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MAKING SUMMER FEATURE: A HISTORY OF SFA STUDENT **PRODUCTIONS**

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By

DUDLEY KYLE MAY, Bachelors of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements

For the Degree Of

Masters of Fine Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

December, 2018

Ву

DUDLEY KYLE MAY, Bachelors of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will discuss the documentary film *Summer Feature: A History of SFA Student Productions*, which I filmed, directed and produced. It will discuss how this documentary came into existence and the process I went through to film and edit the interviews featured in the final film.

It will also detail the process of discovering the theme of the film, from the initial concept through post-production.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I must thank my parents, Roy and Letha May, for their unwavering support, without them none of this would have been possible.

I would also like to thank William Arscott for creating the film program at Stephen F. Austin State University that would introduce me to a love of film making.

I must also thank everyone who was willing to be a part of my film, Scott Miles, Carlos Larotta, Josh Randolph, Trey Cartwright, Blake Dumesnil, Derek Wayne Johnson, Rob Senska, Brad Maule, Jasmine Austin, Ira Shiflet, Herbert Midgley, Ricky Kennedy, Peyton Paulette, and Justin Herring.

Thank you to Ricky Kennedy for being a saint and helping me edit this film, it was a monumental task.

Finally, and most importantly I would like to thank my brother, Daniel May. He helped me film this documentary, and was by my side the whole way. He means the world to me.

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Introduction

Summer Feature: A History of SFA Student Productions is a documentary exploring the history of a unique film program in the Stephen F. Austin State University School of Art. The filmmaking emphasis at SFA began under the instruction of William Arscott in the late 1970's. In the summer of 1986, the film students, along with Arscott, set out to film a feature length movie called Jane Long: Mother of Texas. The term feature film refers to the length of the movie. Anything longer then seventy minutes is generally considered a feature film. Less then seventy is considered a short film. Jane Long became too expensive due to the cost of film and the film printing process. So, it was completed as a short film at just over forty minutes. In the following summer sessions, the students filmed commercials to keep the cost down. In 2000, after a period of filming commercials, the students wanted to shoot a feature film. By this point, digital technology had improved and made movie making inexpensive. Scott Miles, an undergraduate, wrote and directed the first summer feature, Dead Flesh. Arscott gave Miles and the other students free reign with the equipment, not expecting the production to amount to much, saying, "You guys want to do it, go ahead and do it." Miles finished the film in 2001, establishing a precedent for future productions. The students did not come together to work on a film again until the summer of 2002, with

Darkness and Windows, directed by Jason Hubbell and written by Chris Wood. Hubbell and Wood graduated before the film was completed. At this point, Arscott realized that filming features during the summer session could be beneficial but needed more structure to be done properly. Arscott began taking a bigger role in the features, bringing in outside professionals to teach the students and giving them real world film production experience. The summer feature program produced sixteen feature films and two short films by 2018. However, Summer Feature: A History of SFA Student Productions only covers the films from 2000 through 2015.

Ultimately, this documentary tells the story of how the summer feature is a constant learning experience for both the students and the teachers, a theme that shows itself time and time again throughout the film.

The Plan

When I came back to Stephen F. Austin State University to get my Masters of Fine Arts degree, I had one goal in mind; I wanted to direct a feature film. Arscott had two graduate students' films to pick from for the upcoming feature, one of them being mine. My plan was to direct a feature film written by my brother, Daniel May, titled *The Teleported Man*. May's script was a science fiction story inspired by classic morality tales like *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Invisible Man by* H.G. Wells, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. Ultimately, he did not choose my film. Without the support of the summer feature program, it would have been difficult to fund the production of *The Teleported Man*.

Arscott then approached me about filming a behind the scenes documentary for the upcoming summer feature, *Camino* (2015), directed by Justin Herring, and using that for the basis of my thesis. This alternative was cheaper than producing a sci-fi film out of pocket. After some thought, I decided that I would do a documentary; but instead of limiting the subject to one summer feature film, I would cover all of the summer features from 2000 to 2015. The initial concept of my documentary was to tell the history of the film program while also showing the process each production goes through, from being selected for a summer feature to the premiere of the finished film.

The Structure

Documentaries can be constructed in several different ways. The structure is usually determined by the material a director is working with. My first step was gathering the materials: videos, interviews, photos, etc. I began by filming behind the scenes footage of *Camino*. I spent most of the time following Herring and recording him as he worked and dealt with issues throughout the production. This approach is known as *cinéma vérité*, a term invented by Jean Rouch, a French filmmaker. The idea is to film events as they happen and then piece the story together in editing. Initially, my plan was to use Herring's first time directing experience as the framework for the rest of my documentary, using that production to introduce the feature film program with interviews of the other directors. I spent a month following the production, collecting hours of footage, and filming anything of interest. I spent all day filming, and my brother,

action along with who appeared in it (Image 1). When it came time to edit the footage, I searched the catalog of videos for the clip I wanted. For example, if I needed a shot of Herring talking to his director of photography, Russell Blair, all I had to do was search "Russell" in my spreadsheet and pull up the associated clip. This simple step saved hours of editing time. By the time *Camino* finished its twenty-six days of production, I filmed one thousand eight hundred and eighty-four clips, which is four hundred and forty-four gigabytes of data and about twenty hours of footage.

Since I filmed the production as it occurred, I looked for inspiration from other cinéma vérité style documentaries, such as *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* and *Whitey: United States of America v. James J. Bulger.* I also looked at *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show* and *Stripped,* because both of these films interviewed several people in the same profession. I took the same approach with my film. I interviewed as many directors as possible and put their experiences together in my documentary.

The People

On a professional production, there are often hundreds of people all working towards a singular goal, to complete the film. SFA's features are smaller than standard productions, with anywhere from thirty to fifty people per film. I conservatively estimated over five hundred people have been involved in the seventeen SFA films; it would have been a logistical nightmare to interview them all, so I set some restrictions on who to interview. The director is the head of production. They establish a vision for the

film, and they work with their production team to achieve that vision in every aspect of film production, from casting and locations, to the look of the film. By restricting the scope of my documentary to the perspective of the directors, I focused in on one specific aspect of the productions. After the production of *Camino* was finished, I found all of the previous summer feature directors (See Appendex) and scheduled them for interviews. Thankfully, fourteen of them were still in Texas and within driving distance of Nacogdoches. Because of my own involvement in the SFA film program, I was acquainted with the majority of these directors, and it was not difficult to convince them to be a part of my documentary. There were a few exceptions. Lee Langford director of *Christmas with the Dead*, who is based in Los Angeles, California, chose not to be interviewed. I was not able to get in contact with Jason Hubbell, director of *Darkness & Windows*, who had moved to Los Angeles.

I interviewed a total of fifteen people: fourteen directors and one producer, William Arscott.

The Director

I made the decision early on that this documentary would be about the directors of the summer features. Why did I make this choice, when there are plenty of others who were heavily involved with the program? The simplest answer is a selfish one. I wanted to direct a feature length film. I have directed many short films, but I have yet to take on the monumental task of directing a feature. Since I did not get to direct a summer feature, I wanted to interview and live vicariously through the people who did.

Jason Kohl had this to say about directors in his book:

In collaboration with the producer, the director "hires and inspires" a group of fellow creative artists, including the cinematographer, actors, key design collaborators, editor, composer and so on, all while keeping them within the framework of her own specific vision for the film. This is a craft that takes decades to master, requires tremendous people skills and an equally tough will. (26)

A director's job is to take the words from the script and realize them on the screen, using the cast and crew as their tools and medium. This takes skill and determination to do successfully. The best way to gain these skills is to practice, and that is what SFA provides in the form of the summer program. Again, Kohl writes:

Depending on who you ask, researchers currently contend that it takes anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field. Whether those numbers are perfectly accurate is moot; the takeaway is that filmmaking, like painting, athletics, playing the piano or being a rocket scientist, takes a massive amount of time and dedication to master. In exchange for tuition, film school will give you structured time to practice your craft in a safe, constructive environment. This is perhaps the greatest gift a school can offer. (8)

The summer feature will not make a director a master of their craft, but it will add

to the hours of practice. The average day on a feature is twelve hours. If that is multiplied by twenty-eight days of production, that is three hundred and thirty-six hours of invaluable experience. Each person I interviewed carries that experience with them. My goal was to capture a small portion of that mastery from each of them. I still have much to learn, but when it comes time for me to step into the director's chair, I'm better prepared then before I made this documentary.

The Interviews

The first director I interviewed was Derek Wayne Johnson. Johnson was in Los Angeles at the time, working on a documentary of his own called, *John G. Avildsen: King of the Underdogs.* As luck would have it, he was coming back to his hometown, Carthage, Texas, for a week, giving me a window of opportunity to interview him.

The other interviews followed a similar trend. I made trips to several cities to conduct these interviews. In Houston, I interviewed Justin Herring and Blake Dumesnil. In Austin, I talked to Scott Miles, Carlos Larotta and Josh Randolph. In Dallas, I talked to Jasmine Austin, and the rest were close to Nacogdoches. The interviews averaged about an hour each, with one exception, Trey Cartwright. Cartwright did the final edit of Darkness & Windows, wrote American Goldfish, and directed Wish Thief and Truck Month. For Cartwright, who worked on ten summer features, I abandoned the safety net of my list of questions (See Appendex). His full interview was over three hours long. Trey provided a unique perspective in that he saw how the summer feature films changed from when it was new to what the summer feature is today. I had planned

to interview Matthew Perry, director of *American Goldfish*, but decided to cut it, since Cartwright covered the film in his interview. There were a dozen other people that I would have enjoyed interviewing, including a handful of graduate students who directed features at SFA that were not a part of the summer feature program; however, after spending nearly a year doing interviews, I had to draw the line somewhere.

The Footage

I spent a year traveling, filming, and collecting the footage, including behind the scenes material for past features; it was then time to piece it all together. First, I created a timeline with place holders for each of the fifteen films I was covering. This was the outline for my documentary. My initial plan was to create a ninty-minute film. This allowed for approximately five minutes for each summer feature and five minutes of introductions and conclusions. While any professional film credits one person as "Editor," that one person is backed up with whole team of editors. Having already spent a year gathering interviews and footage, I needed to get this film completed within a reasonable amount of time. I enlisted the help of a fellow editor, Ricky Kennedy. I sent him a four terabyte hard drive filled with all the footage. I also included my outline and preliminary edits of the interviews. Kennedy spent a couple of months editing the twenty-plus hours of interviews into a rough cut that was two and a half hours long. I took this rough cut and began editing and searching for what would be the documentary's theme.

The Theme

Every good film has a theme or message that it attempts to convey. In a narrative film, the theme is decided from the start of the project. The screenwriter developes the theme while writing the script. The director then guides that message from the script to the screen through the production. The cast and crew enriches the theme while collaborating with the director. Then, in post-production, the theme gets refined into the final message. However, for documentary films, the process is the exact opposite. The message is discovered rather then created. When I began production on this documentary, I did not know what the exact theme was going to be. My documentary started with the summer feature program and the students that took part in it. I knew there was an interesting history behind the program, and I wanted to explore that history. Once I had recorded all the interviews and gathered all behind the scenes footage, I started searching for what the documentary was about.

Before I had the first rough cut of the film, I believed the theme would be something universal about film making and what it took to be a director. Most of my questions centered around the students' directorial experiences. I wanted to know how the summer feature shaped these students. What I did not realize was how much the students shaped the summer feature program. Each of the past features influenced the film that followed. The students had an inherent, competitive desire to make the next film better then the previous one. Some students worked on multiple features during their time at SFA. They learned from the mistakes of the past productions, thus

improving the next one.

It took some time for me to come to this realization. As I said, the first cut of the film was two and a half hours long. Kennedy cut together all the interesting bits from the interviews into a collection of interesting stories, but they lacked a cohesive message.

This was the beginning of my journey to find the theme of the documentary, when I began looking for the common thread in all of the interviews.

The editing process can be a difficult one if the editor does not know the direction they are taking the film. The one thing I was certain of was that the film was too long. Even the most interested audience members would find it difficult to sit through a documentary over two hours in length. My first goal was to edit the film down to a watchable length of ninety minutes. I looked at each segment and asked myself the same two questions over and over; is this part relevant to the film as a whole and does it provide some new information or perspective? If I felt the answer was no, I would remove it from the film. This sounds like an easy task, but often, the answer was unclear.

The best example of this is the segment about the 2012 summer films,

Truck Month and The Rise of the Robots, directed by Trey Cartwright and Herbert

Midgley respectively. In the first rough cut, this section was twenty-two minutes long,
over twice the length of all the other years covered. Both films were shot at the same
time by separate crews and were in post-production at the same time. Midgley gave an
early screening of his film to get feedback from an audience, which included
Trey Cartwright. Midgley and Cartwright collaborated on the editing and digital effects

that are now heavily featured in the final version of *The Rise of the Robots*.

Since this was much longer then any other part of my film, it was necessary for me to cut it down. This was a challenge for me, because I enjoyed the story that the two filmmakers were sharing. In the earlier cuts, I was not sure of the overall theme, so it was difficult to tell which parts of the segment were relevant to the film. At first, I chipped away at it, reducing it down to twenty minutes for the second cut, then down to twelve minutes in the next one. By this point, I had cut over an hour out of the whole film, but the 2012 section was still the largest segment. After screening a rough cut to some other graduate students and Arscott, they felt the segment was still too long, so I cut it down to five and a half minutes.

That is film making, making tough decisions that make the film better. The 2012 segment lost its message of collaboration, but it now fit in line with the larger theme that weaved its way through the rest of the documentary. The final version of the film was one hour and seven minutes, charting a serendipitous journey from students making feature films for fun to producing a refined film, which were given recognition by some of Texas's biggest film festivals.

The Changes

The path that the summer feature program took was one of change. In the beginning, there was no program, only students with the ambition to shoot a feature-length film. *Dead Flesh* (2000) and *Darkness & Windows* (2002) fall in this category.

Once Arscott saw the educational potential of such a program, he molded it into shape. The students still, by democracy, decided which films they would make, but Arscott brought in an outside professional to instruct the class. This led to the production of *Planet Texas* (2003) and *American Goldfish* (2004). However, this democratic process led to a film that was impossible to shoot by a student production in 2005. Arscott had to step in as the producer and pick two shorts to film instead, *Love Ransom* and *Wish Thief* (2005). Going forward, the students no longer decided which script they would film for the summer feature. Arscott would make that decision. The first feature to be chosen by Arscott was *Within Us* (2006). The program shifted again after *Greater Heights* (2010) went unfinished, and Arscott lost controlling interest in *Christmas with the Dead* (2011). A decision was made, by Arscott, to let the graduate students, who had to film a feature for their thesis work, use the summer program to produce their films. *Truck Month* and *The Rise of the Robots* (2012) were the first of these. The change also made sure there was a student who could see the film through post-production and completion.

This is arguably successful, since *The History of Time Travel* (2013) was the first film to get recognition by being selected for showing in film festivals, including the Austin Film Festival. The last film covered in this documentary, *Camino* (2015), was the first to use crowd-funding. The increase in budget allowed the production to pay actors, improving the quality of performances. These changes over the years have helped the program grow in production quality and educational potential.

Lost and Found

Of all the summer features that were produced at SFA between 2000-2015, only one was never completed. In the fall of 2009, Arscott had the undergraduate students write a scripts to pitch for summer feature 2010. He selected Julia Rodriguez's script, *Greater Heights*. Since Rodriguez was a fairly new film student with little experience, Arscott enlisted Ira Shiftlet, a graduate student, to direct the film. Shiftlet also used the film as his thesis work for completion of his MFA degree. The first day of production was met with bad weather that threw the production into a tail spin that it never fully recovered from. Shiflet never connected with the story of the movie, which made the editing process difficult. Because of this roadblock, Shiflet could not complete a final cut and went on to graduate with a degree focusing on cinematography instead of filmmaking. Film school allows for these failures as Kohl writes:

Failure, confusion and strife cost you more in the real world, if only because they don't have the candy shell of education around them. Though painful, failure is always the best teacher. Film school is a place where you'll be able not only to learn from failure, but also to integrate that knowledge into your next project. (9)

These failures not only provide experience for the students but also help shape the future of the program. *Greater Heights* faded away and, for a time, was lost. Six months after Shiftlet's interview, I received a message from him; he was going through some old hard-drives and found the *Greater Heights* footage and edit files. I immediately made

plans to meet with him and collect the footage. I informed Arscott that I had recovered the footage and there was a discussion of the possibility of completing a version of *Greater Heights*.

The Future

To meet the requirements of the M.F.A. degree at SFA, my thesis documentary was to be at least forty-five minutes. However, I do not plan to release the film as a full length documentary. I feel the material in this documentary works better in smaller segments. If I were to release the documentary for the public, I would edit the film into ten to fifteen minute episodes and upload it to a online, video-sharing service. The pilot episode would introduce summer feature program. Each episode that followed would be devoted to one summer feature film. Presenting the documentary in this format would allow each film to stand on its own while also giving more time to each of them. It would also remove the time frame limitations of the full film, which only covers the productions from 2001 through 2015. Additional episodes could be filmed to cover the productions created in 2016 and beyond.

Final Thoughts

When I started this project in the summer of 2015, I was naive and thought I would finish in less than a year. It took me just over three years: a year and a half of gathering materials and another year and a half of putting it together into the final film. In doing so, I got to hear stories from over a decade and got a very small taste of what it is like to be the director of a feature film, the knowledge of which will undoubtedly help

me in my ambition to direct a feature length film of my own. Completing this documentary was one of the hardest tasks I've ever had to produce. It has been an educational experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I owe a serious debt of gratitude to Stephen F. Austin State University's School of Art and its filmmaking program.

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 DVD
- Stripped. Dir Dave Kellett and Frederick Schroeder. Sequential Films. 2014. ITunes, https://itunes.apple.com/us/movie/stripped/id816065098?ls=1.

APPENDIX

	Α	В	С	D	E
1	Date	Cam	#	Part	Description
2	06/07/15	CAMa	0001	01	Interview: Justin – PreProduction pt.1
3	06/07/15	CAMa	0001	02	Interview: Justin – PreProduction pt.2
4	06/08/15	CAMa	0002	01	first day meeting – crew, Brad, Arscott
5	06/08/15	CAMa	0003	01	first day meeting – Justin, and everyone
6	06/08/15	CAMa	0004	01	first day meeting – Justin, crew, Brad finding out who will talk, close on crew
7	06/08/15	CAMa	0005	01	first day meeting – Brad talking paper work, Peyton talk,
8	06/08/15	CAMa	0006	01	first day meeting – Justin close up, while Peyton calls roll
9	06/08/15	CAMa	0007	01	first day meeting – Peyton OTS roll call
10	06/08/15	CAMa	8000	01	Close up Arscott writing on Crew list
11	06/08/15	CAMa	0009	01	first day meeting – Russell talking
12	06/08/15	CAMa	0010	01	first day meeting – Russell talking, Arscott talking, Hats
13	06/08/15	CAMa	0011	01	first day meeting – Arscott talking hats

Image 1: Footage Catalog

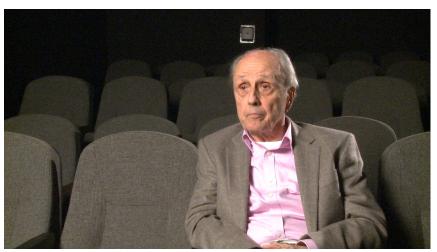


Image 2: William Arscott



Image 3: Scott Miles



Image 4: Trey Cartwright



Image 5: Carlos LaRotta & Josh Randolph



Image 6: Blake Dumesnil



Image 7: Derek Wayne Johnson



Image 8: Rob Senska



Image 9: Brad Maule



Image 10: Jasmine Austin



Image 11: Ira Shiflet



Image 12: Herbert Midgley



Image 13: Ricky Kennedy



Image 14: Peyton Paulette



Image 15: Justin Herring

Year - Title - Director

- 2000 Dead Flesh Scott Miles
- 2002 Darkness & Windows Jason Hubbell
- 2003 Planet Texas Carlos LaRotta & Josh Randolph
- 2004 American Goldfish Matthew Perry
- 2005 Wish Thief Trey Cartwright
 - Love Ransom Blake Dumesnil
- 2006 Within Us Derek Wayne Johnson
- 2007 Skipping Tomorrow Rob Senska
- 2008 All Good Years Brad Maule
- 2009 Sara's Book Jasmine Austin & Ira Shiflet
- 2010 Greater Heights Ira Shiflet
- 2011 Christmas with the Dead Lee Langford
- 2012 Truck Month Trey Cartwright
 - The Rise of the Robots Herbert Midgley
- 2013 The History of Time Travel Ricky Kennedy
- 2014 Fast Ones Peyton Paulette
- 2015 Camino Justin Herring

The Questions

- What is your name?
- What year and which summer feature did you direct?
- Did you write the feature?
- What is a short synopsis for what your film is about?
- Why was your film selected?
- What other SFASU Features did you work on?
- How was the preproduction process for your film?
- Were there any major issues during production?
- Tell me about post-production.
- How was it working with the producer, William Arscott?
- How was seeing your film premiere in front of an audience?
- What happened with the film after the premiere?
- What are you doing now?
- If you they offered it to you, would you direct another summer feature?
- What advice would you give a first time director?

VITA

Dudley May graduated from Nacogdoches High School in May of 2005. He then

went to Stephen F. Austin State University where he earned a Bachelors in Fine Arts

emphasizing in Filmmaking and Digital Media in May of 2010. He returned in the fall

semester of 2011 to Stephen F. Austin State University for the Masters in Fine Arts

Program for Filmmaking.

He has been involved with nine feature films and numerous short films in various

capacities as an undergraduate and graduate student.

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MLA Format

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