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Q&A with Filmmaker, Jacob Strunk

Posted by Mat on April 2, 2010

Welcome to the DOJO!

Ok, so my intended re-launch of Filmsensei.com wound up taking just a bit longer than I had originally planned. However, I’ve got a lot of cool stuff in store and it all begins today!

As often as I can coax my filmmaker friends to do so, the Film Sensei plans to run question & answer sessions with cutting edge guerrilla and indie filmmakers here on the website. We’re going to get down and get answers from filmmakers who are out in the trenches every day working on low budget films. These guys started out just like you, my loyal readers, as run-and-gun low budget filmmakers and have been able to get their flicks made and out to the public.

The first in this on-going series of indie filmmaker Q&As is with guerrilla filmmaking wunderkind, Jacob Strunk. I met Jacob in 2009 when he needed a good camera for his latest short film, “This is the Place.” Normally I don’t tag along to shoots, but having heard about Jacob’s reputation I just had to go and see the man in action. Needless to say, Jacob didn’t disappoint.

I’m going to shut up now and let Jacob take over. Enjoy!

5 Questions for Indie Filmmaker, Jacob Strunk



Name: Jacob Strunk

Year/Age Started as a Filmmaker: Probably around 12 or so, the usual “run around with the family camera covering friends in fake blood” story, though my first festival screening was in 2002. A wise man once told me you’re not a filmmaker until you’ve shown your work to a room full of strangers.

Credits as writer/director:

“*A Day Awake*” – 2002; premiered at Flicker Festival Los Angeles.

“*Go Man Go*” – 2002; part of the Pioneer 2880 Project.

“*Valhalla*” – 2003; finalist for Student Academy Awards, screened at 1 Reel Film Festival, Seattle.

“*A Shadow Before Sunrise*” – 2004; winner, Best Film Noir at New York International Independent Film Festival.

“*Another Happy Ending*” – 2005; one of ten films commissioned by Warren Etheredge for 1 Reel Film Festival’s Filmmaker Challenge with work by Jason Reitman, A.J. Schnack, Seth Henrikson, the Duplass bros., et al.

“*Mr. Butters Syndrome*” - 2007; premiered at New Rivers Press Moving Words : Moving Images literary festival.

“*This Is the Place*” - 2009; premiered at Olympia Film Festival, Olympia, Washington.

Website: www.sevenmileswest.com

Give the Filmsensei.com readers a bit of information on yourself and your experience as a filmmaker.

I was fortunate enough to find a great group of folks in film school, and all the films I directed there found their way into festivals. My film “Valhalla” was a finalist for the Student Academy Awards, which caught the attention of SAA judge Warren Etheredge of Seattle’s Warren Report and then curator of the 1 Reel Film Festival. Warren invited me to Seattle to screen the film and talk to the audience, and invited me back the next year to be a part of his annual Filmmaker Challenge.

In 2004, I received grants from Kodak and Fotokem, which allowed me to shoot “A Shadow Before Sunrise” on 35mm. In 2007, I curated the “Moving Words : Moving Pictures” evening of film in Fargo, where I premiered my film “Mr. Butters Syndrome.”

Since graduating from film school, I went to grad school and earned an MFA in creative writing, and I've been paying the bills and buying cat food working in post production while managing to pull together my own films as often as possible. It couldn't be done without the continuing friendship and support of the group of filmmakers with whom I went to film school. It's been a tremendous life lesson: respect and foster community.

As a run-and-gun digital filmmaker, can you give our readers an idea of the problems that you've run in to on some of your past productions — or even problems they can expect on theirs?

Expect everything to go horribly wrong. Expect the camera to fail, so make sure you have another. Expect someone to drop half the day's film into the glaring desert sunlight, so be ready to scramble to reshoot. Expect your actors to die or be late, your food to be eaten by a bear, the power to go out, the AC to lose focus, a comet to hit. Expect everything to go wrong, be ready to deal with it, and you'll be primed for battle. And, of course, pleasantly surprised every time something goes smoothly.

My productions have ranged from four guys in the woods with a tripod and a bounce board to a crew of umpteen people and a dozen actors on location for four days with generators and a truck full of lights shooting 35mm film; however big or small, have a backup plan for everything. And most importantly, don't get discouraged when things go awry. Take a breath and deal with it, keep the momentum going. Your finished film will not be what you originally envisioned — it never is — but with any luck, it will become its own organic beast, growing and changing and chewing up the scenery. And that, quite often, is much better...

What is the worst thing that's ever happened on one of your indie film shoots?

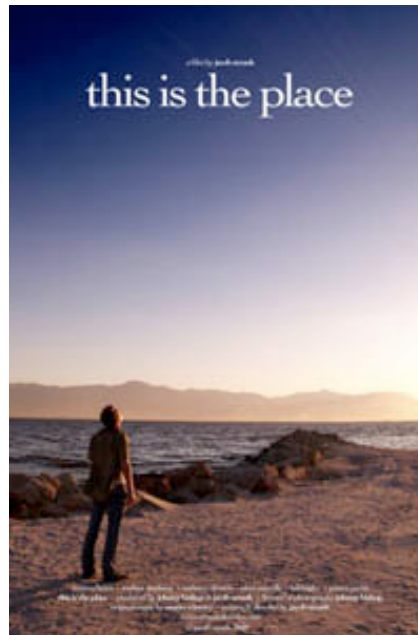
We've been fortunate enough to never have a major injury, maiming, death, divorce, or disfigurement on a shoot, so I have to say the worst thing thus far, the thing most inhibitive to a smooth day of work and a pleasant outcome, was on our final day of shooting the last film, "This Is the Place."

My first mistake was casting someone I knew from previous experience to be unreliable. But he lobbied for a part in the movie, so I wrote a supporting role for him. He's a fantastic artist, so I also commissioned him to create a visual effect for the film. And he came through on it; it was fantastic. It looked so great, in fact, that he decided he didn't want us to use it. He liked it too much and wanted to keep it. At this point, I should have pulled the plug and found someone else. Mistake number two.

He assured me he'd create another. In fact, the day before we shot, the crew gathered at my house for a cheerful afternoon of pre-game beers and banter, during which he continued working on the replacement. Our call time was early the next morning at a location 90 minutes away, so we all called it a night early and got ready for the shoot. Well, almost all of us.

The next morning, he had disappeared. Without finishing the effect. And with my ATM card. I had the entire production waiting on me, so we had to move out without him. I was out an actor, out an effect, and had no money with which to pay everyone working that day. But in the moment, you have no choice but to push forward, so we recast the role (with the stage manager, no less, who did a fantastic job despite never having acted before in his life), someone lent me a bunch of money to pay everyone, and we reblocked the scene to make it work without the effect. In the end, while I still miss that one glorious shot that never was, it turned out to be for the best and, while the day was ridiculously stressful, I think the film is better for it.

Lessons learned: trust your gut and push through obstacles.



As someone who wears multiple hats on your films – writing, directing, producing, editing, running a camera — what is your favorite part of indie filmmaking and why?

It sounds tacky, but whatever stage of production I'm in, I love it (with the exception, of course, of pre-production, which I find daunting and tedious and discouraging). Working on the script is not only a time for ideas to birth themselves in front of you, red and wet and writhing, but also a time for meditation on the film, what it means, what you want to say with it; it's a time to get to know your themes and characters. They become real.

Casting has always been a pain, usually because there's not a pile of money involved, but when it finally comes together, it feels like a first kiss. Production itself is usually the most exciting. Terrifying, undoubtedly, but seeing the scenes you've written and rewritten and visualized and rehearsed actually happen in the moment while a red "record" light pulses or a reel of film purrs past the gate, that's an untouchable high. It's also a time to experiment, to have fun, the chance for true collaboration to take place. Shoot a couple takes, then let everyone have fun. Shoot what you know need for the edit, but then move the camera. See what other moments you can find. Let the actors improv. The true auteurs know that 90% of casting is directing.

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Post is also tedious, but again exciting seeing the puzzle pieces fit together. More often than not, I find myself cutting a rough to script, then making drastic changes in subsequent edits. Things disappear, moments play out differently, characters take charge of scenes in ways you didn't expect, the timeline skews. It's wild. If the script is the delivery room and production is a fun childhood day terrorizing pigeons at the park, post must be that horrifying time in a parent's life when they question whether their child can actually make it behind the wheel of a car or staying out until a later curfew or going to that rock show in the city. More often than not, they're just fine. I think most parents will say you have to give teenagers space to find themselves and develop. That's post-production.

And then comes the bittersweet moment where little Billy or Susan leaves the nest. You're in a darkened theatre full of strangers, about to watch people watch your film. You can't wait, you're so happy for it, but you know your job is done. It's up to the film now to captivate them, to teach them, to move them. And it's up to you, depending on how masochistic you really are, to get back in the bedroom and start trying for the next. Apologies if that analogy skewed a little blue.

Finally, can you give beginning indie and guerilla filmmakers any advice on setting up their first films? In other words, what advice or tips do you wish you had been told before you put together your first film?

I can offer two pieces of advice that may at first seem counterintuitive:

1) Learn your craft. Study it. Take classes. Watch movies. Read books. Go to film school if you're able. I know, I know, PT Anderson dropped out. John Cassavettes was self-taught. "Barry Lyndon" was shot with natural light. But you must. Know. Your. Craft. Learn how to do everything and how to do everything right: light, operate a camera, run sound, direct actors, pull cable. Take an acting class. Take a writing class, even if you're not a writer. Learn it all. Arm yourself to the teeth. This is war, kid, and you can't show up with a penknife to a gun fight.

2) Take chances. Take risks. Now that you know the rules, see how far they'll bend. Once you have the fundamentals down, once you know how the language of film is most effective, you begin to develop your own aesthetic. Don't start throwing around whip pans and tracking shots until you understand the 180 line; don't try to out-Fincher Fincher until you can shoot a scene in which two people speak in a single wide shot and make it interesting. Then...have fun. See where you end up.

Anything else you want to throw out to our indie film readers?

I mentioned it earlier, but I can't stress the idea of community enough. Here's the sad, painful, infuriating truth: almost everyone who makes it in this industry does so through connections you don't have. Family. Friends of family. Significant others. What have you. Someone gets them a job. Someone gets them money for their project. Someone helps them get a celebrity in their film, which gets it into Sundance, which gets them a deal for a feature, which sets them up for a life of caviar and models and fast cars and magazine covers. It can be discouraging and depressing. Believe me. After a decade out here, you look around and sometimes wonder what all the hard work was for, why you bothered (as I mentioned) arming yourself. The war can sometimes seem miles away while you sweat with 100 pounds of armor and weaponry on your back in the sickening heat of the jungle.

You have to surround yourself with like-minded people. Surround yourself with believers, people who believe in both the craft of filmmaking and in each other. You have to help each other, you have to push each other, you have to pester the hell out of one another sometimes to keep making films. But it's absolutely necessary. These people are your platoon and your support group, and as you go through experiences together, as you get better at what you do together, you'll find you're stronger as a team than any one of you alone.

And when someone's rich uncle dies or you all discover that Todd's cousin is dating the guy in the big ABC dramedy, you'll be ready to pull the trigger and you'll all be in it together. All joking aside, the longer you keep at it, all of you as a team, you'll discover you're making your own connections, through work and over beers and at the laundromat. Keep at it and support each other and force one another to keep making things, and the snowball will grow. Always be ready; when the opportunity comes, it'll be yours.



-Jacob Strunk, 2010

Thanks for taking the time to answer questions for the readers here, Jacob! Keep up the fantastic work!!

-Mat N., the Film Sensei

<http://www.FilmSensei.com>



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