooting shape just by reaching out and contacting the right people.

Hire a Script Consultant

There are plenty of professional script consultants. The prices are generally affordable. A feature script consultant often garners between \$350 and \$500; with a short film script this price drops, to around \$125 to \$250. The benefits to having a professional read your script are obvious. They have read thousands of scripts and can offer a plethora of notes. They've read genre scripts, experimental, comedy, and documentary treatments time and time again. They know what is already out there being made and what you can do with your script to make it fresh. Investigate their client lists. Look for recent success stories on their Websites. Contact filmmakers they've worked with. *Anyone can call her- or himself a script consultant, but without client success stories/testimonials you may not get what you paid for.*

But don't get all crazy on me. Sending your script to a paid consultant before it's finished could very well be a huge waste of money. In my consulting business, I'm sure I've had clients who wished they'd written more before sending their script to me only for me to tell them they needed to do a lot more work before I would be able to help them in any significant way. Wait until you've vetted the story thoroughly or make the decision that you're going to pay someone more than once to provide feedback. But if you've got a bunch of cash lying around for script development, I've had a few clients who simply sent a story outline for perusal. I sent back notes accordingly, then they wrote more and re- sent me the updated version when they needed a second round of feedback. Be very clear with yourself, your budget, your readers, and anyone you hire.

Friends: The Pros & Cons

Be careful about taking your draft and asking *friends* who have (or don't have) some writing experience to read it. Not only are most people not qualified to give you notes on your script, they also may be afraid to tell you the truth if it stinks.

But if you do have someone whom you are convinced will give you good, honest feedback, then do it. But the bottom line is you have to first identify what their strengths and perspectives are. For example, if you give me your script you should know that I have a strong bias against scripts with all white people where they could effortlessly be any race (and on the same note, where all the characters are male or female when they could be either), where people of color are background filler, stereotyped, or are stand- out tokens, scripts that include unnecessary rape scenes, and I hate scripts that have gay men talking like it's 1987 and the term "*Oh Mary, give it up*" is a fresh one. One friend might say, "It's perfect, don't change a thing," while another will say, "The characters are transparent and unevolved and the story is cliched and stupid." Same script with totally different reads. You need to be able to process their feedback while not losing what it is you want to accomplish in your writing.

And the same is true when seeking rough-cut feedback. Documentary filmmaker Tiffany Shlain (*Life, Liberty, & The Pursuit of Happiness*, Sundance 2003; *The Tribe*, Sundance 2006; <http://www.tiffanyshlain.com/>) recalls the moment after showing her rough cut to a group of filmmaker and non- filmmaker friends:

"Often I'll show my work to a group of amazing advisors whose opinion I respect, people like, oh let's say Roberta Munroe [laughs]. These are people who will give me feedback that almost always changes the way I'm looking at the story, so much so that I go back to the edit and rethink my entire film. This is when feedback is at its best. But I've also had my share of devastating rough cut screenings where I invited a group over where they wrote down their feedback/ critiques and just tore my film to pieces! I had spent *months* working on this cut and I was absolutely devastated by the feedback. So I said to one of them, 'Well, didn't you like *anything* about it??' And they were like, 'Oh my god, yes! I loved this, I loved that' and I asked, 'Why didn't you say

any of that?’ And it was all due to the way I asked for the feedback. What filmmakers need to know is that your average person thinks a ‘critique’ is what they didn’t like. Make sure to go around the room and ask them to tell you a few things they did like—casting, pacing, music—before they move on to what they didn’t like. We’re all human beings, and these films are our babies after all. Learn how to ask for what you need.”

Okay, maybe you live in a fishing village on the coast of Newfoundland and the closest thing you’ve got to a script reader is your aunt Betty. Hi, it’s called the Internet. In the Resource Guide at the back of this book there are several online filmmaker communities listed. There is an extraordinary independent filmmaking community out there. Log on and tap into it.

THE FEATURE IN YOUR BACK POCKET

Once your short film is successful, many of you will turn your attention to getting your feature made. Your understanding of what works and what doesn’t in a short film script is great preparation for a feature film career—because if you’re ready to take on a feature, it’s your feature script that’s going to get you in the door. Know that writing a short script that you are in complete control of is very different from writing a script you want to pitch to studio executives. Mark and Jay—the Duplass brothers (*This Is John*, Sundance 2003; *Scrapple*, Sundance 2004, *The Intervention*, Clermont-Ferrand 2005; *The Puffy Chair*, Sundance 2007; *Baghead*, Sundance 2008) found this the most daunting aspect of their careers. Mark explains:

“Uh, writing a good script is really really *really* hard. After having two shorts at Sundance, we figured it was time to try to make a feature. So, when Jay and I conceptualized *The Puffy Chair* we basically said, ‘We know how to make a 10- minute film work, so let’s just make about eight or nine 10- minute scenes in a row’ and that’s kind of what we did. We went for long scenes that we could improvise and make better as we shot. It’s weird because we get a lot of compliments on the script for *The Puffy Chair* but the script itself wasn’t that great. It was the performances, the direction, the improv, the editing—all of those things made the script look really good in the end.

“Another thing we try to do is write very quickly. When we bang out a draft in a few days, writing in sequence from front to end, it’s almost like your subconscious takes over and tells you how to pace the movie. Like all those days you spent in front of the TV watching HBO pays off at that point. Your intrinsic knowledge of movies and *what you wanna see next* kicks in and I think you get good pacing with this process. Then, you go back with the critical part of your brain and clean it all up and make it presentable.

“Now, *presentable* is a tricky thing. If you want to sell your script, you kinda have to make it look and sound as funny/dramatic/whatever as possible. The beats have to read more dramatically (or, ahem, less subtly) than you might prefer, but in our experience, getting a script greenlit in the studio system is kind of about making it a great read for the suits. It’s an art form unto itself, and not one we’re particularly

fond of, but it is kind of a necessary evil until you've made five films and people really know what your tone is and what to expect from you.

"Then with *Baghead* we started the same way we always do. We banged out the first draft in a few days. It was really inspired and it had a ton of energy. But the ending wasn't what we wanted, and honestly, we waited around for a year for that ending to come to us. In the meantime, we passed the script around Hollywood to gauge people's interest in making it as a studio film, but nothing felt quite right. Eventually we found 'our' ending and ended up bending more than a couple of genres to get what we wanted, and we raised the money ourselves to make it immediately and without compromise."

Before it was announced that he won the Grand Jury Prize, Carter Smith (*Bugcrush*, Sundance 2006; *The Ruins*, 2008 DreamWorks production) and his feature script were accepted into the Sundance Screenwriters Lab. There is definitely something to be said about having a feature script that is similar in tone to the short you are shopping around. Vanessa Coifman at Senator shares that one of the most important items a short filmmaker should have when going into a film executive meeting is a feature script. One feature Vanessa worked on, *Fireflies in the Garden*, was directed by Dennis Lee, who caught Vanessa's attention with his short film *Jesus Henry Christ*:

"It's one of those things where when someone does a good short and it actually manages to circulate, it's a better launching pad for a feature than a commercial or music video. We're in the market of discovering the next best director, and one of the best places to look is in the shorts. Because somebody put money into it that was probably their own money, so there's a care that goes into it that doesn't exist on a commercial or a music video; it's closer to them. And there's a pace and a tempo and a story that has to be told. If they do it well, it's the precursor of things to come."

But I know (and strongly believe) that for some of you making films, features are not the be-all and end-all of your career. Filmmaker Kevin Everson (<http://people.virginia.edu/~ke5d/>) notes:

"For me, as an artist, it's your responsibility to keep making work as a citizen of the world. I'm not a doctor, but my way of healing folks is through entertainment and art and culture, so I feel it's my responsibility to my family, race, planet to keep doing stuff. People always ask me, are you going to turn your short into a feature? No. It's a piece of fuckin' art."

And now, let's talk short film structure.

Get the full audio copy of Roberta Munroe's *How Not to Make a Short Film* [here](#).

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