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by
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Formosa, TX

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Formosa, TX

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

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Dedication

I dedicate this report to my family for their love and support, allowing me to pursue the dream of making films.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge the MFA entering class of 2006. There were no finer mates.

I'd also like to acknowledge the faculty and staff of the Department of Radio-Television-Film for consistently extending patience and grace towards my lengthy endeavor making the stay that much more pleasant.

My graduate committee for providing guidance and wisdom throughout the thesis film process enabling me to feel confident about doing the best I could do.

Abstract

Formosa, TX

Rachun Roy Rutngamlug, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Donald Howard

The following report is a description of the pre-production, production and post-production of the short film “Formosa, TX”, made in Marfa and Coupland, Texas in 2012. The film is a study of living Asian American in small town Texas.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
PROJECT APPROACH	3
STORY	6
PRE-PRODUCTION - LOCATIONS	8
PRE-PRODUCTION - CASTING	12
PRE-PRODUCTION - CINEMATOGRAPHY	13
PRODUCTION	15
POST PRODUCTION	20
CLOSING THOUGHTS	23
Appendix 1: Shooting Script.....	24
Vita.....	39

Introduction

This intro will serve to cover any pertinent details leading up to the production of the thesis film. *Formosa, TX* is the product of experiences and lessons learned while in the graduate film program here at the University of Texas as well as the culmination of personal experiences prior to entering.

My interest in filmmaking developed early in middle school. Growing up in rural Kansas as one of a small handful of Asian Americans within a fifty-mile radius at any given time cemented my place in my immediate world as an outsider. This sentiment was also bolstered by my experiences with my extended family who, in totality, reside overseas in Thailand. Visiting extended family in Thailand was a similar exercise in being made aware of my outsider status; not being able to properly speak Thai and communicate with my relatives, in addition to carrying Western conventions of dress and behavior, again placed me outside of the bubble. From this, a natural tendency to observe grew.

Visits overseas to extended family in Thailand produced my family's first video camera. At that time, my group of friends would prove to be of outsider status as well. Not possessed of athletic posture or good looks, which deems Middle-American middle school social success, we made do with activities outside of those traditional provinces. Coupled with burgeoning adolescent angst, my father's VHS camcorder would serve as the tool we used to provide ourselves an alternate, secret narrative of our lives as well as

those of our objects of desire and disdain. It is from those early attempts at filmmaking that I realized the power and importance of visual storytelling.

This ended with the advent of college and our going of separate ways. I elected to pursue a degree in Biology with the hopes of attending medical school. This turned into an Economics degree from Washington University in St. Louis. Towards the end of my undergraduate studies, I re-engaged my interest in film with a smattering of both studies and production classes as well as taking in independent films at the art house Tivoli theatre in St. Louis. Shooting a small, black and white 8mm project and seeing Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) made me realize what was possible with the tools I was using in those small production classes in college.

After college, I was found in Austin, Texas working in corporate America as a Marketing Analyst. Aware of the filmmaking community, I found Steve Mims' film classes for the public, enrolled and was again able to re-engage my film interest. I made two films under his tutelage and felt a formal film school education would be what I wanted next; I applied to the University of Texas and was eventually accepted.

From the initial formal years of the program, I came away with an idea about story and what might make a satisfying one to watch but I was not necessarily successful in executing one to my liking. For the thesis, I would endeavor to synthesize what I enjoyed about my film heroes' non-traditional films with the idea of what might make a satisfying film experience from traditional story structure mechanics.

Project Approach

The approach of the thesis would be simply to have an “air-tight” script, which would provide necessary structure, so we could be less rigid in our means of production. The kernel of the story came about in the third year 488M preproduction class; although I hadn’t written a full-fledged script, I had an interest in a story with Asian and Asian American characters.

The interest in writing a story with Asian and Asian American characters came as much from the desire to dramatize an underrepresented point of view as it did from the desire to attempt to couch it as an American story. From what I was able to appreciate at the time, films with Asian American stories tended to occur in larger metropolitan areas where the experience of being different along racial lines tended towards a group dynamic, a character with an inclusive peer group. What I think this does is strongly delineate the group for the story: Asian American, articulate. I had an interest in telling a story where the group may not even be that well delineated for the main character, perhaps just the perception of the group resulting in the character being outside the local bubble of interest or relevance. This led to placing the story and protagonist in a small, outpost town and focusing the story on the relationship between the character and his mother with all the cultural specifics.

The inclusion of the boy-wants-girl narrative came about from hewing to the old adage of writing what you know as well as the desire to make a film with a universally

understood idea. In a certain way, I also felt it would satisfy the American Story part of the rubric I had set out for myself. Once the collection of story ideas and elements were assembled, I had two primary concerns: how to go about constructing a simple, but satisfying script that would stand up to non-traditional production and what that non-traditional approach might be.

At the end of my third year, I still hadn't felt as if I'd really cracked the story code; I hadn't really been able to produce more than just the kernel of an idea in the thesis 488M class, squandering a good chance to develop something with my peers. So, I set out to seek some additional knowledge regarding the screenwriting process by putting generating material on hold and doing a survey of screenwriting methods and approaches. After reading books from the hero's journey to mythic structure to three act Hollywood methods I felt I had a better idea of what might work for the thesis film as I had set out to make simplicity part of the rubric.

Initial drafts of the script ended up containing a fair amount of bloat as per the usual tendency with early drafts. I had explored the family dynamic of the protagonist from both the parental and sibling perspective and their potential influence on the character and felt, in the end, they didn't serve the overall arc of the protagonist. I also tended toward making a point of anchoring the protagonist in the world by including numerous interactions with peripheral characters towards the goal of making the ties to his world unambiguous. In my bid to be unambiguous, I felt I was working against the idea of simplicity; so, most of these issues tended to fall away when hewing to that ideal

and, eventually (with Richard Lewis' help) I ended up with a script which was both simple and clear.

The other concern of what non-traditional approach to work in seemed easier to tackle. For the thesis film I had an interest in taking a different approach from traditional modes and ideas of coverage and scene structure from an editing and cinematography perspective. I had envisioned the film much like the way Kanji characters are read: pictographic representations which, when assembled, would make intellectual and, in this case, dramatic sense, so I settled a film composed of a series of master-like shots in which the drama would play out without coverage, stitched together by simple sequential editing.

Story

The story of the thesis film began in the third year 488M as a kernel of a script with an Asian family in small town America. Beyond that, there was nothing more developed. Although the class hadn't yielded something resembling a workable script, I had explored a few ideas involving the dynamic of an immigrant family in a small town. Writing through heavier ideas of outright racism and the like seemed to produce more trite material than interesting. I eventually came to the desire to couch the story as an American story. By this, I had wanted to convey the Asian-American experience as one that would be universally understood and largely free of culturally specific details and bindings; a story anyone from any background would understand and identify with, told through an Asian American male perspective.

In possession of a solid protagonist and setting, initial drafts yielded rough stories of an Asian American family at odds with their small town surroundings and nothing more specific. The subsequent rewriting process yielded stories with an Asian American male protagonist at odds with his own family as well as the perception of the small town around him. Eventually, the script came to be the story of an Asian American male, Lon, at odds with his immigrant mother over the running of their restaurant and what happens when that dynamic is put to the test by an impromptu visit from stranded bus passengers. I felt this had much of what I had an interest in dramatizing.

I had always felt growing up in the rural Midwest, our media consumption options were limited. Local and national broadcast networks comprised the majority of the

selection on television. We had four movie screens in town which translated into a limited selection of films to see at any given time and the video stores had to stock the items which would move which translated to much Hollywood fare, limited genre and foreign films. From this, I had to resolve the dearth of filmic heroes with my ethnicity. There were certainly American film stars of Asian ethnicity within my sphere of perception; however, they worked with a more exotic appeal I simply did not feel drawn to.

Taking that sentiment, which endured, into the thesis film, I set out to tell the story from the perspective of an Asian-American male. The short format of the film necessitated the focus of one issue; I chose a cross-cultural, familial direction. Mother-son relationships I had witnessed growing up with my Thai-American friends tended towards the same dynamic: that of a strong-willed, results-oriented caregiver focused on seeing their progeny's success through. I felt it clashed with some of the American values we experienced when going to school and spending time with our Caucasian peers' families, namely, making time for the more leisurely and pleasurable aspects of the life experience. Girls.

Using that as the framework for the story, I felt satisfied I had collected a good number of elements to weave together into a coherent and satisfying script. Technically, I approached the script attempting to hew to the three-act idea fairly strictly, with the hope of producing a strong narrative that would survive intact through the possibility of eventual muddying from the non-traditional production approach.

Pre-Production – Locations

For the film, I knew I wanted the location to do the work of setting up the atmosphere of loneliness and isolation. The story called for an isolated small town and Marfa, Texas had always intrigued me as an extant anachronism. Pictures of modern day Marfa reminded me of the small town I grew up in. The wide streets and dearth of modern buildings proved to be the look I had envisioned when writing the script. The script also called for exterior shots that also had to convey isolation so they had to be of a desolate nature and the West Texas landscape right outside of Marfa seemed to fit the bill. Upon the first visit to Marfa to scout, I was able to find a vacant art gallery I felt could serve as the diner in the film. The exterior façade of the building hadn't been updated for, what looked like, decades and since there were interior-exterior considerations in the shooting of the film, I figured it would be close to an ideal location. The owner of the gallery, Julie Speed, was amenable to a film shoot there as long as it was returned to previous condition and the artwork was undamaged. The challenge of using a blank space required heavy production design I had budgeted for. However, I did not have a production designer on board at the time.

During the first scout I was also able to track down a suitable exterior to use for the motor scooter scenes. Highway 2810 south of Marfa served as an ideal backdrop for the scenes as they were relatively traffic-free and had the desolate West Texas desert stretching into the distance no matter where one might place a camera. From this, I felt confident to make Marfa the primary location for the film.

I had planned to shoot the film in March of 2012 and I had a verbal agreement with my Director of Photography, Ellie Fenton, that she'd be onboard for the film. During the run up to production, she was offered a feature film she wasn't able to turn down, so we agreed to push the film back to the summer. In that interim period, the primary diner location contacted and informed me a former tenant had requested the space to set up an art gallery, so I would have to find another space. An additional trip to Marfa was in order and it was during that trip I was pointed in the direction of the defunct Carmen's Café. Upon visiting the locked building, it was difficult to tell if the space was viable, however there were already tables and chairs and all the trappings of an operating restaurant. A serendipitous encounter with the bar tender of the Lost Horse, the bar across the street from Carmen's Café, produced the information of her connection to the nephew of the owner of Carmen's Café, who happened to reside in Austin. I left my contact information and did my best Poor Film Student pitch.

Back in Austin, the owner of Carmen's Café, Elsie Abrams, contacted me. She invited me to her home in West Austin to hear my pitch. Upon arriving, I was treated to a tour of her palatial home and a glass of water. I learned Elsie had been born and raised in Marfa and the eponymous Carmen of the café was her mother who had run it for years in Marfa before closing it due to retirement. Elsie informed me she and her late husband, a former engineer, had heavy philanthropic leanings and felt my student status had earned me the right to use the location free of charge. I felt her sympathy with the project material also helped, as we discussed the familial similarities between our respective ethnic cultures. Elsie's generosity had cemented Marfa as the primary shooting location.

The script also called for a dance hall. As Marfa was not equipped with a functioning one, I had to look elsewhere. Tim Tsai was instrumental in assisting me; I had asked him for help in locating a dance hall that might be amenable to hosting a student shoot. I had initially asked him to look in the Austin area and had the Broken Spoke in mind. We were unable to secure the location for an affordable fee so Tim went to the Film Commission for further options; we were delighted to come across Coupland Dance Hall in Coupland, Texas. A few emails and phone calls and a visit later, we had the location.

The other less-major items proved to be exceedingly difficult to obtain. The script called for a picture bus, a moped and a few extras here and there. The picture bus proved difficult as I felt the look of the bus had to resemble an interstate bus line, which meant getting a charter bus into Marfa. The remote location of Marfa proved to be the limiting factor in the decision not to use a charter bus; the cost of fuel became far too prohibitive to get a bus into Marfa from surrounding cities large enough to have charter services. We explored schools as another potential source of a picture bus to no avail; in the case of the Alpine school district, busses were going out on the days required for school activities, and Sul Ross University did not yield any results. The day before we scheduled shoot days with the bus, we were able to procure an old, re-purposed school bus now serving as a dining car for the local food truck, Food Shark. Luckily, we had hired a very capable production designer who was able to create and execute the look of a value bus line deftly. The moped was obtained in Marfa from a local resident responding to a solicitation on the local Internet bulletin board, Marfalist.org. The moped's owner, a

Jeff Matheis, had mastered the incomprehensible art of starting his own moped. Gracious enough to loan us his vintage moped, he would eventually have to lend his presence on set as the sole practitioner of this seemingly arcane and mysterious art. The extras were just as difficult to obtain and, in true student film fashion, were located one day before we had scheduled to shoot them.

Pre-Production – Casting

The casting process began with the hiring of Katie Richter, a local agent in town. I had known, in the most likely case, I would not be casting locally in Austin. Since the script had an Asian-American protagonist and Asian immigrant antagonist, the search would be in larger metropolitan areas. I hired Katie with the hopes of finding my talent within the state of Texas. Her initial canvas garnered two tapes out of the whole of the state; she was kind enough to expand the search to Los Angeles at no extra charge. From the search, I found a better selection of Asian-American talent. I flew to Los Angeles to read and converse with a few of the potential actors and eventually chose two: for the role of Lon, Lucas K Peterson and for Ma, Peggy Lu. Both had a film and theatre pedigree and were working actors in Los Angeles. Both had also related to me their interest and approval of the material, which would prove to be the streak of luck in aggregating the talent in this film. The role of Mina, the deuteragonist, I cast locally. I had initially pursued an actress in Los Angeles who had appeared in my cinematographer's thesis film at the American Film Institute. Scheduling conflicts negated that option and I was able to tap local actress, Dora Madison Burge, to play the role. She had also related to me her interest and approval in the material. Much of the time spent in the run-up to the film working with my actors happened remotely through phone calls and email; we exchanged reference material and developed character back-stories. Since rehearsal time would be limited, I had hoped picking seasoned, talented actors would help mitigate this issue.

Pre-Production – Cinematography

Cinematography would be an emphasis of the thesis film. I felt the visual part of the Kanji character model outlined in the project approach section necessitated a precise style of cinematography. Part of what I had envisioned for the thesis included an idea of visual contrast; contrast in movement towards bolstering mood. As there is distinct contrast in the dramatic acts of the story, I wanted the visual representation to follow suit. The beginning of the film has our protagonist stuck in an uneventful world; the static nature of the cinematography would reflect the static nature of the protagonist's world. As the story progresses, and our characters break free of their confines, we would introduce movement into the frame with either camera movement or mounting the camera to a moving platform.

Ellie and I had also discussed a naturalistic look, using naturally motivated lighting and the use of a soft effects filter to give the light a bit of bloom and softness. Inspired by the town of Marfa and Carmen's Café, I had envisioned the film to appear as if it was stuck in the recent past. My hope was for the audience to realize the small town nature of the setting without making a period film: a setting neither here in the present nor in the past, but familiar. We would present the town and settings "as is" as much as possible. We also discussed favoring composition over "setting up the space" and orienting the audience to the room. Discovering the shots in an improvisational manner and blocking the action to the frame would be our method going in.

Owing to the method above, we chose to shoot film. Our initial pick would be 35mm anamorphic as Ellie had a line on a camera and lens package in Los Angeles which would be available during the production dates and relatively affordable. The extra softness and visual artifacts the anamorphic lens would lend the film would serve to bolster our intentions. During the run up to the film, the question of how to get the package back to Los Angeles became the sticking point for whether or not to rent it; Ellie would be able to drive the package to Marfa from Los Angeles but would be staying on in Austin after the shoot for work. Shipping the entire package became the only option and a very cost-prohibitive one at that; the decision was made to lose the anamorphic package and shoot the film on the school's three perf Panavision G2 package. We would lose the anamorphic characteristics but gain some budget back, and the extra footage going from a four to three perf movement. The choice of stock was a rather straightforward one as we did not envision utilizing any special photochemical process to contribute to the look of the film. We chose the current iterations of Kodak's 500 speed indoor stock and 250 speed daylight balanced film. It is worth mentioning that Kodak's university representative, Michael Brown, provided a full half of our film stock at no cost.

Production

Production began in early May. We had loaded up from the university and set out for Alpine, Texas where we would be lodging. I had flown one of my actors, Lucas Peterson, into Austin and took him along with my old classmate Anthony Penta on the drive out there. Additional cast and crew would be headed out a day later. We arrived at the location for lodging and settled in; Ellie set up for camera tests with the actors and I concerned myself with administrative and producing duties.

We had one prep day scheduled before we would roll camera, which proved invaluable; we had producing items still outstanding we were able to address, in part. The learning began almost immediately. The production of a short, location-based film with a student crew and limited budget far from support is, undoubtedly, a train-wreck filled with explosives, drenched in napalm, coursing down a flint-laden track, waiting to ignite. The lesson in preventing the train from disintegrating into a million particles of sorrow is assembling a bulwark of talented, capable and dedicated cast and crew. Luckily, we had done so.

Shooting began with a few of the minor-major pieces still up in the air as they were difficult to solve and weren't scheduled until later in the shoot. These items, as seemingly minor as they were, were nonetheless vital components of making the film work. We had yet to secure a picture bus and a smattering of extras, this would haunt the well being of the director throughout the shoot. From a cinematography perspective, Ellie and I were able to accomplish the majority of the film working free of a hard shot

list and working to our whims as we saw fit. As the shoot went on, we were unable to do so and were required to prep a tentative shot list the night before the last few days.

However, Ellie had brought on Mike Gillespie, a professional grip from Austin, as key grip who facilitated our desired method of work with speed and competence. Mike provided the know how and equipment necessary to secure the camera to one of the production vehicles using what's known as a hostess tray: a metal contraption with a plate designed to accept a variety of camera gear. He was also instrumental in rigging the giant ball of rubber bands. The rubber band ball shot involved placing the camera in the basket of a rented cherry picker and hoisting a 1/7th section of a sphere of rubber bands on three triple risers while securing them in the wind. Mike was instrumental in leading the rest of the crew with the safe rigging of both.

Working with the actors proved far more difficult. As with all student films, the position of the student filmmaker extends beyond the role of director. When pulled into other areas of the filmmaking machine, the director position tends to suffer most. The difficult-to-solve producing issues took time away from potential rehearsal time and, I feel, grated on the actors' good intentions, at times. For the time we did get to spend rehearsing, I felt we were successful in discovering interesting aspects of the scenes through play and incorporating them into the performances. The last scene of the film exemplified that fortunate case in that we were able to rehearse and play through the scene with the collective mind of avoiding melodrama stepping through each beat of the scene and making adjustments on the fly, yielding good results in my estimation. In the times where rehearsal time was limited, the actors helped meet me halfway by bringing

suggestions to the table and relying on their prodigious talent as capable actors. Most of the interior scenes in the diner worked out within roughly the same dynamic.

Cara Stewart handled the production design and was brought on as a last minute addition by producer Kelsey Coggin. Cara was able to work largely independently with input from myself at the qualitative level. She deftly handled the duties of the position, presenting me with various options on items such as bike helmets to logos for the picture bus without holding the production back. In addition to all her other duties, she crafted the giant ball of rubber bands from scratch and spent many a night up till early in the morning finishing it with along with other crew folks to great effect.

The smaller holes in production unfulfilled at the start were the most difficult aspect of the film to solve and mitigate. The remote nature of Marfa had caught us a bit by surprise in terms of what goods and services might be available at any given time. The picture bus was a source of much grief as it remained up in the air until the very last minute. Anthony and I spent mornings in Alpine, when I should have been rehearsing with actors, visiting local schools to see if they might be in the possession of and disposed to lending us a bus free of markings for use in the film. We were lucky in that there was a bus we were able to transform into a charter bus that had previously been serving as a dining car for a food truck. The look of the bus initially put me off pursuing the option but once we had exhausted all other options, we contacted the owner and were granted permission to use the bus for our exterior shots. Cara was able to conjure up a look and dress the bus within a morning before we needed it camera ready.

About a month before the shoot, Julie Speed, the owner of the original location I had planned on using as the primary location contacted me to let me know it would be vacant at the time of our arrival. I ended up asking for use of her power outlets out of the studio to power lights as I wanted to park the bus in front of her gallery and fake the row of shops on her street as the side of the street across the street from the diner. Julie was amenable to the idea and granted access to her gallery for an IOU for a dinner with her partner sometime in the future.

Shooting the exterior bus scenes angered many of the local denizens until they discovered it was a student film; there were many drive bys with horns blaring and one gentleman tried to drive straight through the area we were setting up to shoot. He inquired to the AD why he wasn't able to pass and if the shoot was for the fashion house, Fendi. Upon learning it was a student shoot, there was no problem with the minor wait. Another local resident became enraged when he realized the shoot would go into the night next to his place of employment and residence. Kelsey was instrumental in defusing the situation as the gentleman first demanded the presidential suite at the local Paisano Hotel and was able to be talked down to a six-pack. We got him twelve. We wrapped in Marfa and headed to Coupland for the last day.

Coupland Dance Hall proved to be a smooth shoot in comparison to Marfa; we were able to take our time and budget for one particular shot I feared would take the majority of time as it would require precise choreography between the talent and crew. I had rented a dolly for one shot of the film; a crab-dolly shot of Lon and Mina dancing down one end of the dancehall and shifting directions dancing back to their original spot

without cutting. We were lucky enough to score some high-end carbon fiber track for the Pee Wee Dolly, shortening set up time.

Behind the camera, there were six crew working in unison; the camera operator, camera assistant, dolly grip, boom operator and two grips with china balls rigged to the end of C-stands, providing moving fill, all shuffling along with the dolly as it kept pace to the actors' two-stepping down the way. I had requested they be shot in profile and kept in the center of the frame; initial technical rehearsals proved it a tough request to fulfill. Mike, the dolly grip, came up with the method to push the dolly while keeping his steps in pace with the actors' two-stepping; the dolly was pushed to: quick, quick, slow, slow and we got the shot.

Overall, the shoot had to be defined for myself as a constant wracking of nerves as I had high expectations for the execution of the film and the last minute nature of some of the pieces to the puzzle were taxing events. Going over budget on the film was new and dizzying in the vein of harrowing experiences not soon forgotten. I sent the film to FotoKem in Los Angeles and, without seeing the footage, concluded this may have been one of my biggest personal failures to date. Never during the production did I feel 100% confident we were hewing to the rubric or methods we had set out to work under.

Post Production

We exposed roughly sixteen thousand feet of film and it spent roughly three weeks at the lab being developed, transferred and captured under a reduced-price agreement with the lab. We processed the film normally and transferred the footage digitally under a best-light transfer to two, one hundred and eleven minute HDCAM SR tapes. I had sent a hard drive in advance and asked the lab to provide me a capture of the two tapes in the Apple ProRes 4444 codec at 1920 x 1080.

Upon receiving the footage, I began to sync the audio and begin to feel a bit better from when I had left production. I began to view the footage and felt there was the promise within it of something workable and perhaps something I could cobble into a potentially satisfying film. Placing the every third take of each shot in order of the script yielded a sunnier picture of the potential of the film. This was the first hint the Kanji character model of film might work.

Working from the assembly cut, I began to choose takes I preferred and assembled the cut once again. Potential problems with performances began to spring up as well as coverage, story and pacing issues. I chose to prioritize performance first and work the other considerations and issues to the resulting material kept from a performance pass. Here is where the idea of the Kanji character model began to fail; I had realized in the editing room if there were to be long master-like takes stitched together in order, forming a film, the performances would have to stand on their own from scene-to-scene as well as carry the dramatic arc of the scene wholly through what

would play in that one shot; it was far too ambitious for what we had done or had time to do during production. I would not be able to carry on that model as I hadn't directed the actors in that manner. I would have to, to some degree, manufacture the performances in the edit.

Subsequent editing passes got the film in better shape as far as the performances were concerned and the next issue of story and how to go about revealing the film to the audience bubbled to the surface. I had shown cuts to Don Howard and a couple of ex-UT MFA friends for feedback and what came back all pointed towards a problem with how the character arcs are revealed. There was no subtlety to the film, translating into a very one-note performance from the female lead. I had still included the majority of things on the page in this cut and it was clear some of the action would have to go in order to sculpt and preserve the dramatic levels reached by our characters and do a bit of a 'level-setting' for performance.

Prioritizing the sculpting of the performances related directly to how much of the story would end up possessing value after performance judgments were made. In the script there were scenes where Ma might come after Lon for perceiving in him a laziness or dereliction of duty, culminating in a physical attack on Lon. Thinking about sculpting Ma's character from a lower standing dramatic level helped shaped the rest of her appearance in the film in that I would look to build the tension between her and her son culminating with the slap near the end of the film. Subsequently I was able to lose many end-portions of scenes when the script called for Ma to terminate the scene with some kind of attack or dig.

I began to revisit the idea of the Kanji character model as I now saw it might begin to apply to the rest of the film once again after tailoring and tuning the performances. Much of the rest of editing the film became an exercise in losing the right bits of material; there wasn't a need to go and procure more footage or use different takes from different scenes to substitute one for the other and the like. The resulting cut still yielded a simplicity I had wanted to see, and the story seemed to hold up to shooting the film under duress with minimal coverage.

After additional fine cut passes, I felt the film was ready for picture lock. I had worked the edits with some of the faculty at UT and my ex-MFA compatriots still in Austin and was getting similar feedback on major issues and wildly different feedback on small things; I felt this was the time to picture lock. The film was subsequently mixed by Brad Engleking and color corrected by Brandon Thomas, bringing production on the film to an end.

Closing Thoughts

Setting out to make the thesis film began an enlightening and frustrating chapter in the close of my graduate school career. The films I had made in graduate school up until that point had been informative exercises but ultimately unsatisfying to myself as a viewer (as much as the creator of it can be). The thesis contains many of the things I enjoy about films myself from the cinematography to the actors to the music. From a craft perspective, I also got to close in on the idea of having a thought out model and vision for a film and seeing it through; I wasn't entirely successful, but am happy with the results. I also got to close in on the idea that things subject to the flux of chaos often produce things more than suitable for use and that some things are beyond a measure of control and there is nothing one should attempt to do about it.

The experience of making the film also reminds me of the community I feel I have joined. There was a sizeable cast and crew on the film and the contributions made by those fine people towards helping make my film are staggering and humble a certain graduate student beyond words.

As the culminating event of graduate school, I feel the thesis film experience offered me an opportunity to synthesize work based on all the lessons learned up until that point. From the films made previously in the curriculum to discussions in pre-production classes to the feedback offered in post-production classes, the knowledge gained shaped the approach and methods put towards this film. I can say with confidence what's been learned here will certainly put forth towards future endeavors.

Appendix A *Formosa, TX* Shooting Script

FORMOSA, TX (WORKING TITLE)

Written by

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EXT. FORMOSA, TX / MAIN STREET - DAY

Travelling down small town main street, we open on a row of shuttered businesses.

We settle on a diner on the corner.

EXT. DINER / STOREFRONT WINDOW - DAY

Through the glass, LON BOONYAPRADEE (18) sits behind the cashier's counter of his family's diner, head-in-hand, agaze out the window.

The reflection visible reveals an empty, small town vista.

INT. DINER / CASHIER'S COUNTER - DAY

Lon gazes into the street daydreaming.

He is pulled from his reverie by a sharp smack to the back of the head knocking his paper food-service hat off.

Recovering, he turns to see, MA (50s), his mother staring at him arms crossed.

LON

What?

She turns her gaze from his eyes to just past his shoulder.

Lon turns in the direction to see a TEEN COUPLE (teens) dressed in formal western wear, standing just off the counter. The BOY TEEN has a ticket in hand.

He snaps to posture and takes the ticket.

LON (CONT'D)

(to couple)

Hey guys, how was everything?

BOY TEEN

Just fine.

The BOY TEEN steps forwards and hands Lon the ticket.

LON

(to couple)

Y'all look nice, headed out tonight?-

Ma interrupts Lon and begins reciting a script.

MA
How was your meal? Everything-

Lon and Ma begin reciting in unison as he nods his head in labored affirmation.

LON and MA
(in unison)
-you expected? Thanks for dining
with us and come back soon.

The teens look at one another with quizzical looks.

Irritated, Lon fumbles with the ticket attempting to decode the ticket as it's been filled out in Thai.

From behind, Ma uncrosses her arms and snatches the ticket from his hand.

She displaces him at the counter.

MA
(in Thai)
Get up.

Lon acquiesces but remains standing behind Ma.

Sensing his presence, she stops ringing up the ticket at the register and turns to him.

Ma (CONT'D)
(in Thai)
Go!

With a startle, Lon backs away and turns to the kitchen. On his way, he glances back at the teens to see them stifling snickers.

INT. DINER / CASHIER'S COUNTER - LATER

Lon sits at the counter once again eating noodles. The drone of the empty dining room is broken intermittently by his slurping noodles.

While slurping, he stares out the window.

LON'S POV:

A bus pulls into view. As it comes to rest across the street, smoke billows from the rear.

Passengers disembark and begin milling about; they turn to watch the billowing smoke.

3.

The BUS DRIVER runs to the rear engine access panel and opens it.

Lon scans the passengers; a QUARTET OF SENIORS (60's) look with concern at the bus driver.

A DISHEVELED MAN (30's) holding a greasy brown paper bag stands apart from the seniors while MINA (20's), mills apart from the others holding a cell phone skyward.

Lon fixates on Mina, he notices her manner of dress; she's not from around there.

The bus driver corrals the passengers and appears to make an announcement to their apparent dismay. He gestures towards the diner and the passengers turn their heads right at Lon making him straighten up.

Lon

Ma?

He turns to see her kneeling at the ersatz Buddhist altar off the dining room, she doesn't respond.

Lon turns back and sees the passengers filing towards the diner.

Lon (CONT'D)

I think they're coming in.

Ma

(in Thai)

Who?

Ma gets up and meets Lon at the counter. Her eyes widen.

She begins to nudge him from his seat.

LON

What? I can do the front!

Ma

No, we need the business. Go to the back!

Ma succeeds in displacing and shoving him towards the kitchen. She begins shoring up the counter.

Ma (CONT'D)

Go, GO!

Lon huffs, takes his bowl and heads to the kitchen.

INT. DINER / CASHIER'S COUNTER - DAY

The front doors swing open as the passengers enter.

Ma greets the crowd with a flourish.

MA

Welcome to our diner! We have
everything you want; American,
Chinese - whatever you want...

Her enthusiastic overture is barely noticed by the first group in the door, the Seniors.

They grumble as Ma sits them towards the front by the storefront windows.

The Disheveled Man enters next and finds his way to his own seat next to the Seniors' table, to their disdain.

As Ma continues to chat with the Seniors, Mina enters and sits at a table near the others.

INT. DINER / KITCHEN - DAY

Lon stands at the flattop ready for orders.

He flips spatulas while he waits.

His curiosity edges him towards the kitchen door; he cracks it and peers out.

While Ma takes orders from the tables near the front, he studies Mina.

LON'S POV:

Mina fiddles with her cell phone before abandoning it in exasperation.

She picks up a menu then begins thumbing through it. Midway, she stops and turns towards the Disheveled Man and examines him; his eyes are closed and the greasy paper bag is resting on his lap.

She takes on the countenance of someone who has just smelled a dead body.

She gets up and re-seats herself, further away.

Lon scrambles to a desk in the kitchen and begins rifling through the contents.

5.

Through stacks of paperwork, he's able to find an old, Formosa, TX, Chamber of Commerce pamphlet highlighting the attractions in town; among them, the world's biggest ball of rubber bands.

He takes the pamphlet and begins searching the kitchen for another item.

Finding an order pad, he steels himself, then enters the dining room.

INT. DINER / DINING ROOM - DAY

Lon waltzes into the dining room.

He approaches Mina's table; pad and pen in hand, pamphlet in back pocket.

She looks up over the menu.

LON
Hi, do you know what you'd like?

MINA
I haven't really decided.

LON
I can make some recommendations.

She puts her head back down into the menu while Lon keeps an eye out for Ma.

She takes notice of Lon's continued presence, puts the menu down and peers out towards the street.

MINA
You know I'm not really hungry,
where are we?

LON
Well, I happen to have this.

He pulls out the pamphlet and slides it on to the table top, she picks the pamphlet up and examines it.

MINA
'The world's biggest ball of rubber
bands...'

LON
Yeah, it's kind of all we have
around here.

MINA
I'm not sure what you do with
something like that.

LON
You know, I don't really either.

She puts it down and slips the pamphlet back to Lon.

MINA
(platitudinous)
Well, it sounds really great.

LON
You think?

MINA
(platitudinous)
Sure, I'd love to see it; it sounds
really interesting.

Just as Mina cracks a half-smile, Ma struts up to the table
from across the room and begins to displace Lon.

MA
Hello honey, we have everything you
want, I can take your order or I
come back?

During the pitch, Ma pulls the top sheet off her order pad
and pins it to Lon's chest.

LON
(to Ma)
I was just taking her order.

MA
(to Lon)
Take these.

She nods towards the kitchen.

Lon stands his ground.

LON
She was in the middle of ordering,
I've got this if you want to cover
your section we should be able to
get everyone taken care of.

Lon feigns a confident smile and unpins the ticket from his
chest and tries to give them back to Ma.

Ma
Section?

Ma leans in close and, while maintaining eye contact with Mina, pinches the skin of the back of Lon's arm into a knot and holds it.

She turns to Lon.

Ma (CONT'D)
This is a big order, I don't want
them waiting too long.

Lon acquiesces and heads into the kitchen with a barely concealed grimace.

Ma turns back to Mina with a grand smile.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Lon flips sausage patties next to piles of shredded potatoes. He handles the equipment forcefully.

Ma enters to witness Lon throwing a pan into the sink with abandon.

They exchange looks.

Ma places a ticket next to the range.

MA
(in Thai)
Order of soup noodles.

Lon takes the ticket and examines it too closely for Ma's taste.

Ma (CONT'D)
(in Thai)
Hey!

She snaps in front of Lon's face and places an additional ticket in his hand.

MA (CONT'D)
(in Thai)
Delivery order next. Twenty
minutes! Make the noodles and then
take this next.

Lon's face falls.

She gestures towards the dining room.

MA (CONT'D)
(in Thai)
Don't mess around out there!

Ma twists Lon's arm once again.

He shrugs her off and starts grabbing pans.

She heads to the dining room as Lon begins cooking Mina's order.

He eyes the ticket and the unchecked 'to-go' box.

INT. DINER / DINING ROOM - DAY

Lon pokes his head in the dining room and surveys the scene.

A malaise has come over the dining room; there is a dearth of conversation and activity. Plates from the meal have been bussted, save for the coffee.

The disheveled man appears to be sleeping; his snoring, the only sound in the room.

Ma sits at the cashier's counter ready to address any need as Mina lays her head on her table.

The bus outside the storefront windows sits idle as the bus driver sits on the curb.

A loud snore and snort from the disheveled man startles the room, adding to the ennui. He begins adjusting his crotch.

The seniors look with renewed disdain at their fellow passenger.

SENIOR
Excuse me, excuse me!

The disheveled man turns towards the seniors.

DISHEVELED MAN
What?

Mina turns away and tries to shut out the room.

Lon sneaks up to her table with a bundle.

Mina looks at the to-go containers neatly wrapped in a plastic bag.

Before she can open her mouth, Lon shushes her.

Lon
(whispering)
Order to go?

Mina looks at Lon quizzically then turns her head, hearing a commotion.

MINA'S POV:

She sees Ma approach the man and utter something which agitates him.

She turns back to Lon.

LON (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Order to go?

He shakes the bag and nods towards the back.

Mina gets the hint, gets up and sneaks out with Lon.

EXT. FORMOSA, TX / MAIN STREET - DAY

Lon and Mina ride down a bumpy road on Lon's scooter. They laugh with each bump in the road.

EXT. FORMOSA, TX / THE WORLDS'S BIGGEST RUBBER BAND BALL - DAY

They both arrive at the car-sized sphere perched atop a pedestal.

Lon circles it on the scooter and turns back to look at Mina.

They both shrug.

Lon exits the circle.

EXT. FORMOSA, TX / STREET - DAY

Driving down the road, Lon points to something. Mina nods.

INT. DANCE HALL - DAY

Lon and Mina enter the dance hall to find it empty. Soft country music emanates from the jukebox.

Mina begins exploring the empty space.

Lon moves to the bar and meets the COWBOY BARTENDER.

INT. DANCE HALL / BAR/COUNTER - DAY

COWBOY BARTENDER
Hey bub, I was waiting for you.

Lon hands him the to-go bundle.

The cowboy bartender places cash in Lon's hand.

He looks over to Mina and nods.

COWBOY BARTENDER (CONT'D)
What you got going on, Lonnie?

Lon smiles and stays mum.

Cowboy bartender nods in the affirmative.

Lon walks to meet Mina.

INT. DANCE HALL / DANCE FLOOR - DAY

He meets up with Mina who is enamored with the black and white photos of past events at the hall.

She stands with her back to him.

LON
Do you have these where you're from?

She turns around in place.

MINA
These?

She gestures at the bar.

MINA (CONT'D)
Yes. Balls of rubber band? No.

Lon looks at the floor sheepishly.

The music in the room comes up.

Lon and Mina look over to see the cowboy bartender wave from afar.

Mina shoots Lon a look.

Lon begins to shake his head.

MINA (CONT'D)
You know how to dance to this?

LON
I do.

He assumes the stance with arms outstretched.

Mina walks into his grip.

LON (CONT'D)
So, it goes: quick, quick, slow,
slow.

They shuffle along awkwardly until Mina picks up the step.

MINA
What do they call this? Line
dancing?

LON
Two-stepping. They taught us this
in school.

Mina nods and they shift directions.

Lon has difficulty containing a smile.

Mina takes notice.

MINA
They teach you this in school here,
huh?

LON
Everyone does it here. They don't
do this where you're from?

MINA
No, they do not.

They shift directions again and continue dancing.

EXT. FORMOSA, TX / STREET - EVENING

Lon and Mina ride back to the diner on the scooter.

INT. DINER / DINING ROOM - EVENING

Lon and Mina enter the dining room to find it darkened and empty.

As they move towards the front, they see passengers boarding a now-operational bus.

Mina lets out a sharp exhale and scrambles for her belongings.

Just as Lon rushes in to help, he spies Ma standing, arms crossed, with a look of disapproval.

Mina gathers her things and sees Ma menacing towards Lon, she freezes.

Ma meets Lon and slaps him across the face.

MA
(in Thai)
*You think it's ok to leave Mom by
herself? You think I do this for
myself?*

She unleashes on Lon's arm.

Ma turns to Mina, who shuffles towards the door. She gives Lon a look then exits.

Lon watches her through the storefront window.

MA (CONT'D)
(in Thai)
Clean up!

She throws a wash rag at Lon hitting him and falling to the floor.

Ma stops preparing a bucket and mop upon hearing the wet rag hit the floor.

Lon bolts for the door just as Ma is able to get a grasp on him.

He jerks his arm away and escapes out the door.

EXT. IDLING BUS - CONTINUOUS

Mina places her belongings in the undercarriage just as Lon runs up to her.

MINA
Hey!

Lon stops and recomposes.

LON
Hey.

MINA
How's your face?

She examines his puffing cheek.

LON
I'm fine.

MINA
I gotta go.

Lon nods.

She leans down to pick up her remaining item as Lon does the same.

He rushes in and begins to kiss her.

She pulls away smiling.

MINA (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

Lon pulls away and steps back.

Mina smiles, squeezes his arm and boards the bus.

He watches her through the windows as she moves to her seat.

She waves then sits out of view.

Lon steps away as the bus backs up.

He watches the bus depart down the road into the darkness.

INT. DINER / DINING ROOM - EVENING

Lon walks into the diner. Ma is behind the counter wiping it down.

They make eye contact, Ma then turns towards the kitchen and disappears.

Lon picks the rag up off the floor and begins wiping the counter.

14.

He sits on one of the stools as he becomes enamored with scrubbing out a stubborn stain.

Just as he blocks out the world to focus on the stain, a bowl of congee and two spoons appear next to him.

He stops his scrubbing to see Ma sit down next to him and begin eating.

Lon picks up the spoon and begins to eat with Ma.

FADE OUT.

Vita

Roy Rutngamlug grew up in Hays, Kansas and attended Washington University in St. Louis, graduating in 1998 with a degree in Economics. After, he moved to Houston and eventually Austin, landing a career in corporate America. After reconnecting with his childhood interest in filmmaking, he applied and was eventually accepted into the Master of Fine Arts in Film Production program at the University of Texas. With the completion of his thesis film, *Formosa, TX*, he will be graduating in the summer of 2012.

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