

## Amateur Hour (or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Student Filmmaking)

### 1. TINSELTOWN

In Nathanael West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, a young, idealistic artist moves to Los Angeles to paint film sets. Hoping for inspiration, instead he finds a city rotted out by the insidious sweetness of the American Dream. West describes the seething anger of the LA citizenry, people who migrated from places like Iowa and Ohio to California, the "land of sunshine and oranges."

And what happens when such ordinary folk reach their destination? "Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit." West goes on: "The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing."

I read this passage on the 14-hour flight from Melbourne to Los Angeles. A wannabe writer searching for adventure in a foreign land, I was about to start a ten-month exchange programme in that very city. Suffice to say, I had been warned.

Three months later I was enjoying life in a new country, living like one of West's Iowans: savouring the sunshine and oranges but with no jaded palate to speak of. The film club at my college announced it was accepting submissions for production. Always keen to busy myself with creative projects, I set myself to work: brainstorming scenes on my walk between classes, digging through my laptop for old plotlines and short stories with resurrection potential. I had made three short films back in Melbourne, and this project was looking to be no different: produced for an absurdly low budget, under an absurdly rushed schedule. A part of me wanted to see how Tinseltown compared to my home city at this lowest entry point of the film industry. (The main difference? Failed LA filmmakers might strike lucky and get work as Joan Rivers' assistant, or maybe valet to one of the Baldwins. Here in Melbourne, we just have to get a real job.)



The deadline for submission looming, I paired up with my friend Jack, a native Southern Californian with a Tarantino-esque encyclopaedic knowledge of film. If selected, we would have about nine weeks to produce the short. Nine short weeks for revising the script, casting, securing locations and crew, and filming the damn thing—all the while juggling real life responsibilities such as assignments, relationships, and the impending cancellation of my J1 visa.

Jack and I spent the next weeks juggling drafts of the script between us, tearing out the chaff and mixing new ideas into the plot. At first we were impressively productive, but our co-editing became convoluted; the more we obsessed over minuscule details, the more we lost sight of the bigger picture. I was sure the script was a dud. God only knows why we never managed to get the third act right.

But lo and behold, on an otherwise lonely Sunday night, the film club called to inform me I had eight weeks to make a movie. Sitting on my bed, staring out at the starless LA sky, I was reminded of the title Art Spiegelman chose for his sequel to *Maus*. The title he chose for the book that came *after* one hundred and fifty pages of Jew murdering, child poisoning, and heart-of-darkness soul searching:

*And here my troubles began.*

## 2. PRE-PRODUCTION

Frantic with production demands, we sent the casting invitation emails late. We booked a room on campus and waited for the few people who'd checked their inboxes to arrive for auditions.

To our relief, people showed up. Not as many as we would have liked, but enough. Some of them could even act, which was a bonus. We even had an extra from *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* sign up to audition; one step removed from the real deal.

We sat in the room, which stunk of whiteboard marker and body odour, working our way through candidates with the deftness of a guy who's just downloaded Tinder... for the fourth time. Right. Left. Right. Right. Left.

"That was great," we'd say to the aspiring actor in question, who had spent hours driving across Los Angeles for the chance to star in an unpaid student film. "But could you try again, with more *feeling*?"

Then they would pack up and leave, back to their ordinary lives Uber driving or shelf stacking, and as the door closed behind them, someone would make a snide comment and I'd feel awful. Or I'd be the one making the snide comment, but only because I'd been sitting in a fog of body odour and whiteboard marker all afternoon... and was hearing spoken aloud lines I wrote weeks ago... and oh god how awful and phony these words sound coming out of real peoples' mouths...

The extra from *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* never showed up.

I've found the creative process of producing a short to follow a general pattern: while writing the script, the possibilities are endless; when filming starts, you become preoccupied with technical aspects, fixing the lighting, getting the shots you planned, corralling cast and crew; by post-production, the cards are on the table—the bet's been placed, the damage done. But that leaves a moment right at the end of pre-production, where I now found myself, in which you realise you have a real chance to fuck this whole thing up.

### 3. THE LONG RIDE INTO FRANKLIN CANYON

A week before filming, I went location scouting with Jack to Franklin Canyon, a public park in west LA. There we hoped to find a suitable location for a horror night scene at the end of the film's second act.

The night before this expedition, the film club had thrown a party. Given that our short was one of the three being made that term, we were somewhat forced to attend. As the night pressed on, some malicious partygoer tricked Jack into getting very, seriously drunk.

The consequences of Jack's night of inebriation became woefully apparent the next day, as we drove down Los Angeles' characteristically hilly, twirling mountain roads to Franklin Canyon. Several times, Jack insisted we stop so that he could projectile vomit out the consequences of the previous night onto the side of the highway.

It was during one of these stops that Jack, wiping specks of bile from his lips, told us it was his birthday. He celebrated with another hurl on the side of the road.

It was a long ride to Franklin Canyon.

We arrived in the canyon, a valley surrounded by mean, burnt-amber hills, whereupon our driver—a line producer from the film club—left us. The plan was to return by ourselves whenever suited best. It was only then we realised how hot the day had become. Neither of us had thought to bring water.

Swarms of LA joggers and picnicking families sent us into the less populated parts of the canyon and down one path that led us into thick forest.

It wasn't long before we found a place away from the other park goers—unfortunately a little too well. We were soon lost, stuck somewhere at the bottom of the canyon. There was no one around and our phones had no signal. I could feel my face beginning to sunburn. Jack was getting anxious to return home. It was still hot as anything. And wasn't this Manson country not that long ago?

We spent nearly two hours hopelessly wandering through the wilderness before finally rediscovering the main section of the canyon. There we found a spot that suited our filming requirements—away from people, but close enough so as not to drift too far from the safety of civilisation. We decided it was home time.

Our troubles resumed.

### 4. THE LONG RIDE *OUT* OF FRANKLIN CANYON

We called an Uber, but the buggy reception in Franklin Canyon meant our driver never found us. We sat around brainstorming our next move. Suddenly an idea came to me, or perhaps it was just the onset of heat stroke. To escape from the canyon, I would employ the one gift God had given me: an Australian accent.

“Alright buddy,” I said to Jack. “I’m going to turn the Aussie up to 10 and find us a lift out of here.”

It was a funny idea, but not one I expected to pay off. Yet within five minutes of walking around the carpark greeting drivers with a horribly forced “g’day,” we copped a lift.

The plan worked. Our driver, one of the classic LA fitness freaks jogging in the canyon, took a special interest in me. It turned out old mate had watched every documentary ever made about marsupials and was dying to pick my brain. Of special interest to him was the thylacine (the famous, hunted-to-extinction “Tasmanian tiger”).

Grateful for the lift, I happily acted the part of marsupial expert and Dundee progeny. Conversation lingered on that topic the whole way, although at one point he must’ve noticed Jack was feeling excluded and shot my American friend a conciliatory question. “Where are you from, kid?”

Jack sat up. “Moreno Valley, mister.”

“Oh cool.” I saw our driver’s eyes glaze over, before connecting with mine through the rear-view mirror. “So anyways, the weirdest thing about the thylacine is...”

## 5. LIGHTS; CAMERA; INACTION

And, like that, our two weekends to shoot arrived. Pressed for time and with little wriggle room for fuck-ups, my hope was that what we’d set-up in pre-production would save my arse if things got too hectic. Safe to say, I probably overestimated our clairvoyance.

A new character entered at this stage: our director of photography (DP), Vincent. Vincent was French and becoming something of a golden boy in the film club, assigned to projects the club held the most faith in. Older than most other members, Vincent had already graduated from film school in his native country and was now trying to hack it in Hollywood. He smoked cigars. He deplored French New Wave. A video of him doing a perfect Russian jig was floating around Snapchat.

The last day of shooting was the most hectic. Filming inside a friend’s apartment, we had totally reconstructed it according to our needs. One of the apartment walls was hideously bland, so we borrowed a tapestry to cover it; giving the set, intended to be a middle-aged woman’s apartment, a distinctly esoteric, hippie-college-student vibe. But it worked well enough, bearing in mind the tapestry’s tendency to come loose and slide down the wall, ruining several takes as we raced to stick it back up. Soon we’re filming a set-piece in which multiple lights flash on and off in sync to the movement of our lead actor Dvoraw—one of those uniquely Los Angeles names, like Zsa Zsa Gabor or Yvette Mimieux. At one point, she is meant to realise a crucial plot detail. The lights flash and she follows the cues correctly (which I just pray will sync up okay in the edit with what I’m trying to do), but when it comes to the moment of realisation nothing happens. We try again. And again.

But Dvoraw just isn't doing what I need, no matter how many times we try. I can tell she's increasingly disheartened each time I call for another take. She sees the stress on my face, and it makes her stressed. Vincent and I consult briefly in the bathroom, trying to figure out exactly what to tell her. We re-appear and I try to cut out the vague "feel surprised" or "imagine it's the happiest realisation you've had" language. No—she needs to know what her face is doing wrong and how to fix it.

We start the take. It's going perfectly. The lights are synched up. Dvoraw's face is full of that realisation I was after. Vincent follows the blocking meticulously. The shot is in focus. Lightning in a bottle. It's goddamn magic. And then, halfway through the shot, I see it... the fucking tapestry starting to slide down the wall. Its corners release their grip as Dvoraw is in the middle of her action. I can't bear to call cut. The tapestry collapses to the ground. The cut is unavoidable. We stop. Everyone sighs. I am filled with the urge to destroy something. I want to burn the tapestry, then throw it out the fucking window. I fight back what feels like an impending aneurysm.

Another take. Jack, can you put the fucking tapestry, I mean—the tapestry back up on the wall? He walks over to it at the slowest pace I have seen a human being move. I forget he has been complaining about a bad back all day. Instead, I wonder: is he doing this deliberately to piss me off? I want to scream at him to hurry the fuck up. Then the tapestry is back in place and we go for a take.

The cycles of anger, annoyance, and occasional marvel continue for another few hours; I try to keep them in check as best I can. This is when the collaborative nature of filmmaking comes in handy. The set should be organised so that your worst impulses are kept in check. As director, you're the only one with any real clue of what's going on. The actors are guessing and the in-the-know crew members like DP and 1st AD are focussed on their niche. Meanwhile, everyone else is going to be bored shitless. Figure out a way to at least appear to have your shit together.

Since the student film is such a self-indulgent process, the director needs to adhere to their role—after all, the whole thing's for them. If you don't give many, many fucks about the project, why would anyone else?

## 6. THE ORACLE OF VENICE BEACH

One weekend after production wrapped, not quite brave enough yet to start editing the mass of footage, I went down to Venice Beach with a friend.

We entered a tent on a street of stall vendors. Inside, a bearded man with a mess of long grey hair offered us henna tattoos. Why not? Talking to him as he painted a design on my palm, I discovered he was a budding actor.

I mentioned the recent shoot and asked him how he felt working on student films, being bossed around by young people with little know-how. He told me he enjoyed the work itself enough to endure it, so long as the students shared their final product. "Too many of them just gobble it up in the edit and then we never get to see it... that final cut, that's our

paycheck, y’know? We’re doing it for free, the least we want in return is something for our reel.”

He looked into my eyes with a stern face, holding my palm tightly and dangling the henna ink gun over my hand. Note to my peers: send on the footage, for the sake of all those part-time henna tattooists willing to waste their weekends working on cheap Edgar Wright parodies and metaphoric explorations of your parents’ divorce.

## 7. ELEVEN YEARS, ONE FEATURE, AND A WHOLE LOT OF UBER DRIVING

After the premiere—the reaction was positive overall; I mean, it wasn’t Kubrick, but it worked well enough for my friends that night—I caught an Uber home. My driver Brian, a friendly guy in his late 30s or early 40s, asked how the night had been. Full of late-night jubilation, I told him about the short film. He smiled and mentioned he had once directed a feature of his own.

“You guys know William Macy?” Of course. *Fargo*; *Boogie Nights*; *Jurassic Park III* (a personal favourite). “Well, Will was in it. Great guy.”

The rest of the ride home, Brian entertained us with stories of his time in Hollywood. His film *Bart Got a Room* (2008) had flopped. For a few years after that, he had peddled scripts around Hollywood, with one entering development, but talks fell through and production was halted. He drifted out of the Hollywood circle not long after that.

“Been driving Uber for about three years now...” His smile refused to drop. “It’s good fun.”

Brian went on to impart his wisdom from his time in the industry on to me. “Stay true to your vision, know what advice to follow, know what advice to reject,” and other inspiring but cliché things.

The day after the film’s premiere, I met up with Vincent to help him on another film shoot. I told him about Brian and his brief flirtation with Hollywood. “Said he’d made a feature film with William Macy,” I said, bringing the story to a close. “And driving Ubers for about three years now.”

Vincent, one year into his own Hollywood adventure, looked up at me from behind the camera. “I wish you hadn’t told me that,” he said in his thick French accent. I laughed.

Nearly two years since making the film, and one global pandemic later, I look back at my time in Los Angeles with nostalgic longing. That era of my life now appears somewhat miraculous. International travel is on a hiatus; I no longer enjoy the ridiculously privileged life of an exchange student; I have not directed a short film since.

What was it all for? Ego must have definitely had something to do with it. I think of all the money spent, the stress brought to bear. The film hasn’t made me a star or given me

prophetic wisdom about filmmaking. It sometimes feels like nothing more than a thing that occupied me at a time when I needed occupying, a time that has since passed.

But I still call my friend Jack, and, despite the continental separation, we still talk about film and politics and all the other stuff we used to, and fill each other in on our respective lives. He's begun production on a new film of his own—a dark comedy partly inspired by feelings of jealousy during a car trip in which he was totally ignored, as the driver relentlessly bugged his Australian friend for information about extinct marsupials.

Returning to Melbourne, I felt lost. I was happy to be home, but had no direction. Always a neurotic, I spent boundless energy stressing about work, relationships, moving home, familial obligations; whatever was happening around me. And then, amidst the piling responsibilities of adult life, there was also the problem of not at all knowing what I wanted to do with my life.

But I think I know the answer. During 22 years of overthinking and compulsive worrying, most of which comes with the territory of being an adult human being, there was one period in my life where that stress felt like it went towards something greater than myself—my time in LA, rushing between locations, juggling meetings and emails, improvising on set. The truth is, I can't imagine a more enjoyable way to spend my time than stressing over a creative project.

And so today, two years since shooting my LA film, there is a ten-page script sitting on my desk, just waiting for me to pluck up the courage to do it all again.