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## **“The Mary Janes”**

Jessica R. Voelker

*University of New Orleans, New Orleans*, [jessicarvoelker@gmail.com](mailto:jessicarvoelker@gmail.com)

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When a rebel accepts that life's "Plans Change"  
The creation of "The Mary Janes"

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Film & Theatre Arts  
Film Production

By

Jessica Voelker

B.A. University of New Orleans, 1999

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Assistant Director
DP	Director of Photography
MDQ	Major Dramatic Question
UNO	University of New Orleans

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I will discuss, analyze, and explain the process of creating my thesis film, *The Mary Janes*. I will begin with a discussion of the theme, and continue with explaining each aspect of making the film in relation to that theme. I will recount my greatest challenges during the process. I will also relate my use of knowledge and skills accumulated through study. Finally, I will analyze the outcome of the work of art, and question how well my theme was actualized and understood. I will evaluate the film as whole, including the process of creation, successes and failures, and determine how well I was able to create a clearly articulated story with a strong genre style.

Keywords: short film, The Mary Janes, exploitation film, feminism, auteur, Jessica Voelker

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

An **exploitation film** is any film which tries to succeed financially by exploiting a current trend, a niche genre, or a lurid subject matter. Subjects which these films exploit include, but are not limited to: sex, violence, and romance.<sup>1</sup>

My intention was to create a thesis project that takes the exploitation film genre and uses it to tell a tale of love and heartbreak, acceptance, and letting go. It's told through a story about a female gang living in a small town in the Deep South. On the surface, the film is an all out romp ride of a "girl gang" film. My hope was to make a film that is exciting and fun, dangerous and evocative, emotionally charged, yet with a deep meaning that causes a strong connection with the audience.

The focal point of my film is to reinvent the "girl gang" exploitation film genre by adding an underlying emotional element, a relatable protagonist, and a clear dramatic arc. I wanted it to be tough and wild, yet below the surface sensitive with an emotional feminine reality. This is the spark in the film that grabs people. The underlying insecurity and vulnerability that contrasts with the tough exterior is what I hope people will be drawn to in the film. This is the duality of human nature that exists in all of us. Most people can relate to feeling one way and expressing another.

Specifically, our protagonist Mary Jane, is an extreme example of this duality. Mary Jane, a small town girl, has been cheated on by her fiancée, Frank. When this happened, her idea of the perfect life was crushed. Though Mary Jane has been heartbroken, is angry and seeks revenge, deep inside she still desires Frank's love or her "idea" of life with Frank as she had planned it. However, once finally accepting who he really is, realizing that he will never change, and acknowledging the trouble she's gotten into because of her feelings about him, she is finally able to let him go. She must focus now on her baby and being a good mother and living a happy and simple life. The message being, allow yourself to love, but also be able to let go if things don't go as planned. Don't let the inability to move on keep you from finding happiness. Only when we let go of expectation, and embrace acceptance, can we move forward in life. Mary Jane

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<sup>11</sup> Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw- Hill, 2010): 310.

chooses to let Frank and her anger towards him go, allowing her to focus on a healthy life and being a good mother.

In preparation for the film, I explored the genre through early exploitation films with female protagonists and young people behaving badly, such as: *Switchblade Sisters*, *Coffy*, *Teenage Doll*, and *Reefer Madness*. I also studied modern versions of the exploitation/girl gang film, such as Tarantino's *Death Proof* and *Kill Bill*. My thesis film has the low budget production poor quality "look" of the Grindhouse movies. This was achieved through careful use of Cinematography, Production Design, and Editing. To achieve the "reinvented" exploitation genre, I directed for excellent performances and wrote the actors carefully crafted dialogue. Generally, these films have neither. However, I wanted the acting to be believable, gripping the audience and taking them into a story that moves them. The film is a tribute to everything that is fun about the genre. It contains risqué material and titillating artistic content, expressed through high levels of sex, violence, and shock. It has fun and funky visual effects, exaggerated sound effects, and wild loud rock music. Yet, it also has a feeling of a higher quality than the usual exploitation film, expressed through the careful use of dialogue and acting. This is a girl power film. The film has a strong female protagonist surrounded by a group of strong female supporting characters. The film puts the choices of a woman in her own hands, not in the hands of a man. The message is a woman can be happy with or without the fairy tale. The film shows a woman openly expressing aggression and anger at being treated badly rather than gently pining away alone in the passive manner as is more acceptable by society. The film will attract a youthful and female audience, akin to these perspectives. However, at its core the film is about the need to love and to be loved. This is the most intense of all human desires and universally relatable. Most people who have loved have loved the wrong person, and been heartbroken at some point in their lives. The film shows how even when heartbroken, sometimes we hold on to the hope of still being loved by that person, making foolish choices and holding on to the bitterness of not having their love, leading to unhappiness. Letting go, acceptance, and moving on are the hardest things to do, and the best lessons to learn about love. So, although it is an empowering film that will appeal to young women, it also has a universal message about love. Its message of dealing with love, loss of love, moving on, and choosing more wisely who we love, will speak to anyone of any age who sees the film.



## CHAPTER 2

### WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

#### THE WRITING OF *THE MARY JANES*

I had an idea for a thesis film upon entering graduate school at UNO. It was to be an epic thriller that spanned different time periods. By the time I had enrolled in Erik Hansen's Thesis Screenwriting class in spring of 2013, I had learned a lot about the challenges of making a short film. It was obvious that the idea was too large scale. Now what was I going to do? I had to start brainstorming.

We received some helpful handouts in class about ways of coming up with ideas for our scripts. I had also studied many books on writing screenplays by this point in graduate school. One method stands out to me, "write what you know." The author of the book *Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect*, Claudia Hunter Johnson, suggests: "The best short screenplays are deeply felt and highly specific."<sup>2</sup> I feel most drawn to writing stories with characters that face certain internal struggles that I have personally faced. I write what I know or what I have experienced. I began to dig deep into my own life looking for issues that I have dealt with, something that I felt I would honestly share is what I wanted my protagonist to overcome. As I came up with these ideas, I was also simultaneously imagining what kind of world I wanted the protagonist to live in and what type of stylistic elements worked with the theme.

I knew I wanted a female protagonist. I started developing a story about a girl who was a pseudo Bohemian writer in New York City. Then one about a wealthy woman who was searching for her birth parents in a bar in New Orleans and finds they were Gypsies. Then there was one about a female serial killer living life as a soccer mom in the suburbs. All the ideas I was coming up with did not stick. I didn't feel connected enough to the protagonists or the plots. However, I did feel connected to the theme. Each story was about female identity. In each story there was a woman who was struggling with living a life that was "planned," trying to be what society said they should be or rebelling from what society said they should be, with an underlying need to find acceptance of their true identities.

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<sup>2</sup> Claudia Hunter Johnson, *Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect* (Focal Press, 2010): 11.

As I was developing this theme, I was at the same time digging around in my past for a world my protagonist could live in, other characters to interact with my protagonist, and deciding which type of genre I'd want to use to tell the story. I have travelled and lived in many places and so I could envision many interesting settings. However, I also had to take into account what locations I could practically use to create this story. It would be best to set the story in the South, as that is what I know best and what I have access to. And so, I knew I wanted the film to take place in the South, and to be about a strong female character struggling with her "plan" of life. This was a place and a subject I personally knew well and felt a deep connection with.

I had always wanted to make a film about a group of young friends living an idle lazy life in the rural South, where their innocence is challenged in some way. I was influenced by films like *Stand By Me*, *The Outsiders*, *Grease*, and more recently *Spring Breakers*, which all had aspects I wanted to incorporate into my film, such as small town life, groups of friends that are gang-like, innocence facing danger, and coming of age. I spent my teen years in an all-girl school in a small Southern town and this context really spoke to me. I decided this would be the type of story world I would use for the film. So, my protagonist would be part of a group of friends. They would be a gang of sorts, engaging in petty crimes and illegal activities. But also they would be like sisters, a family. The protagonist would be a mother-like figure that the girls look to, to take care of them, making her a natural fit to be the group's leader. I like to write supporting characters who are instantly recognizable, somewhat stereotypical, but with unique qualities that help support the story. I would develop the female gaze of the film, with describing different aspects of women through these characters. Each girl in her group would symbolize a certain type of woman. For example, Kat is the tough wild girl, Liza the carefree sexy girl, and Summer the smart innocent girl. My protagonist would encompass them all, being a culmination of all aspects of femininity, giving a true portrayal of a woman as multifaceted, in contrast to how women often are portrayed in film as flat and one sided.

Still I needed a story. What happened to make our protagonist so rebellious and to form this gang? What went wrong in her plans of life? The struggles of relationships and marriage come up as an area that I find endlessly fascinating to watch as a viewer, as well as to write about. I have my own past relationships, as well as those of my girlfriends, guy friends, and family to use as material that I know personally and have a connection with. I decided the protagonist would have to be struggling with a relationship. I came up with the idea that she

needed to be facing a love relationship that didn't work out as she had planned, and she was rebelling by being wild with her friends in the small town. Her ex could be a cop, making an even stronger impact when she caused trouble in town, as it would always attract his attention professionally as well as personally. Though they were physically apart, the relationship hadn't truly ended as now they were in a sort of cat and mouse game.

At that point, I started considering the genre. I was always attracted to Tarantino's style. He was greatly influenced by exploitation films. He lists *Switchblade Sisters*, the cult girl gang film classic, as one of his favorite and most influential films. I had recently studied exploitation films for one of my comprehensive exam questions and so the genre was currently on my radar. It clicked. I would use the exploitation genre for its stylistic elements. Yet, I'd reinvent it as Tarantino did. I decided to mix the fun and exciting elements of the exploitation genre with a drama told from a female perspective, as this was my perspective as a female director. The film would have a female gaze, as opposed to the male gaze of the male director's exploitation film of the past. A female auteur film exploring a woman's internal struggle told with the stylistic elements of an exploitation film. This would be fresh and new and exciting.

Screenwriting is the area of filmmaking that I feel most comfortable with. I have always had the ability to write with ease and storytelling comes naturally to me. Because of that, it's the area that I wanted most feedback on. I didn't want to become complacent with my script. During my Thesis Screenwriting class, I developed the story. I started with a basic plot. Mary Jane is a girl who has had her heart broken and so rebels against men by forming a gang with her friends. They act wild and run around town taking advantage of guys and getting into mild trouble. Their badness has undertones of innocence, as they aren't so much malicious as they are immature in their outlook on life. In her reaction to her breakup, Mary Jane is still unable to let go, as she is still trying to attract her ex's attention by her actions. Now I had to come up with an MDQ, the Major Dramatic Question. This is one of the elements of writing that I learned from The Gotham Writer's Workshop book called, *Writing Movies: The Practical Guide to Creating Stellar Screenplays*. According to the book, the MDQ "propels the story along its path of action, accelerating it steadily and breathlessly toward climactic conclusion".<sup>3</sup> What would be the big dramatic question of the film? What if a bad girl living a wild lifestyle all of a sudden got faced

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<sup>3</sup> Gotham Writer's Workshop Faculty, *Writing Movies: The Practical Guide to Creating Stellar Screenplays* (Bloomsbury USA, 2006): 35.

with pregnancy? And what if this baby was the result of the love between her and the ex who hurt her so badly? Would she grow up and face her life, and stop all the nonsense? Would she hope this might heal the hurt between herself and her ex, possibly reuniting them? Or would she run from the problem and never face the truth or reality?

Originally, in keeping with the girl gang wild tone, I decided she would come up with a crazy plan to use the situation to get revenge on her ex and give her an excuse to run off away from her problems and live in “paradise.” She and the girls would steal money from Frank’s new wealthy girlfriend who he had cheated on Mary Jane with and they would use the cash to run to Mexico, searching for a perfect life on the beach. The film would end with a happy family of wild girls living on the beach and raising a baby. This idea was fun by all means and definitely had the girl power tone. However, it didn’t feel real enough to me. It was a fantasy. There was no real internal dramatic tension. There was only external plot tension. My protagonist didn’t change throughout the story. She was still wild and rebellious, and now she had her revenge, her baby, and her paradise. Through feedback from my teacher Professor Hansen, I realized she needed an internal struggle, something that would truly change her, allowing for the MDQ to have much more meaning, also allowing for the true female experience to be portrayed.

Around the same time I was at this point in the writing stage, I had a very intensely painful event occur in my own life. I separated from my fiancé, the father of my little girl. I started going through a very difficult time personally. I became a single mother and had to face the reality of this challenge. I also had to face my choice of a father for my child and the repercussions of that choice. As I have done in the past, I try to use my art as a healing. My own story started to mesh with that of my protagonist. At this point, I had also received feedback from my professor that the story seemed to be about Mary Jane and Frank, a love story gone bad. I needed to show the two of them in love in the beginning of the story for the audience to understand why she is so hurt. Then I needed to show her rebelliousness and her change once she truly learns who he is. All of this needed to be shown cinematically, visually, through the character’s actions. She would act in an angry, rebellious manner, and the intense emotional impact of his horrible reactions would in turn cause her to awaken and choose healthier actions. She needed to learn through this process. I realized this story had to be more about her and her relationship with her ex, and her personal growth. She had to realize who he really was, let go of

her idea of what their life should have been together, stop rebelling and being angry, and accept that life could be ok without him and not as she had planned.

I started with work shopping the script over the summer with my father, who is a very talented writer. We had worked well together previously on refining my last script, *Blackbird*. I also used the feedback I received from my professor and peers in the Thesis Screenwriting class, to help revise the script. I developed the girls into a gang more, by showing their solidarity in a visual way. I also developed each of their unique personalities and place within the gang. I developed the gang's place in society as well. I found a way to tie together different parts of the plot to the protagonist's past with her ex. I worked in scenes where the girls discuss love, relationships, and friendship loyalty. I created the internal journey of the protagonist, which followed along with the external plot twists, culminating in her choice and change. In the fall of 2013, I went to my screenwriting professors, Erik Hansen and Henry Griffin, to ask for feedback. I sent the script to my graduate classmates. I looked to them for advice and trusted their astute observations on the story. Throughout the fall of 2013 and into the spring of 2014, I continually refined and developed the characters, language, and plot. The final script was long. I was asked to shorten it by my professors and peers, as it was too much for our capacity to shoot as students, and the story seemed too long for a short film. I cut it down as much as I could. It was just a very dense script, and shortening it was a huge challenge. About a week before shooting in April 2014, I had my Final Final script written. It was still long.

## THE STORY

The film is about Mary Jane Duncan, who has been cheated on by her long time love, Frank Clary, a corrupt town cop who she had planned to marry. To deal with her heartbreak, she forms a gang with her sister and friends. They tease and taunt men, make mischief, and live by their number one rule: Never fall in love. The film opens on Mary Jane's 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. The girls steal some cash from some unsuspecting guys to use to party with. Back home they start the party by going to hang at their secret beach by a little creek. They girl talk and some of the gossip involves a friend who has left the gang for a boyfriend. Big No-No. And some of the gossip involves Frank. Mary Jane is upset by all of this talk. They sit on the beach and hand out

beers. Mary Jane refuses to drink at first, as she's not feeling well, but then proves she's the tough leader by downing a beer.

Back at the house, the gang is getting rowdy. They are drinking, smoking pot, and listening to loud rock music. Mary Jane is in the bathroom alone. She holds a pregnancy test, scared of the results. She looks at it and looks away toward the party outside the door. Her friends yell for her. She goes to her room and looks at her stomach in a long mirror. She grabs an old Polaroid of her pregnant mother on a beach that she has hanging on her mirror. She smiles. The girls call for her again. She rejoins the gang and drops the bomb. She tells them she's pregnant. She's going to Mexico and has a plan. The girls, of course, agree to go, following their leader as usual, no matter what. The plan is to rob Frank's rich girl. The girls find Marla at home getting dressed. They easily overpower her and take the cash from her safe.

Back home again, the girls pack. Mary Jane finds a picture of her and Frank, a map of Mexico, and a little engagement ring, as she's packing. She slips them in her bag and goes out to join the others. Meanwhile, Frank shows up for a little afternoon love with Marla, and finds her tied up. He finds out it was the Mary Janes and goes to look for them. When Frank shows up looking for the money, he tries to attack Mary Jane, and she kills him. The girls decide this will not stop them from going forward with their plan. They go to bury his body in the woods. After they throw his body in the hole, Mary Jane tells the girls to leave and let her take care of the rest. When they leave, she starts to break down emotionally. Suddenly, she hears a noise coming from the hole. Frank is still alive and pulls himself out. Frank proceeds to persuade Mary Jane that he still loves her. She still wants him and the life they had planned. She falls for it and the two have sex. When they are done, Frank betrays her. He cuffs her and radios for backup.

He leads her to his patrol car. The girls inside decide to put up a fight. But before anyone else gets hurt, Mary Jane realizes she must put an end to the madness. She is going to be a mother now and has to do the right thing. She realizes that she needs to let go of her feelings about Frank and accept who he is. Only then can she move forward and live the normal happy life with her child. The life that she always wanted she will finally get. Mary Jane convinces Frank to call off his "dogs" and she will get his money. As he leads her out of the car by gunpoint, she daringly pulls away and tells Frank how she sees now what kind of person he is and is able to let him go. Just as Frank is about to pull the trigger on Mary Jane, and Kat is about to do the same to him, Mary Jane tells him she's pregnant. He puts his gun down in shock. She

tells the girls to take the cash and go. Not wanting to leave her, they stall, hugging her tight. She pushes them to the car, and demands they go. They take off looking to their leader for guidance as they hesitantly pull away. Mary Jane and Frank stand staring at each other. Fade to black. In the last scene, Mary Jane sits on a beach with her little girl. The beach is the same one she and her friends had gone to. She is happy now with a simple life. She's accepted her life as it is and no longer tries to make "plans." It's her little girl's birthday. As they start to pack up to head back home for some cake, MJ is startled by a car noise. She jumps into her old bad girl toughness persona, grabbing a knife ready to protect her baby. Now as a mother, she has combined elements of toughness and nurturing. Around the bend come the gang, yelling surprise, and bearing gifts and sweets. They all gather around the little girl showering love on her. Mary Jane narrates how they all grew up through the experience, tells the fate of Frank and Marla, and explains how she finally accepted her life as it is.

## CHAPTER 3

### PUT THE PEDAL TO THE METAL

#### PRE-PRODUCTION

This was a very ambitious project. The script included several locations: the opening scene in the drive-in, an old house the girls live in, a beach on a river, a large wealthy home, and a burial site in the woods. It also included five primary cast members: Mary Jane, Frank, Kat, Liza, and Summer, as well as several secondary cast members, extras, kids, a baby, a dog, unique picture cars, cop cars, coordinated fight scenes, a burial, and a sex scene. Including just one of these in a script is usually challenging. I have a tendency to write challenging short scripts. Artistically, I am attracted to a very rich story world, filled with drama and intrigue. I guess you could say simplicity isn't my thing. In my previous projects in school, I had done a period piece, used antique picture cars, included weapons, coordinated fights, special effects makeup, and commissioned paintings, to name a few things. However, I was really pushing it this time. I knew pre-production would be a lot more work on this film, and so I devoted around seven months to the process. I intended to work out as many issues on the front end as possible, by carefully scheduling our shoot and planning for the unexpected, allowing for a smoother Production phase.

I planned to shoot the film in April of 2014. Visually, the story takes place in the deep hot South. Picture cut off shorts and sweat. I decided to shoot in April because it was the soonest I could shoot the film when the weather would be most fitting for the story. I didn't want to shoot in May, as this month would be too close to the end of the semester, risking a loss of availability for reshoots if they were needed. This would also give me some time to start Post Production before the end of the spring semester. I secured two Producers for my thesis production in spring of 2013. I asked Kd Amond, who was a Producer and an Editor on my 4530 film, *Blackbird*. She was an alumna from the UNO film department, and had been out of school for a couple of years working in the local film industry. We have a great working relationship and I was excited to have her support with my thesis project. My classmate, Joey Laura, was the second producer. Joey approached me after reading pages of my script in our "Writing the Thesis Script" class, and asked if he could help produce. He was going to be taking



Laura Medina's Producing class in the fall of 2013, which would be a huge help during Pre-Production. I also secured an undergraduate producer, Lizzie Guitreau, to help starting in November of 2013. Lizzie Guitreau also worked on my previous film, *Blackbird*, and did a great job. She was smart and talented, and was able to jump in head first, giving her all to a project. I knew she would be a great fit for this project. I planned to produce as well. I did a lot of the producing for *Blackbird*. For my Advanced Short Film class project, it sometimes felt more like a thesis film in its complexity to produce. I learned a lot while producing the film. It was extremely difficult to balance the hats of writer, producer, and director on a low budget student film. I learned how to work with a small crew on a small budget and to try to be as efficient as possible with time and money. I have a pretty good grasp on the role of an independent student filmmaker at this point and what's needed during this stage in the process. Though I hoped to be able to focus more on writing and directing, I knew from my past student productions that I would need to be producing, too, as many times you are working with other students with limited time to devote to your film.

I met with Kd Amond once I had a first draft written. We discussed ideas for setting the exploitation tone of the film and possible actors for the major roles. We could give it a grainy look like the old grindhouse films. We could get the local actresses, who acted together in her *Bayou Talent* web series, to audition for Mary Jane and the gang. We also discussed ways the film could be manipulated in post to have a more stylized look with many different extreme effects. She was helpful in suggesting reference films for specific scenes. I wanted to have her involved due to her experience and knowledge, as well as being like-minded artistically. However, I also came to realize that she wouldn't really be able to do much legwork as a producer as she was currently working in the local film industry. This meant she'd be working long hours on sets and did not have the time available to really produce. Early on, she became more of a resource of advice and information than a proper Producer. At this point, I looked to Joey Laura to start taking the lead as producer.

Joey and I met for lunch near the end of the spring semester of 2013. He had done a good bit of script breakdown with the current draft at the time. I was impressed with his preparation and eagerness to discuss what we needed to start working on. He also told me I had to cut the script down, that it was too long. I agreed that it was too long and that I would shorten it as much as possible. After showing him the next draft, he told me to cut several scenes in the

film that I felt were extremely important. At that point, I feared that our director/producer relationship was incompatible. I stood my ground on keeping the scenes. Not long after that, the fall semester of 2013, Joey told me he didn't think he would have the time to commit to producing the film. Once again, I was in need of a solid producer to carry the film through pre-production.

In the fall semester of 2013, I was working as a graduate assistant in the film department of UNO. I worked with three other graduate students in the equipment room. One of them, Jacob Hoyson, was in my year of graduate school, we had worked on several films together, and we were friends. I completely trusted him, admired his strong work ethic, and felt like he would be a strong producer for the film. I knew he was also busy working on his own thesis project, and that we would have to work with the amount of time he could commit to my project. I was willing to have his help on his terms, in order to have him involved in the film. He said he could help some when we were at work together during the fall, and mainly during the shoot in April. However, I now knew that I would need to work with several people in the producer role, considering everyone's student schedules and projects. I needed more help, so I decided to look for more helping hands.

At this point, time was ticking. The fall semester was starting to get into full swing. I only had myself as producer for the entire project. Lizzie Guitreau was available only to help produce in the fall because of her own projects the following spring. Jake only had limited availability to produce in the fall, due to classes and his own thesis work. I turned Barry Cunningham for help. He was a first year grad student, who also worked with Jake and me in the equipment room at school. I had asked him earlier to work on the film. He said he was interested in the camera department, which I agreed on, as he was learning a lot about cameras working in the equipment room. However, I decided to ask him to help produce, then later switch to the camera department for the shoot. He seemed to be a hard worker and eager to be involved. It was also convenient that we worked together daily. He agreed. Now I had to figure out how we would divide up the time available by all of us, and which tasks we would all take responsibility for. Casting was an area that I wanted to do in the fall and take a lot of time with. Since Lizzie had the most time to devote in the fall, I asked her to help with casting. Jacob, Barry and I, between the three of us, would manage the rest.

Lizzie took on casting and rocked it. She successfully found a group of actors that included those that I had envisioned for the roles, as well as others interested in the film. She organized and scheduled several days for me to meet with them. She was there to greet actors with drinks and snack and sign-sheets, read with the actors, and filmed the auditions. When she was unavailable, she arranged for someone else to help. Jake, Barry, and I hashed out all the other details, producing during our work hours in the equipment room. One day my friend and fellow grad student, Weizhong Huang, came to the equipment room to tell me he knew a girl from Russia who wanted to get involved in film projects and he had mentioned to her that I might have need for her help on my project. I was intrigued, and I definitely needed the help! I texted Anastasiya Rul and we made a plan to meet at the graduate assistant office. I immediately liked her and knew I wanted her involved in my project. She said she would take any position. I didn't want to stick her in just any position, so I asked about her background and what interested her. She was studying business and was interested in the financial aspect of filmmaking. Boom! That was perfect because I had secured zero funds for this huge production that I was planning. I asked if she would produce and focus on the financial aspect of the production. She was game. She was also available to help during the shoot, which was great as, at that point, I would be directing and would only have Jacob producing. So, I was finally covered for the whole project, securing Lizzie, Jacob, Barry, and Anastasya, and we were ready to put the pedal to the metal.

Our production meetings consisted of Jacob, Barry, and myself making phone calls and planning during our work hours in the equipment room. Eventually, the meetings included our Assistant Director, Andrea Kuehnel. She was an extremely experienced and dedicated AD who pushed the production forward with her scheduling and organization. Lizzie would stop by while I was working and we would discuss casting. She arranged everything and managed the casting sessions on weekends. Anastasiya was getting on me about the budget and funding. I knew I would mainly need the money for cast, food, cars, wardrobe, and makeup/hair. This was a lot. At the time, my plan was I would need to use student loans. Even then, I wasn't sure it would be enough. I had been considering asking a close friend of mine who is a wealthy entrepreneur to sponsor the film. I had been procrastinating asking him, having guilty feelings about asking for money for something that is not going to profit. As I started to go over my budget and expenses were mounting, I was starting to worry I wouldn't be able to make the film.

Maybe I would have to do it later, after saving more money, or write something more simplified. No, I needed to do it now and I needed to ask my friend for the help. What would I lose?

I contacted my friend and asked if he would be interested in helping me with funding for my thesis film. He had shown interest in my films in the past and recently. He is an entrepreneur with an interest in the arts. I had worked for him in a small shop that he owned during my undergraduate years as a film student. We have been friends ever since then. He said he was interested in helping and asked me to send him the script and budget. After that we planned to meet to discuss further. He is always in and out of the country on business and is very hard to pin down. I had to secure a meeting with him as soon as possible. Right around Christmas time when he was home, I asked if we could meet and that I needed to start spending on the film soon. We met and he asked how much I needed. I said the whole budget. He asked if I would have ownership of the material. I said yes. He asked if there would be any financial return out of the film. I said probably not as it's a student film and unlikely. I said that I would take it as a loan and pay it back. At that point he said he would be willing to take the risk and give me the money if I wanted it. I said yes and tried my best to stay calm and keep from letting out a waterfall of tears and emotional gratitude. He wrote me a check for the full amount. I was in complete shock with that check in my hand. I knew I was going to make the best film I could possibly make. I was so grateful for this amazing gift from my friend that as soon as I was alone I cried for joy! It was time to make a movie.

## CHAPTER 4

### I AM WOMAN HEAR ME

#### INSPIRATIONS

**Feminism** is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women.<sup>4</sup>

I was inspired to write a female-centric film. As a female writer and director, I am ready for our time to tell our stories on film. My thesis film would be not only a film with a main female character, but one with several females in the main roles. This would be like *Thelma & Louise* times four! I wanted the story to be about real issues women face in life and have them blown out of proportion in the exploitation style. I also wanted the main character to be empowered as a woman in the end of the film. Having been raised by a single mother, in the 1980s, I feel I was greatly influenced to explore the woman's journey as a story. My mother and her friends were part of the 80s feminist movement, which was my early exposure to feminism. I grew up with a strong sense of female power and of the struggles women face in life. Later in life, I took feminist theory classes and read the works of feminist authors, to further my knowledge of feminism. I am most interested in women's gender roles and identity developed and constructed by society, which promotes inequality of women and their dependence on men to be happy. I decided my heroine would be struggling with a life she thought was what she wanted, as it was the life society defines for women (i.e. perfect nuclear family= perfect life). When she doesn't get this life, she is unable to adjust and reacts with anger and rebellion. This inability to let go of an idea that has been so ingrained into who we are as women causes self-destruction in my heroine's life. It is only when she is able to see that she doesn't need that life to be happy, she is then able to see another social identity of herself as a single mother and is able to find true happiness within herself.

Now, I needed to find a way to mesh my feminist theory influence on story with a stylistic approach influenced by the exploitation film genre. I was very influenced by Tarantino's films *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, and *Kill Bill Vol.2*. These films have a strong

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<sup>4</sup> Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (Sage Publications, Inc., 1999): 2.

female protagonist dealing with real life female struggles, and they end by empowering the woman. Tarantino uses an over the top style with exploitation roots to convey the story, and is successful in doing so. Could I be? I knew that my story had to somehow work with the style I was going for, and this would be a challenge. Exploitation films exploit, whereas feminism empowers. This would seem to be counter-intuitive and non-cohesive on the surface, to use such a style with such a story. However, I knew it could work. What I was attracted to in the exploitation genre was that it used or exploited current societal trends for profit. What I wanted to do was turn this around and exploit the exploitation film. I would use elements of a style, which had originally exploited and use it in a story, which empowers. This would be my re-invention of the exploitation genre, with strong feminist roots. It would be sexy and wild with strong female characters, but with a depth to the story not found in an exploitation film. I wanted to express a woman's perspective, not fake, not manly, but emotional and raw and real. And I wanted the style to be over the top and dramatic like the world we live in.

I spent months researching feminist theory and exploitation films during the summer of 2013. I researched and carefully studied by reading books and watching as many films as possible related to the theory and genre. I also spent time researching current popular culture as it relates to women. I collected images and wrote down ideas as part of my visualization process. I collected pictures of costumes, make-up, hair, props, and locations, pictures of paintings and photographs for lighting, pictures of famous actors who I could imagine in the major roles for their looks as well as talent. I also researched different ways a story could be told, to inspire different ways of shooting the film. I spent time interviewing female friends and family members on their perspectives on love, heartbreak, and friendship. I also spoke with undergraduate students in the film program who are young women. They are going through these experiences and were glad to help with interviews. I felt it was important to have an idea of what it is to be a young woman going through these things currently. It gave me a fresher take and feel for the material. I gained great insight into my characters by doing this. I gained a greater vision of what the film would be in the end by doing this visualization process. I was ready to start making these visualizations a reality.

## CHAPTER 5

### WE ARE ALL PLAYERS

#### CASTING

After I had written the first draft of the script, I was ready to start considering the cast. When I write, I tend to begin imagining certain actors that I know of in the roles I am writing. This helps me to flesh out the characters when writing. In the past, instead of holding auditions, I would simply ask the actor that I had envisioned in the role to do the film. If I didn't know an actor for a certain role, I would ask for recommendations by fellow student directors, and then ask that actor to do a reading. As soon as I had the story idea for my thesis film, as in the past, I had an idea of some of the primary cast members that I wanted to work with. However, I also knew that casting is an area that I am insecure in. I had never done a formal audition because the idea of doing them caused me anxiety. I had been through the audition process as an actor and it was such an uncomfortable experience for me, being judged and rejected. As a director, I felt uncomfortable with not choosing certain actors who come to audition for me. I know how much actors put themselves on the line during auditions and I hated the idea of rejecting people. However, falling into the easy way would only limit my possibilities. I was determined to face my fears about auditioning and do it for the film.

In the Spring of 2013, my friend and fellow graduate student, Maja Holzinger, and I decided to go watch some acting classes to look for potential actors for our thesis films. We had heard of a local acting coach from New York, Jerry Katz. His classes were popular for many local actors and he had a good reputation. He was holding a free daylong seminar one Saturday and we decided to go. I was impressed by the quality of the actors at the seminar. This was an eye-opener for me as it confirmed that there is a wealth of talent in our city that I was not allowing myself access to by not auditioning. This was further confirmation that I needed to hold auditions. Even though I had an idea of who I wanted for the roles, I knew that, as with this seminar, I could be surprised by new talent and combinations of talented actors in the main roles. I was inspired to discover new talent to work with, outside of the UNO acting pool.

My plan at this point was to contact the actors that I imagined in the roles and audition them. At the same time, I would do general casting. Then, once I narrowed down my choices, I

would start doing readings with different groups of actors. I was mainly interested in a group of local female actors working together in Kd Amond's short web series "Bayou Talent." The actors in her show were Chelsea Bryan, Natalie Hultman, Ashton Leigh, and Nicole Lovince. They had a great rapport in the show and I felt strongly they would work. I had also seen their work in several UNO short films. They were all very talented and I felt safe using them. I wanted to try Chelsea and Natalie as Mary Jane. I wasn't sure which of them would work better as I'd never worked with them. I knew for sure Ashton would pull off the tough Kat. I had worked with her on my film *Blackbird*, and she played a very Type-A intense character and nailed it. I originally thought I'd have a scene with one of Mary Jane's friends who had left the gang. Her name was Nikki and I thought Nicole Lovince could play that role, or possibly the role of Liza. I was also looking at Caleigh Keith for Summer or Liza. Caleigh had played a similar role in Maja Holzinger's student film, *Rosebud*. As for Frank, I had no clue. I couldn't think of anyone at the time who fit my idea of Frank. I hoped through auditions, I would find someone perfect. Fingers crossed. During the summer, Kd Amond helped contact the girls to see if they'd be interested in the film. They all said yes.

In the fall, I began holding extensive auditions with the help of my producer Lizzy Guitreau. I knew this film would be made by the performances, and so allowed for a long audition and selection process. Once I found a selection of actors from open auditions, I held selective auditions with them and the actors that I contacted during the summer. I did this so that I could weed out those that didn't fit the roles, and work with those that did by trying different combinations of girls together. Though I was glad I went through this process, I still ended up choosing the original actors I was considering. I believe I have an instinct for choosing actors for roles, and when I know I know. I decided on Chelsea Bryan as Mary Jane, Ashton Leigh as Kat, Natalie Hultman as Liza, and Caleigh Keith as Summer. I was thrilled at the dynamic of these actors and excited to work with them. Once I had the girls chosen, I started doing readings with possible Franks and Chelsea, our Mary Jane. No one seemed to work. I was still in need of a Frank.

In the fall of 2013, I had enrolled in an advanced acting course. I wanted to learn more about the actor's process, as well as scope out possible talent for my thesis film. My teacher was a UNO graduate student in theater, James Yeagain. I was immediately struck by his intensity as a teacher and had a gut feeling he could be my Frank. However, I felt strange asking James at



the time because he was my teacher and I didn't want any conflict of interest. So, I waited until the end of the semester and then contacted him as soon as possible, asking if he'd audition for the role. He agreed and I held a reading with him and Chelsea. It was magic. They were perfect together. I finally had my Frank and Mary Jane.

The only other larger role was Frank's current love interest, the wealthy and spoiled Marla. Marla was the woman Frank had cheated on Mary Jane with. I was interested in Deanna Meske, a local New Orleans actor. I had never actually met her, but had seen her in some local short films. But I didn't want to choose her before asking around about other actors that would work. It was a smaller role, and I didn't want to spend too much time on auditions. All the suggestions from teachers and fellow students didn't seem to work for me. I pictured Deanna, with her Marilyn-esque looks and acting, when writing this role and I was pretty much set on using her. I asked her and she agreed to do it. Then there were a few other small speaking parts that I filled with fellow students and friends.

Heading into the spring semester of 2014, I was all cast and ready to roll into rehearsals. Right before I started rehearsals, Natalie Hultman contacted me and said she couldn't do the film. I was shocked and now stressed about trying to find another Liza. My perfect foursome was no longer. I had to re-evaluate the dynamic. Who could work with the three girls I had already chosen? I started thinking of everyone I had auditioned for all the girls. One person stood out, Sylvia Crim. I had worked with Sylvia on an undergraduate film, where she played an oversexed teen girl in Lyndsay Simon's film *Night at the Watsons*. I knew Sylvia could do Liza. She had auditioned for Mary Jane, Kat, and Liza, and was extremely interested in being part of the film in any capacity. I had Lizzie call her and ask her if she'd play Liza. She said yes. Finally, I was cast. With a fine cast of talented actors, fellow students, and friends, we were ready to start playing our parts.

## CHAPTER 6

### FEMALE GAZE FEMALE AUTEUR

#### DIRECTING THE MARY JANES

An **auteur** is a filmmaker whose personal influence and artistic control over a movie are so great that the filmmaker is regarded as the author of the movie.<sup>5</sup>

As a female artist, I wanted to use this thesis film project to explore the idea of how a woman's gaze is unique in the creation of a work of art. I have always been fascinated with the auteur directors, such as Tarantino. I personally feel most connection with their process and full control of the vision of a film. However, most auteurs have been men creating a male perspective and representation of women. According to feminist theory, male directors have only created an objectifying perspective of women. I have written a paper on this subject for John McGowan-Hartmann's Film Theory and Criticism class, and have learned a lot on the topic. In my thesis project, I wanted to turn the idea around, being both the auteur and the women that are represented. I consciously envisioned a film that would specifically call attention to the female perspective and a woman's representation of woman. I used the subjective view of women, a story told through their eyes and experiences. I used my personal style and vision to create a film dealing with high emotional drama and strong female characters.

I have been a long time fan of Tarantino, since I saw *Reservoir Dogs* for the first time in my early years of film study. I felt he was doing something so totally new and exciting. He pushed conventional filmmaking. He took the exploitation genre, married it to new wave filmmaking style, and twisted it into something new. He has stated that he's been greatly influenced by exploitation films. He lists *Switchblade Sisters*, the most well known "girl gang" film, as one of his most influential films. In preparation for this film, I explored the genre through books and films. I did my best to incorporate recognizable aspects of the genre in the film's style. My goal was to make a film that is fresh and original, that uses the exploitation genre style that Tarantino uses in his films, but that has a feminine and emotional core and a story with depth and meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 2010): 381-382.

## PREPARATION

Directing is the most fulfilling part of the filmmaking process for me. I most enjoy working with the actors in an intensely creative collaboration, to bring the story to life. I hope to continue to direct films in the future. And so, I wanted to challenge myself the most in this area in order to gain more experience and learn more about the craft. This is an area that one learns by practice. There are so many variables involved in directing that it's a hard thing to teach or learn in a class. Each time I direct a film, I learn something that can be used when directing the next film. Whether it's how I interact with different actors and their personalities, or how I envision a shot, or what's included in the mise-en-scene, I am constantly learning that there is no "right" way. The choices a director makes are very unique to the director and to the movie being made. Because of this, I know I will always be learning how to direct, no matter how many films I have directed.

One thing I did to further this learning process is take the Advanced Acting for the Camera class in the fall of 2013, taught by James Yeagain. Nicholas T. Proferes recommends in his book, *Film Directing Fundamentals*, "You can help the process along, and make gigantic strides in your insight and confidence, by studying acting to find out what it is like."<sup>6</sup> I felt like I needed to be challenged by putting myself in the place of the actor in order to better direct my cast. I believe that the more I know about the actor's process, the better a director I will become. I learned a lot in the course. I gained a greater understanding of how an actor creates a character and how important the communication and understanding is between actor and director. I also used the techniques in Lenore DeKoven's book, *Changing Direction*, analyzing the script and outlining the characters to help better communicate this insight to my actors. Prior to shooting, I had rehearsals with the four girls for all of their scenes. Then, I had separate rehearsals for just the Frank and Mary Jane scenes. We rehearsed the bar fight stunt and the girls attacking Frank stunt with professional stunt coordinator, Sean Braud. I had worked with him on my last film and he is wonderful to work with. I tried my best to use all the techniques and tools I've learned in acting and directing courses, to prepare to direct believable and emotionally intense performances out of my very talented cast for this film.

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas T. Proferes, *Film Directing Fundamentals* (Focal Press, 2008): 123.

## SHOOTING

As a female director, I use my sensitivity as a woman, I embrace it, and I use it to create a calm and safe atmosphere during the shoot, where I connect with the actors on an emotional level. I am more of an intuitive director than a technical director. I gave the actors as much insight as possible into the characters during rehearsals and between takes, but at the same time not too much as to create stiff performances. I allowed the actors to bring their talent to the table and create the characters with me. I believe in rehearsals in order to communicate ahead of time how I imagine the scenes to play out and to work on tone and intentions for scenes. I don't, however, like to over-rehearse. I feel if we rehearse too much with the actors, the scenes become less organic and literally "rehearsed." I believe a lot of the directing happens collaboratively on set in the moment. I feel out the actor and get to know their style during rehearsals, as well as build a mutual trust. Then on set we are free to play and see where the scene takes us. We were able to handle a difficult scene, such as the sex scene, and do it somewhat smoothly and painlessly. I didn't rehearse this scene, as I knew that would be uncomfortable for the actors and would make the scene feel false. Instead, I limited the number of crew members allowed on set and directed my actors calmly and quietly, and approached the scene as respectfully as possible. The scene worked! I enjoyed working with this very talented cast. They were a great group to direct and we all worked very well together to create some great moments in the performances.

My plan was to spend more time directing on this film than my last films. I hoped to use Lenore DeKoven's directing techniques on set as well. I had hoped to have enough planned out with my producers and camera team that I could solely focus on directing during the shoot. Things didn't go as planned with that. I was leader of the ship during this shoot, constantly making all kinds of decisions at any given moment. I tried my best to focus on directing the actors during the shoot. However, if I needed to make last-minute budget decisions, costume decisions, lunch decisions, camera angle decisions, or stop to pay my babysitter who was watching my daughter during the shoot, I would do it. I learned that this is independent filmmaking. On a larger scale big budget film, a director can focus on directing. However, on a small budget student film, a director wears many hats before, during, and after the film shoot. It's not like directing a play where you are directing actors in a performance and that's it. You

are expected to make all decisions at all times. This is quite a challenge and quite a juggling act. I have gained much appreciation for independent film directors and how difficult the job can be. I feel that I did my best with the challenge, learned a lot, and got some memorable performances despite how difficult the job of directing this film was.

## CHAPTER 7

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Making a film is such a wonderfully collaborative art form. Personally, I enjoy all areas of the filmmaking process. I see the process as important as the final result. The film begins as an idea, which is developed into a script by a writer. The director works with the actors to put life into the story through creating the characters. The director works with a director of photography to imagine how the story will be told visually through camera placement, movement, and lighting. The director works with the production designer to fill each scene with objects that unify the world in which the characters live with the story being told. The director works with the costume designer to create wardrobe that fits the characters and further supports the story being told. As the writer/director, I have a vision of the film I am making and I work with other artists to develop my vision into a collaborative work of art. It is the final product, which reflects the work of all of us, and truly shows the merit of the work.

#### PRODUCTION DESIGN

This is an area that I feel most creatively stimulated by. I feel I have an instinct for design, probably due to my mother's interior design influence. Observing and living in carefully designed spaces for most of my life has taught me how the choice of objects, patterns, and colors can affect mood and feelings. When used in storytelling, I feel design is one of the most important areas of the filmmaking process. A careful design adds immensely to the story being told by giving a sense of unity of the story with the lived in spaces of the characters in the story. Designers create a story world that the characters live in and, when done seamlessly, they create a feeling and tone with design that is imperceptible to the viewer on the surface for it seems natural. The viewer is drawn into the story by design and pulled by it throughout. Design adds an extra layer of depth to a film, giving the story life through artistic elements, which tell the story on a more intuitive level.

I looked forward to this opportunity to create a design that specifically works with the exploitation genre. The look I wanted to create was the small town Deep South environment. In

the last two projects I had done, I had been working with a very refined design. I was excited for the challenge of working with a grittier design scheme, yet, keeping my eye for aesthetic beauty. I wanted the design to be ambiguous in that it doesn't look specifically like it takes place in 2013. There would be no cell phones or flat screen televisions. The clothing and cars would be from a mixture of time periods, further creating the ambiguous effect. I knew I needed someone with great talent and experience to pull off the design for this film, as it would be a challenge to incorporate all of the elements I was looking for. I knew that Production Designer Ellen Bull would be the one.

I had first worked with Ellen on a few of former UNO graduate student Wendy Granger's films, in the art department. I was blown away by her work. She graduated with an Art Degree from Tulane, and worked on UNO student films as Production Designer. She has a great eye for Production Design. I knew I had to work with her on my films. She accepted the position of Production Designer on my last film and did a fantastic job. She created the story world I had envisioned and added her own unique style, and she did it on a budget. We were able to get a majority of our props from Strike It Green prop house. We made a personal connection with the owner, Lonnie, and she was great to work with. Ellen was able to tell the story with her design just as I had imagined. I felt we worked together as artists well; I had total trust in her; I knew I had to have her for my thesis. Luckily she accepted!

Due to our schedules, a skeleton crew of a department, and no secured budget to work with yet, we were challenged in pre production. We met a few times late in the fall of 2013, to start discussing the "look" of the film. I brought pictures and gave film examples to the team. I wanted to mix a 50s and 80s look that could also be now. I would use a gritty look and tone influenced by the exploitation genre. I have always been attracted to a more highly designed style of film, the formalist approach. However, with this film I intended to incorporate a more natural feel for supporting a more believable dramatic storyline. This would be a perfect mix of formal design with a more natural design -- highly designed that doesn't feel highly designed. We started mapping out the necessary props and how the props would look. I discussed with them the locations and the spaces they would be working with and how we would fill those spaces through design. Once I had my budget secured, Ellen and her team went to work gathering what was needed. She gathered personal items from crewmembers, as well as rented items from Strike It Green. She bought some items, as well. A few weeks before the shoot, she

attended our location scout in order to have a better idea of the spaces she would be designing. During the shoot she and her team did an amazing job of setting up an entirely empty house for the girls to live in. In another house we used, she was able to add her own design to what was already there to create the perfect look for the scenes. For the car, woods, and beach scenes, she was able to add just the right touches to keep the flow of design as the story progressed through these scenes.

As part of design, I also feel a strong love for costume design. I was always dressing up as a child. It was my favorite game. I was able to escape into my imagination and be whoever I wanted to be through the outfits I put together. I understand from that experience as a young child, how a costume adds to the character. A costume holds great importance for the actor to get into the character, and for the audience to identify with who the character is. As an adult, I like to dress up the characters in my films. I enjoyed creating the costumes for my period piece short *The Anniversary*. For my last film *Blackbird*, I had specific looks that I wanted that would define the characters. I worked with my costume designer to achieve those looks. For this film, I wanted to focus more on directing and less on other areas of the process. So, I wanted a costume designer who had experience and who I could trust to have as great a passion for the costumes as I have. During the time I had worked in the equipment room, I came to know, in passing, some of the theatre costume design students who worked in the costume shop next door. One of these students was graduate student Lindy Bruns. Once I had gone into the costume shop and asked if I could dress in a turn-of-the-century outfit for a photo for an extra gig. She whipped me up into something perfect in no time! I saw she had talent and loved her personality. I thought how it would be great to work with her at some point. Well, that point had come. I contacted Lindy and she accepted the position. I was so excited to have her as part of the team. I knew she would do a bang-up job, and she did. In our first discussions, I emailed her pictures and gave her the look I was going for – the 50s/80s look, with a raunchy dirty south and exploitation style. I told her I wanted the costumes to be on the verge of looking like costumes and looking like something these people would actually wear. This would further the theme of reinventing the exploitation film with a more “real” dramatic core. She took the ideas and rolled with them. She came to our first design meeting with a look book of drawings she had made of the girls’ costumes. Style-wise they were perfect. I added that I wanted a specific color to go with each girl. I also added that I wanted something to tie the girls together as a gang. We



came up with the bandana, a typical gang symbol. She added they could each use the bandana in a different place in their costume that would emphasize their personality. We worked together well. She did a great job and stuck to our budget.

I wanted to add an additional aspect to the design of the film, as I did in my last. In my last film, one of the characters was a painter. I paid a local artist to paint the pictures for the film. I felt the paintings added depth and meaning to the design that wouldn't have been there had we had someone in the art department paint them. In my thesis film I wanted to use some art on the walls in the girls' home that could do the same. An old friend of mine, Steve Williams, does cartoon-like artwork with a very punk/rockabilly style. His style was perfect for the genre and story. I asked him if we could borrow some artwork to use for the film. He was happy to allow us to use his work. His drawings were hung around the girl's house and are in most of the scenes shot there. They were a great addition to set the tone of the film.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY

Cinematography is an area that continually mystifies me. There seems to be endless subtle nuances available to mold a story with light, composition, and focus, among other things. I loved learning about cinematography in Hamp Overton's class. However, I feel that I am just at the tip of the iceberg in my learning of this vast area of discourse. I intended to spend a great deal of time planning and preparing in this area. I would carefully consider each aspect of cinematography for visually telling the film as a whole, and on a shot by shot basis. I envisioned the film to have to have a "look" that says exploitation film, a dark and gritty B movie. I hoped to find a knowledgeable and experienced Director of Photography to work with, who could teach me and collaborate with me to achieve the look that I was going for, with whom I could creatively combine efforts towards a finished product.

Those were my hopes. However, sometimes, as Mary Jane learns, things don't turn out how we expected. In my previous film, I had the honor of working with a very talented professional DP. I found her through one of the actors in the film that highly recommended her. She is an Italian female DP with lots of experience and a pretty hefty price tag to go along with it. Her work was immaculate. I wanted to work with her again. However, upon evaluation of my budget, I knew the bulk of my money would go towards talent and food. I wouldn't have

enough to pay an expensive professional DP. So, I started looking for someone local and inexpensive, but good. Unfortunately, there were no graduate students in my class with a penchant for camera. We were all writer/directors. I definitely did not feel comfortable with an undergraduate in this role. I started asking previous UNO graduate students who had DP experience. They were still too expensive for me. During this time I was working in the equipment room at UNO. A new graduate class had started in the fall of 2013. One of the new graduate students, Trenton Mynatt, started visiting the equipment room to study the cameras. I found out his area of interest was cinematography. Soon he started coming into the equipment room, preparing to shoot Maja Holzinger's thesis film. Maja and I were good friends and I trusted her artistic choices. I decided ask Trenton for a look at his reel. After viewing it, I was impressed. His photography was a much higher quality than any other student filmmaker's work I had seen. I thought he would be a good fit for my film. I asked Trenton if he would shoot it and he said yes. He was very eager to shoot as many films as possible during his graduate years at UNO. I appreciated his dedication to learning and perfecting his part of the filmmaking process. I knew that if he were involved in my project, he would give it his best, as that is how he approached his work as a DP. I felt secure putting the responsibility of the image in his hands.

I had intended to work much more on this part of the process than I ended up doing. Again, faced with student schedules and personal schedules, there was not much time left to spend on so many areas of the process. I was faced with trying to spread out my little time, and this area got shortchanged. I was hoping the majority of the responsibility for the visual look of the film could be put in the DP's capable hands. I had assumed that Trenton would naturally want to take the lead here and run with it. However, I'm not sure he had the same idea. We had generally discussed the look of the film months prior to the shoot. We had agreed upon mostly all handheld shots. This would allow for the low production value, "exploitation" style look of the film. Near the start of the shoot, Trenton asked me for a shot list. At that point, I realized I would have to give more time to this part of the process than I had so far. The shot list ended up happening the night before each day of shooting. This is the exact same way I worked with the DP on my last film and it worked. I work well under pressure. I also like to collaborate during the process of shooting, using the shot list as a guide only, and not the end-all blueprint of shooting. I found this to work well for me, but not so much for Trenton. It became clear to me

that he probably wanted a more structured process with a detailed document to follow. I believe both of us were expecting the other to take on the same responsibility, and in the end, this disconnect in communication created problems that would become apparent during shooting and with the footage we captured during the shoot. He did a great job under the circumstances and pushed hard to make it work. He kept his cool and found solutions to issues that arose, never letting go of the vision of the final outcome of the film. For that I greatly appreciate his help. Looking back, I believe I personally needed a very proactive DP to take the lead ahead of the shoot, on such a demanding project. The responsibilities piled up on me and I needed someone to facilitate the communication and preparation for the shots, allowing me to focus more on directing the actors. Lesson learned. You must be totally on the same page with your DP way before the night before the shoot.

## CHAPTER 8

### DEVIL'S IN THE DETAIL

#### LOCATIONS, EXTRAS, PICTURE CARS

For this film I needed to work hard at finding locations that would add realistically to the feel of the film. I needed to create a believable story world for the characters to interact within. This would include not only locations, but also the other people living in this world, as well as cars they would drive. I wanted to be extremely specific in the details of these elements of the story. This would turn out a difficult endeavor. Sometimes the seemingly simpler tasks of filmmaking can be the most difficult.

Originally, I wrote the story to take place entirely in two locations. I wanted to keep it simple so that I wouldn't have to complicate production. I wrote the story to take place in a house on my parents' property, which is currently vacant. The house is run down and rustic. It had the perfect look I wanted for the girls' house. It had the look of my inspiration from the movie *The Outsiders*. It had the look of an abandoned house they took over or some family member left them. I would also use my parents' house as Frank's rich girlfriend's house. There is also a creek with a little beach at the back of their property that I was thinking of faking as the "beach in Mexico," when one of the first drafts ended in Mexico. I would keep it simple shooting entirely in one location. However, during revisions in the Thesis Screenwriting course, there was feedback from classmates that there needed to be more action outside of just at the girl's house. In order to have a feel for the world the characters inhabit, I needed to somehow include more scenes around their town and not keep the characters and action cooped up inside two houses on one piece of property. Obviously, my classmates were not going to let me get away with the easy route of limiting the space for greater ease during production.

My writing professor Erik Hansen had suggested I somehow show Frank and Mary Jane in love. We came to the conclusion of using flashbacks of the things she loved about him in the beginning of the film. I would also use this as a way to show the characters in other places in the town. This flashback sequence included a bar scene, a scene in front of a suburban looking house with a baby and a dog, and a scene in a park-like setting. I have a friend who lives close to my parents' property, where we would be shooting the majority of the scenes. She was open to

us shooting in front of her house and her house had the perfect suburban look. However, we could only shoot during a short window of time because her family needed to stay inside their house while we shot the scene. They didn't want to be stuck in their house all day. The dog we used was my best friend's Pekingese lap dog, who, thankfully, was relaxed and behaved during the scene. The baby in the scene was my hairdresser's baby, who also thankfully behaved for the scene. For the bar scene, I had a specific bar in mind, however, the owner did not want to open up early on a weekend morning for us for free. Then someone working there suggested that I try Ruby's Roadhouse because the owner was open to filming in his bar. Ruby's also had the perfect look for the scene. The owner agreed to us filming there. The bar was open in the morning when we shot there, so we used the actual bartender and patrons in the scene. I also had a few friends show up and we used crewmembers, as well, to fill the scene. For the park-like setting, I just shot in an area on my parent's property that wasn't being used in other scenes.

I also wrote a grander scaled opening scene to show the girls in the town they live in acting rebellious and setting the tone for the film. There would be a very fun, fast opening scene that shows where these girls live and what they are all about. They would be causing some kind of trouble and taunting some young guys in some kind of public place that's typical of small town life. Originally, I was looking for a drive-in style restaurant like Sonic, to go along with my "Grease" inspiration. I was unable to find a place that would be closed when we needed to shoot and most places that fit this description were on major roadways with terrible sound quality for production. Then I started considering how I could re-write the scene.

In the scene the girls decide to steal some petty cash from the register in the drive-through where one of them works. Two of the girls use their sexuality to distract the manager and another guy working there, while the other girl steals the cash, and Mary Jane waits in the getaway car. I started to think of what other type of location would work for one of the girl's workplace in this small town. I thought gas stations, but there's not much visually appealing to a gas station and the noise is still a factor. Then I thought of places of business in the small town near my parents' house that would have a nice look and might be on a quieter street. And then BOOM, it came to me. The old movie theater in downtown Covington was perfect for the scene. It's not in use; it's on a quiet street; and it has a perfect vintage small town look. The owner happened to know some of my family and I was able to convince him to let us shoot there. He would only agree to us using the outside, though. But we made it work by having the girls run

out from around the corner as if they were coming from a back door entrance. Then I had to fill the scene with more people to make the town feel more alive and real. Aside from the four main girls, we also had the two guys from the theater, a mom and her two little girls, a gothic-looking girl, and a bum, in the scene. The two guys and the gothic girl were people I know from film school. The mother and two little girls was an old friend from high school and her two kids. The bum was also an old friend from high school. All locations worked out well and cost us nothing for production.

For the cars, I wanted special movie cars that would stand out and be characters themselves. I like using cars that fit the film and the characters and have presence in the scene. I wanted some kind of vintage muscle car for the girls to ride in. This would again weave in my movie inspirations and show their badass nature as a girl gang. I looked into movie car rentals. Most of the people wanted to charge too much or didn't want to drive their car across Lake Pontchartrain to the Northshore of New Orleans to film. I decided to look on craigslist for someone selling vintage cars. I thought I could offer to pay someone to use the car for a day. I found a few and finally settled and made a deal with the owner of a perfect yellow vintage mustang. For Frank's car I wanted something a little more modern but also a muscle car. I had a hard time finding a car for him. Up until the last minute we were searching for something for Frank. Finally, we asked around our film crew if they knew anyone. One of our crewmembers had a friend with a brand new bright red Mustang. We made a deal with his friend and the car worked perfect for Frank's character. For the cop car, we contacted the local Covington town police. The police were willing to bring us a car to use for free because we were shooting a student film and the car would be used on private property.

These necessary script choices led to some difficulty in finding locations, extras, and cars. But once these details were ironed out, they really made a difference in the believability of the story and setting the tone and look of the film.

## CHAPTER 9

### STRAW THAT BROKE THE DIRECTOR'S BACK

#### EDITING

Editing is an area that I feel most challenged by. Being about ten plus years older than most of my classmates in graduate school, I didn't grow up with a laptop and editing program to use to edit a film shot on a personal video camera at home. The last time I had edited a film before graduate school, was as an undergraduate with a very early version of Avid editing software. Things have changed a whole lot, since then. I have struggled to keep up in this area while in graduate school. Even though its been a struggle, I have learned a lot about the technology and appreciate what is available to us as filmmakers. I worked with my editing Professor Danny Retz on my first year graduate film, *The One*. Then I worked with fellow student Thomas Baumgardner on my second first year graduate film, *The Anniversary*. On my most recent film, *Blackbird*, I made the first cut on my own, then worked with fellow film students Spencer Kancher and Kd Amond on subsequent cuts. I also worked extensively with Professor Danny Retz on the final edit for *Blackbird*. I had learned a lot from all of these people about editing and planned on learning more through the editing process of my thesis film.

One of the stipulations of the graduate thesis is that you must perform two out of three roles: writer, director, and editor. I was writing and directing the film. The editor would be the third author of the film. Because of this, editing is very important creatively in the filmmaking process. The editing suite can be almost magical when you see your not-so-interesting-dailies turn into a genuinely emotionally moving film. For this reason, I planned to choose someone who I trusted would be creatively in sync with me that I could work well with during this final step. I try as much as possible to plan ahead for editing when creating my shot list. I always try to plan for enough coverage. However, the issue for me in my last film was that I ran out of time to shoot the coverage that I needed. I had to reshoot to get some necessary inserts. This time it happened again. I tried to plan better this time to get all the necessary inserts. However, when we starting shooting, I quickly realized that we just didn't have time for all the shots. Things come up and schedules get thrown off for various reasons. I had a very ambitious script for the time I had allotted to shoot. There was just no way of getting everything I wanted. In the end, I

came out with the footage I needed to make a cohesive, clear story; however, it took a lot of magic in the editing room to make that happen. Had I cut the story down and made it shorter and simpler, I could have gotten more footage to work with to mold the story well. But the story I felt needed the length to be told. It was a Catch 22. If I shortened the story, it wouldn't be fully told enough to have impact, however, if I made it that long we wouldn't have enough time to get the shots we needed to tell the story with enough visual impact. We did the best we could with the time we had, and a lot of the story suffered from pushing it with not enough time for all the coverage that was needed.

After the shoot, I planned to take a break from the film before diving into the post-production process. I needed a little separation from the story in order to go into the next phase with a fresh and revived outlook. This is a time where my lack of preparation really caused problems. I had planned on getting some help from an undergraduate with syncing the dailies, the video footage from the shoot, and the sound recorded during the shoot. I was going to register in the fall of 2014 and make a first cut. Then I planned to hand it off to a student editor or recent student graduate to finish the process of post-production. I wasn't sure who would be able to do it at this point. I had a few ideas of people, but hadn't locked anyone in the position. Shortly after we shot the film, the spring semester was ending and most students weren't available to help edit during the summer. I wasn't able to register to work on the film during the summer for financial reasons. At this time, I was moving into a new home with my little girl. Some of the budget I was going to use for post-production, I ended up using for my move and to support myself until I got a job. In the fall of 2014, I registered for school and was looking for a student to sync the dailies. My editing professor and a few other students recommended an undergraduate student, Stephen Bertucci, for the job. He synced the footage and then I started to work on a first cut. At this time, I began working a full-time job and between working and single parenting had very little time to work on the cut. I decided I would find someone to do the entire post-production including the first cut. I asked around and the people that I would trust to edit the film wanted me to pay them more than I could afford. I ended up getting very little done on the first cut during this semester. In the spring of 2015, I put the film officially on hold. I was unable to edit due to many reasons: limited time, no software or equipment at home, unable to register and use school equipment, unable to afford paying someone to edit. Another factor was that I could only register once more and I would have to graduate that same semester.



I was nowhere near being that close to finishing. I was stumped. I had no idea what I would do or how I would get this done. I emailed my professors to ask for help.

Professor Retz, our editing teacher at school, was willing to help. He oversaw the editing process at school during the summer of 2015. I was able to work with him to get a great first cut of the film. In the fall of 2015, I started trying to think of how I would start saving up money to pay someone to finish the film. I decided to ask my friend and fellow graduate student for help. Thomas Baumgardner, who was now graduated and looking for work might do the job. He is an amazing editor and would be my top choice, anyway, and I hoped he would do it. I thought if I could pay him a little here and there instead of all up front he might work with me. I asked him and he agreed. Shortly after I gave him the film to edit, he got a job working on a film and had to postpone editing. He finally got started and had a cut by mid January 2016. Thomas did an amazing job and we work great together. He was the perfect person to finish the film. I trusted him and am so grateful that he was able to be the third and final author of the film. I registered for my last semester in the spring of 2016 during which post-production was completed in time for graduation in May of 2016. Life happened, and I hadn't prepared for this part of the process as I should have, resulting in greatly postponing and jeopardizing the completion of this film. Looking back, I would have portioned out a large chunk of my budget for post-production and I would have locked down an editor on the front end, as well as having a tightly scheduled post-production phase. This is one of the most important parts of filmmaking and preparing for it, or not, can make or break the film.

## CHAPTER 10

### ROCK N ROLL BITCHES

#### CREATING THE SCORE

The score is a huge part of any film. It draws an audience emotionally into the film. Score will especially be a huge part of this film. As with most films in this genre, soundtrack plays a large part in setting the tone and mood. This film needed a score to draw out the various moods of the characters during the story, as well as music for the characters to interact with in their story world. I have many friends who are local working musicians, who were excited to collaborate on a project with me. My cousin, Todd Voltz, created the score for my last film, *Blackbird*, and did a great job. He has a background in film and theater and he also had a local rock band. I planned to work with him again to find the perfect accompaniment for my thesis film. I asked him before filming if I could use some of his band's music in one of the scenes and he agreed. The surf punk rock song was perfect for the girls' party scene. During the first cut, I asked if he could send over some temporary samples of score for certain scenes. Some of the samples were perfect for the intense mid section of the film when all hell breaks loose with the gang.

After finishing the first cut of the film, I sent it to Todd to see if he would be interested in creating the score. After seeing the first cut of the film, he was in, and excited to get started. He gathered a group of local musicians and started pumping out some amazing score. He sent me samples and I loved it. After Thomas finished his edit, he sent it to Todd to add score. They worked together to get the perfect rock and roll magic added to pump up the energy and intensity of the film. The score definitely added greatly to the effect of the film and pushed the story forward powerfully.

## CHAPTER 11

### FINISHING TOUCHES

#### POST-PRODUCTION SOUND AND COLOR CORRECTION

The last processes of the post-production phase are the final sound mix and color correction. The sound on a film can make or break it. A film with bad sound is almost unbearable to watch. It calls attention to the fact that you are watching a film and takes you out of the story. When this happens, you have the sense that the film you are watching has a low production value and is unprofessional. This is why I tried to secure a very able sound team on this film in both the production and post-production phases. Often, sound gets put on a back burner and isn't considered as important as other areas in the filmmaking process and this can be a huge mistake. On my last film, *Blackbird*, my sound team was Jack Bigelow and Adam Lipscomb during production, and Alex Aaron for post-production. They did a fantastic job and made a huge difference in the quality of the finished film. I wanted to work with them again on my thesis film. But, unfortunately for production, they were unavailable or wanted to be paid more than I could afford.

I started looking for a current film student who had experience and interest in sound recording. Tim Conner, an undergraduate, was recommended and was interested in the position. He did a good job during production and allowing for less time during post-production fixing sound issues. For post-production, Alex Aaron was available, but due to cost I decided to have my editor do the sound editing as well. My editor, Thomas Baumgardner, had edited the sound for his own thesis film and I trusted he could do a good job. I also asked him to do the color correction as well as titles and any visual effects we might want to use. I also felt that it would simplify things in this stage if I had one person working on all areas in the completion of the film. I discussed with Tom how I wanted to use sound, color, and effects to add to the exploitation film style. I wanted to use this phase as the opportunity to add the pop of wildness and quirkiness to style up the film and take it from melodrama to a more pulpy kitschy edgy film. Thomas was a life saver during this phase of the film. He did an amazing job with the final edit, working with the musicians to get the right sounding score, editing the sound, adding great sound effects and visual effects, as well as an awesome title sequence. He really was the

third author of this film and was the icing on the cake, finishing the film better than I could have imagined.

## CHAPTER 12

### SELF-ANALYSIS

#### THE ANALYSIS OF *THE MARY JANES*

With this thesis film, I hoped to make a film that is both entertaining and meaningful. I also hoped to use the film as a sample of my work and skill in independent filmmaking. But most importantly, I consider the process of creating this film a learning tool. My thesis film experience and lessons learned were a means of growth as a filmmaker. I cherish this experience and the chance to collaborate with my peers and seek advice and feedback from my professors. I feel I've been able to take my own filmmaking process to a higher level by exploring and working with a specific genre and theory, fully developing the film on every level according to my research and findings. I feel that through the challenges and hard work, I learned from this experience more than anything how to be a better filmmaker.

I know that in this collaborative art form, working as a team means everything. The filmmaking process is a huge puzzle. Each piece is just as important as the other, and a film cannot be a success unless all the pieces fit together just right. I did my best to be a leader on this film, with a laser focus and dedication that would permeate the entire process. I made an effort to clearly present my vision to everyone involved and allow each member of our team to give their input and apply their expertise. I felt that if I could accomplish this, it would be the true measure of success for *The Mary Janes*. Looking back at my intentions and what I accomplished, I can analyze how well I was able to follow through with my goal for this project.

Upon completion, I look back at what it took to make this happen. It was a monumental effort for me. It was a huge challenge and I am proud that I was able to finish. There are many things that I would do differently if I could have, although I'm not sure that I could have. Filmmaking is never going to be so easy as to avoid every issue or problem that comes up. Life happens and I believe it's your ability to problem solve, be resourceful, and persevere; never giving up until the end is what truly makes a filmmaker successful. Had I planned better, budgeted better, and spent more time on this film in preproduction, perhaps I would've come out with a better film. However, I didn't have the time, or the budget, or possibly the skills of being a good planner. I feel I did the best I could with what I had to work with. I gave it my all and

never gave up until it was finished. In a perfect world, I would have liked to spend months of hourly production meetings for planning ahead with all my department heads. I would have spent months raising money and then putting that budget in the hands of a strict producer. I would have had every possible detail ironed out ahead of time so that the shoot would go smoothly and we'd get all the shots we needed. However, at the time of making this film, I just did not have the time or ability to do all of this.

Perhaps I may be questioned on why I didn't choose to make a simpler film, one that I could handle at this time and one that I could perfect. Well, my answer would be, I wasn't trying to make a perfect film with no errors or problems. That is just not what I set out to do here. I wanted to make art and express myself through this film and to learn more about making films. I feel I accomplished that. My film may have suffered from being more than I could handle. However, I don't think that should be a reason not to make a film that you want to make. I took on this challenge and did everything I could to make it the best that I could. I learned many lessons about the filmmaking process. I had the most amazing experience of creating art with an extremely talented group of people. I would say, for me, making a film is as much about the process as it is the outcome. As in life so it is in art. I was the original Mary Jane. I was a rebel who had to accept life as it is. That rebellious spirit is what makes me take risks like making this film. And I can also accept that the film may not be perfect or what I thought it would be. However, it was a lesson as is life. Mary Jane learns her lesson by making the bad choice to be with Frank again, and this time not only risking her own happiness but that of her child. She finally realizes that she needs to be realistic about her life, see people for who they are, and respect herself. And now my ending is as in the film, a single mom, making good choices, working hard, enjoying family and friends, and accomplishing her dreams.

## CHAPTER 13

### FINAL JUDGMENT

#### CONCLUSION

I planned to make a film that would take the exploitation genre style and mix it with a female-centric story and dramatic narrative. I wanted to create something different and fresh and with a female perspective. As an artist, I wanted to express my own ideas and feelings through this film. I feel I was successful in all of these things. I feel the film definitely has flaws and I know that the story may not be interesting to some people. I know that the film has technical flaws. If judged by these things, my film may not be completely acceptable academically by my professors. However, I did not make this film to please my professors. I made this film to learn my craft and to express myself artistically. I know I have much more to learn. I know that this film could be better academically and technically. I also know that I worked very hard and did my best with what I had to work with. I hope I've made a film that some people will enjoy watching. I hope I've made a film that some people will be inspired by to make their own films. I hope I've made a girl power film that speaks to young women.

I received feedback during my thesis defense from my professors to learn if they felt I was successful in each of their areas of expertise. My professors felt I accomplished the exploitation genre and that I had a definite audience for my film. They also felt I sacrificed the quality of my film by the lack of time I devoted to all areas in the process. I was also given the advice that I should have complete clarity of vision in all areas before going into the production phase. After my thesis defense, I was invited by Professor Erik Hansen to screen my film in his undergraduate class. There was mixed reaction to the film. I considered that a good thing because a film that satisfies everyone would be boring. Many people liked the genre and stylistic elements. Many people understood the story and connected with the characters, considering the genre. The class didn't see my feminist perspective in general, but could see some influence in some of the character's actions. A few people had no connection at all with the film and didn't seem to like the style, either. I found this feedback invaluable. The students were honest and didn't hold back their criticisms or praise. It helped me see what worked and didn't work for an audience. I also sent the film to many friends and former film industry colleagues. So far the

general consensus has been that *The Mary Janes* is “a fun kick-ass little film.” I am happy with the feedback I’ve gotten and look forward to more.

I will also try to enter the film into some festivals. Hopefully, I will be able to do this so that I can test an audience reaction outside of school as well. Last but not least, I gauge my success through the dedication and feedback from my actors and crew. I had a fantastic and dedicated crew and actors to work with on this thesis film. Each did their best to help me make this film and I believe it shows in the final cut. Reactions of myself, classmates, teachers, family, friends will be my final judgment on the journey of creating *The Mary Janes*.



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The DVD copy of *The Mary Janes* is located in the Earl K. Long Library.

## VITA

The author was born just outside New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor's degree from University of New Orleans in Communications with a focus on Film Production in 1999. She joined the University of New Orleans film arts graduate program to pursue an MFA in Film Production. As a graduate student, she instructed undergraduate students on film equipment use and taught an Intro to Film Arts course. She showed her graduate student films at art exhibits and film festivals. She will be showing her thesis film in film festivals throughout 2016.