



Nathan and the Luthier: An Analytic Reflection

Common wisdom in the filmmaking industry states that every film is comprised of three different stories: the story as it is dictated by the script, the story that is filmed during production, and the story that emerges through editing.

The Story of Writing

I began conceiving the story for my thesis project, which was then to be a 30-minute fictional film, at the end of August shortly before the fall semester of my senior year. The initial concept centered around Blue, a character inspired by my eccentric mailman and neighbor of the same name. Almost nine months later, all that is left of that original concept is Blue's rusting Volvo sedan, which makes brief appearances throughout the finished film, *Nathan and the Luthier* (2011). The lengthy and exhausting evolution of the story began when I first pitched Blue's character to my IMP sponsor Susan Kelly who, true to her brutally honest—and insightful—nature, told me to go back to the drawing board.

As Susan accurately predicted, the final script that I ended up filming had little to do with my original concept. What I realized after several initial re-writes was that the elusive story I was trying to capture was not dependent on the plot, but had more to do with a *feeling* that I somehow needed to translate to paper. I wanted to write a moody character drama filled with lingering camera work and sparse dialog.

My inspiration came from movies like *Fargo* (1996), and *The Piano* (1993). I wanted to make an actor's movie—a story that the cast could dig into and explore,

savoring the nuances of their roles. I wanted to focus on story rather than set. The movies that inspire me are those that haunt the viewer well after the screen has faded to black, and that was the kind of film I wanted to write. The characters, story structure, and dialog, though challenging in their own way, would come later. And they did, though only after nine drafts. Writing, as I have been taught over and over again, is re-writing.

Another particularly difficult challenge that I encountered during the writing process—and really throughout production and post-production as well—was maintaining momentum and excitement and communicating that excitement to the rest of my crew. What made this harder than it might have otherwise been was the fact that the crew had little information to grab onto throughout this process except rough story concepts, as the majority of the material (characters, locations, and other concrete elements) would significantly change from draft to draft. Thus, we were trying to accomplish the impossible—locking down logistics before we knew what we actually needed. Additionally, I was asking them to be motivated and excited about a story that was fairly intangible. In an ideal world, I would have had a year, or several years, to finalize the script at which point a crew would have been brought on board. Instead, due to the short timeline, we were forced to multitask pre-production with writing.

To deal with these issues, I had to develop alternative ways to communicate excitement about what we were doing, which I knew would help build momentum for the project. One of the ways I did this was by communicating the “feeling” described above, rather than the exact story. I also communicated the fact that I wanted to collaborate with the most talented students I could find, and use our collective skills to create a substantial

piece of art that would be greater than the sum of its parts. These were high aspirations, but they worked as a pitch.

Overall, I communicated the idea: “Let’s do something big; something more ambitious than any of us has done before.” I also spent a significant amount of time locking down project elements that I felt would demonstrate not only our commitment, but also the scale of the project.

One of these elements was Carrie Newcomer, a well-known local musician whom I met at an IU function midway through the fall semester. She played a short set at the event, and I was immediately intrigued by one of her songs (which now plays during the montage sequence of the film). I emailed her a week or so later to ask if we could use some of her music for the soundtrack, and she agreed.

Another element that I went after with a vengeance was the newly renovated IU Cinema, which I hoped to convince to screen the finished film. To approach the Cinema, I put together a packet about not only the film and what we were trying to accomplish, but also samples of work I had done in the past. I met with and presented these materials to Jon Vickers, the Cinema director, and he agreed to fit the film into the spring lineup. While this was a tremendously exciting breakthrough that helped muster support and bring the crew strongly on board, it also created an additional level of pressure. Once the Cinema agreed to screen the film, we knew that we not only had to make a film, but that it had to be good. I didn’t realize how high a bar we were setting for ourselves until much later.

Casting calls were another crucial step in building momentum towards production, as we were finally able to visualize in the flesh what the characters might

look like and act like on screen. Furthermore, rehearsals with the actors marked a personal breakthrough for me. Hearing the actors deliver lines and bring fresh ideas to the table was an incredible moment that rekindled excitement that I hadn't felt in months. The actors helped breathe life into the script, and I was able to finalize much of the dialog that I had been struggling with. The second story—the story of production, was finally beginning to emerge.

The Story of Production

The reason that a second story emerges during production is that no matter how much you prepare and plan beforehand, you never quite know what to expect once you get on set. This is both wonderful and terrifying. For example, because we were shooting on location rather than building our own sets, we were confined by the reality of the spaces that we found. The violin shop, which served as the primary set in the film, was extremely narrow and cramped. Because of this, many of the shots and visuals we had planned had to be adjusted or changed to accompany realistic camera movement.

Though we had planned to dolly (wheel) the camera from room to room within the shop, when we brought the dolly into the space we realized that it was too big to fit through the doorways, so those shots had to be changed. However, the unanticipated upside of the space limitations was that the visuals in the shop ended up feeling claustrophobic at times, which was a fantastic effect for the story we were trying to tell. Furthermore, dressing the shop with clutter and trash—as called for in the script—turned out to be a much smaller task than it might have been had the space been much larger.

Another issue we ran into was that the original script called for a scene in a dingy garage filled with boxes. When we scouted the house location where we were filming, the

only available garage was enormous and contained two antique cars that couldn't be exposed to the winter weather. However, the house had a very small dirt-floor basement, so I re-wrote the scene to take place in a basement. In the end, this space provided excellent visuals of light streaming down the stairs when Nathan, the main character, opens the door for the first time, and the lack of windows also meant that we could perfectly control the lighting for the scene without worrying about what time of day it was.

Another unanticipated occurrence that happened during production was that the cast and crew meshed intimately, both with the project and together as a team, in such a way that the overwhelming tasks at hand became manageable, and even enjoyable. While 7am call-times and 12-15 hour days are to be expected in the industry, I was concerned heading into production that the volunteer basis under which the cast and crew were operating would clash with the long hours we were demanding of them. Instead, with few exceptions the entire team rose to the occasion and carried the project through three intensive weeks of filming, including one grueling 24-hour shoot that finished at 5AM.

What was ultimately so rewarding about this was that it demonstrated the fact that people felt personal ownership in the project. They were no longer doing this for me; they were doing it for themselves and for each other. From that point on, my role in the project evolved to that of vision keeper. As such, I was able to step back and observe the project as a whole, rather than worrying about the nitty-gritty details, each of which was taken care of by a different member of the team. I believe that my ability to act in such a role was in large part facilitated by the communication skills that I have learned throughout my undergraduate career, each of which relates to filmmaking in its own unique fashion.

Looking back at the coursework that I have completed for my IMP curriculum, several classes have specifically helped foster my ability to communicate as a filmmaker.

For example, one of the more influential courses in regards to my thesis project was T-330 Production Management, taught by Professor Steve Kranhke. Though the majority of the class could be easily criticized as dry number crunching and the examination of legal wording in release forms, the practical knowledge and skills that I developed in this class—though at the time infuriating—instantly and directly translated to the tasks I needed to complete for my project. By having to go through each step of creating a line-item budget and organizing a cash-flow in T-330, I was excellently equipped to create those documents and many more as they related to my own film—tasks that otherwise would have been somewhat daunting. While this might not seem like communication, I argue that the skills I acquired can be thought of as a specific and unique language that I will be required to speak as an independent filmmaker. In other words, writing a budget in a certain way is a way of communicating financial information that ultimately affects and influences one's ability to acquire funding and be treated as a professional; likewise, the ability to draft contracts that hold water legally is a foreign, though essential skill-set that I will be referring to for years to come. I believe that learning to communicate information in this way has already had extremely beneficial ramifications including our team receiving three \$1,000 Creative Activity Grants from Hutton Honors College, and another roughly \$10,000 worth of equipment donations, not to mention my ability to comprehend contracts drafted by the lawyers representing Carrie Newcomer, and other musicians featured on the soundtrack.

Another course of particular relevance was T-436 Advanced Digital Cinematography, taught by Professor Jim Krause. While the practical knowledge contained in this class regarding visual storytelling has helped developed my eye as a director, what was perhaps most useful about taking this course was the intrinsic lack of structure or rhetoric which gave me my first significant taste of what I was to experience through my final project. More specifically, the course facilitated the making of several short films throughout the semester with very few guidelines other than the fact that the films had to be completed by the end. While many students were able to slide by doing a bare minimum of work, this lack of structure simultaneously allowed several other students and me to put into practice the same leadership and communication skills that I would need to use again for my thesis project. My potential to succeed or drown within the class hinged on my ability to inspire those around me to greater heights.

What I ultimately took away from the production phase and have applied to my thesis project is the importance of being able to communicate a vision. I found that if I was able to communicate a clear and exciting vision, my fellow students automatically felt an investment, and their own excitement grew exponentially about the project. The second my excitement dwindled, or my vision became unclear, my crew—and the project as a whole—would lose energy and momentum. Communication was essential, and ultimately the success of the project depended upon it.

The Story of Editing

Upon finishing production, it feels as if the movie is made, in the can. In reality, acquiring the footage is only one step in bringing the story to life—the rest of that process is determined by picture and sound editing, color correction and grading, and assembling

other components like scoring and soundtrack. This is a rewarding process in that it produces tangible results. It's also frustrating, as what you envisioned while writing and shooting must often be discarded for what works on screen. For me, it was a tremendous exercise in letting go, as it became clear that particular shots that we had spent hours setting up and recording did not have a logical place in the timeline of the story, or for some other reason did not work. One example of this was one of the last shots of the film, a camera dolly and pan across the finished violin and through the workshop, ending up on an out of focus "boca" shot of the violinmaker, Alexander, standing at the window. It was gorgeous cinematically, and tied several story elements together. However, when we began to edit the end of the film, it became clear that the shot tied off too many loose ends in the story—it provided too much resolution. While this doesn't sound like a bad thing, the best stories are often those that don't explain everything, and leave it to the viewer to come to their own conclusions. The shot had to go, and it did.

Another element of the story as filmed that changed drastically in editing was the flashback scene, in which Nathan and his mother, Melissa, recall the argument between Melissa and Nathan's Father, Phillip, when the violin is broken. This was an important scene in my eyes because it communicated Nathan's childhood baggage, and also introduced us to the antagonist figure of his father, a role that is transferred in some ways onto the (character) of the broken violin. The scene required careful set dressing and costuming to make it believable as a flashback, and ended up delaying us significantly during production, ultimately causing the 24-hour shoot. Needless to say, a lot of work went into it. When it came time to edit, the shots cut together visually, but the actors didn't look or feel believable as a young married couple. I believe I am largely

responsible for this, as the lack of significant rehearsal time meant that the actors faced the difficult task of making us believe something that they hadn't had time to believe themselves—their relationship. The scene was accomplishing the opposite of what was intended by pulling the viewer out of the story world. To fix this, we edited all but their voices out of the timeline so that the only shot that we see during the fight is an intimate and lingering image of young Nathan listening to his parents argue from the stairs. Ironically, the child actor who played this role was the most believable onscreen both physically and emotionally, despite his minimal experience.

Central to both the issues I just mentioned was my intimate relationship to the story, and the footage captured, which proved to be an obstacle. In other words, I had spent so much time thinking about, writing about, and visualizing how the story should unfold, that I was periodically unable to look beyond what I saw as the errors or flaws in what we had captured to see alternative ways to make things work. I had a very clear vision of how each element, and even each shot should be cut together, so when things didn't line up the way I had imagined all along, I wasn't sure how to proceed.

My advisor and IMP sponsor, Susan Kelly, once again played a pivotal role in that she instantly recognized what was happening and pointed it out. Once I recognized what I was doing, I was able to step back and make more informed decisions. Susan also served, along with fellow mentor Sean Connolly, as an objective pair of eyes that looked at the material we had captured as assets of equal worth. What I mean by this is that she was able to logically point out what was working and what wasn't, without being influenced by the amount of blood sweat and tears that went into various components. Throughout the editing process, both Susan and Sean spent hours pouring over the

footage with me and discussing each decision in frame-by-frame detail. This dedication, characteristic of the time and energy given to the project by everyone involved, has ultimately helped the film achieve its full potential.

My initial intention for my thesis project, aside from story, was to simultaneously showcase my undergraduate education in filmmaking while producing a film that would help me navigate into the professional world beyond school. In other words, I wanted to make something that would act as a creative calling card.

On a blindly ambitious level, I additionally hoped to set a new standard for undergraduate filmmaking at IU. While I am still striving to reach all of those goals as I finish my project, what has become increasingly important as I reflect on the last two semesters is how much the process itself has taught me, as opposed to what the final product might eventually provide, or state about me as a filmmaker. Restated, making this film has evolved into one of the most—if not the most—valuable learning experiences that I have had so far, both within the Individualized Major Program and at Indiana University as a whole. What I greatly appreciate now is the fact that the Individualized Major Program, by facilitating such an intensive thesis project experience, allowed me to go above and beyond what I could have possibly accomplished through *any* other major. While this is probably true for most IMP students, I feel that it is particularly true for me as a filmmaking student as the Individualized Major Program embraces the same values of entrepreneurship and inventiveness that filmmaking necessitates. The course of study that I have completed through the IMP has in many ways prepared me for, and provided me with the necessary skill sets to succeed as an independent filmmaker. While I intend to go on to make many films throughout my

career, I believe that *Nathan and the Luthier* (2011) will always exist as an important and memorable step in my artistic and intellectual education, both as the first feature film that I directed, and as the incredibly intensive and immersive learning experience that it was. I am extremely grateful to the Individualized Major Program for helping facilitate this experience.