

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

November 2007. One of the things that has always fascinated me as an artist and an educator is how quickly we are dated by our technology. When I was in high school, Dolby sound systems were just taking hold and the war between audio cassettes and 8-track tapes was in full swing. Video tapes had not been introduced and the perfect graduation gift for college was an electric Smith Corona typewriter; preferably one with a correction ribbon which would lift the mistake off the page.

The first calculators appeared about the time I finished college and aside from the sticker shock on the first models that were put out by Texas Instruments (TI); for anyone taking a science course, they meant the end to the slide rule. Of course, they were not allowed in taking the GRE's for grad school and long hand was still the order of the day.

My first experiences with video centered on tube model cameras and reel to reel half-inch video tape. Editing was primitive with the systems we had in college. We literally made chalk marks on the tape, manually rolled the tape back on the deck and as it played forward, picking up speed, then we plunged our finger onto the edit button, hoping that we would have synchronization. The systems for portable use were bulky and heavy. They stored a maximum of 20 minutes of footage and of course, they were black and white.

Then a revolution took place. Within 10 years of my college graduation we went from 3/4" SP with the Sony U-Matic system to VHS and Beta tapes, to Betacam SP to three chip color cameras to Super VHS and then the mini-DV. Field recording systems went from separate units of camera and deck to self-contained cameras with built-in recording mechanisms. Tube models morphed to single then three-chip digital systems.

The war between cassette and 8-Track tape became a distant memory and was soon bulk erased in our collective memory as a new generation found a once restricted medium becoming ever so accessible.

As video technology has evolved, so too has the concept of filmmaking. Little could anyone know that when Hollywood director, Stephen Spielberg gave small camcorders to his youngsters and urged them to "discover life," that his gesture would impact on his very industry.

Today, it is not unusual for young people who have not even reached puberty to know camera movements, sound design, lighting techniques and even editing systems. It is also not unusual for these same youngsters to create award winning film work that has opened new markets and raised the bar within the filmmaking community.

In 1999, I was asked to create a two-day program for youngsters in the Rhode Island to learn about filmmaking. Dr. Robert Billington, President of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was participating in an arts project called "Convergence Arts Festival" with the city of Providence and wanted something that would be different and provide a level of interactivity. Bob and I had been involved in the creation of the Rhode Island International Film Festival and bringing the 1998 World Premiere of the Farrelly Brothers hit film, "There's Something About Mary," not only to the Festival, but to the Stadium Theatre in Woonsocket, RI.

So, armed with early model Panasonic three-chip cameras and separate VHS recording decks, KidsEye was born. Working with an aspiring filmmaker named Christian DeRezendes, we set up "shoot outs" in downtown Pawtucket, explained the techniques involved, allowed for hands-on participation and then did play-back for review and critique.

In the two-day period, we saw more than forty youngsters, most under the age of twelve. The experiment was a hit.

The KidsEye Program has just completed its ninth year and continues to evolve. The one-week summer camp we produce sells out within weeks of its enrollment announcement. It's not a tough program to market at all these days. It's also no longer unique. Indeed, anything that is film connected is hot with all age brackets.

I'll admit, I was a film geek when I was younger. It was a passion for me and it was not accessible to the general population as it is today. There were only a handful of film schools to attend if one wanted to build a career within the industry. Not today. At the University of Southern California, regardless of what we knew previously to acceptance at the school, the first required class was 8mm film production, which demanded knowing the operation of the camera, film theory and practical application. Proficiency came by doing—again and again and again.

So, what drives young people today? Has our technology fostered creativity or has it merely allowed for the mass production of what is nothing more than visual stimulation? Does picking up a handycam or digi-palmtree make someone a filmmaker?

I wanted to know what drove young people and their perceptions on the wave of programs that encourage film creation at the earliest possible age. Is this some form of new democracy in communication? To get my answers, I decided to speak with a young filmmaker I know who has participated in the Rhode Island International Film Festival. His name: Joe Procopio; and he hails from Canada.

How to describe Joe? To begin, he is an auteur by any definition of the word. His energy, enthusiasm, and vision have long impressed me. His work is always creative. It is always original. It is also highly regarded and has played many of

the leading film festivals on this continent from the Chicago Facets Film Festival, Toronto's Sprockets Film Festival and South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas, to name a few. Joe had his first United States screening with us in Rhode Island.

Maybe it might be better to let Joe tell you the rest...

GTM: Tell us a bit about yourself. Just who is Joseph Procopio?

Joseph Procopio: I don't really like talking about myself – I'd rather talk about my films. I guess I can say, "Joseph is a film director from Canada. He makes one short film a-year and he keep them under seven minutes."

I like modern novels (*Catcher In The Rye*, *Ordinary People*), and I listen to a lot of music. Then there's swimming and basketball. If I'm really stuck on some writing, I'll ride my bike. It clears my head. I always make sure my mind is clear before I do any filming - but my homework has to be done first.

GTM: How old are you at this interview and how old were you when you made your first film?

Joseph Procopio: I'm now 13. I made my first real movie when I was 9. But when I was 5, I used a Handy-cam and a Hot Wheels set for a movie about a street car race that went wrong. Big crash scenes, lots of speed, but no story or soundtrack – I was only 5.

GTM: What motivated you to become a filmmaker?

Joseph Procopio: I grew up watching a ton of movies – sometimes 5 or 6 a week. Then I started watching the Bonus Features on my favorite DVDs like *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, and *Forest Gump*. Soon I felt like I wanted to make my own movie. I learned from the Extras that I could do anything if I had a story and plan the shots.

GTM: What has the process been like for you since you began developing your own work?

Joseph Procopio: First, when I get an idea for a project, I close my eyes and imagine it. If I get a feeling about it or an emotion then I go to the next step. I try not to build on weak ideas, I like stories that have a discovery or a good moral b.g. – but that's because I like those kinds of stories myself. I also like comedies; I'm working on one of those as well. A week later I review my ideas and if they still feel strong to me, then I know I have something worth trying.

GTM: Where do you find the inspiration and stories for the films you have created?

Joseph Procopio: I mostly write about what I'm going through, or something I'm trying to figure out. In "9x8" (my first movie) I was having a rough time with math

and I thought the number 8 was haunting my life. By the end, I realized that I really was happy being 8 and I had nothing to worry about.

In "Green Tee" I learned not to pre-judge people, and in "Lost and Found", we realized that everyone can choose where they want to live and be happy (I wrote that one with my twin sisters Susan and Katherine).

GTM: Can you tell us about the first film you directed, what you learned from that process and where you are today with your storytelling technique?

Joseph Procopio: I wrote "9x8" when I was stuck on multiplication. That script came easy to me, and I wrote it in 3 days. Then I recorded me reading the script, where I was describing every shot, and we used that to film the movie. Now I write a script, make a shot list and then put it on index cards. I lay them out like a comic strip, and I setup the movie from that.

GTM: Did you ever expect that your early work would open so many doors or you and be accepted at so many film festivals?

Joseph Procopio: I Never expected what happened. I made "9x8" because there was a chance I'd show it at the Toronto Sprockets Festival - in a real theatre for all my friends to see - which was really cool.

At the screening, I freaked over how it felt showing a movie I made myself. I felt like a real director. People I didn't even know were thanking me and telling me to make more. I was stunned when my first movie won the Toronto Sprockets Frederick Simpson Award for Best Film, and then again in Rhode Island with The Discovery Award.

I never expected "9x8" to get picked in Palm Springs or Chicago and then in London England and Finland and Australia, and a whole bunch of other places.

GTM: What has it been like touring the Festival circuit? Can you tell us about some of your experiences?

Joseph Procopio: The festivals all treated me well. Even though I was 9 or 10 , the festival people made me feel like a grown up director and it's been awesome.

They encourage me to do more movies, to go back to them again, and now I have really good friends all over the world. I like the Toronto, Rhode Island, Palm Springs, Chicago and Kids4Kids European Festivals a lot. Austin Texas, Washington, and Kids4Kids Europe were really generous last year when they fly me and my dad in VIP style.

The Chicago Children's Film Festival gave me a \$2,500 Montgomery Award for my movie "Drive", and then in April, it received the Young Filmmaker Award in

Nashville, and in Cyprus, "Lost & Found" won two first prizes and a digital camera. I thank them all.

GTM: You have been very fortunate in having the strong support of your family. How do you think that has benefited you as a filmmaker?

Joseph Procopio: My parents never said no (at least not yet). They bring me to as many festivals as possible and they encourage me to try new things - not to repeat myself. We built a crane together because I needed one, and now we're working on a homemade steadicam for my new movie which is a romance.

With my parents, I was able to do add some great things for my films – like, for "Green Tee" I wanted to use some Lower Thirds graphics for a fake newscast and they helped me find them on e-bay. They helped me get started with editing software and they bought me some killer equipment like a used Canon XL-1. We put together a real Lowell Light Kit one piece at a time.

GTM: Do you think you're unique in the film world or have you found that then medium is now encouraging more young filmmakers such as yourself?

Joseph Procopio: I hope I'm unique. I hope I have my own way of doing things. I don't want to be just another filmmaker. I'm already working on my first feature film script and I want that to be very unique too.

My digital cameras and computer editing made it easy for me get started – for sure – and if I don't get funding, my feature will be in high-def. I'd really like to shoot on 35mm as soon as I can, but it costs more than a house to do that and we need a place to live...

GTM: What is the process you go through in editing your films and shaping them for exhibition?

Joseph Procopio: I make a rough cut while we're shooting. I look at it everyday to figure out what's missing. It's usually too long, so I cut it down. Then I put in the music and cut to the beats. After I record any voice-over or sound FX, I tighten it some more. I screen it a dozen times and pick out the dead spots. It takes about a month, sometimes more.

GTM: From your experience, do you think that festivals and distributors are looking for a certain theme or approach to storytelling? Have you found that originality is rewarded?

Joseph Procopio: From what I see, I think Festivals will screen anything that's really good and new. It could even be shot on a cell phone. It doesn't matter if it was shot on 35 or High-Def, it's the story that counts. It is the most original films that are picked and rewarded.

GTM: What do you think makes a Canadian film different from an American film? Is there a difference?

Joseph Procopio: There is no difference between a Canadian film or an American film. Stories are about people and what happens to them; and whether the characters live in Canada or the U.S. makes no difference.

GTM: What more do you want to learn about the filmmaking process and what skills do you want to polish?

Joseph Procopio: I want to improve my sound mixing and color correcting skills because editing is very important to the process of putting everything together.

GTM: Is there anyone who inspires you today that you see as a role model?

Joseph Procopio: At first I was inspired by Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Robert Zemeckis. Lately I watch a lot of Chris Nolan and Paul Haggis.

They're all great directors who inspire me to make strong movies. They all use the same rule: have a great story.

GTM: Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Joseph Procopio: I want to direct the most successful drama ever made by a young director in motion picture history.

GTM: Anything else you'd like to add or share with our readers?

Joseph Procopio: Yeah. Does anyone have Spielberg's number?

How do I get on Oprah?

About the Author:

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