

Jump Cut

By George T. Marshall

(October 2006) Here is the storyline:

"Drunk and exhausted by yet another sleepless night, tormented by his past and the weight of a future he can't bear to face, Greg walks into the crashing waves, hoping to end his life and suffering in a salty grave. It's at the edge of the ocean that 16-year old Julie Peterson finds Greg's limp body a short time later. She manages to resuscitate him but receives no thanks from Greg. Bitter and angry to still be alive, Greg wants nothing more than to be left alone to die. Something in this broken man touches Julie and she decides to save him from the demons of his past and show him that life is indeed worth living.

Just as the busy tourist season approaches, word spreads throughout this beach community about a "transient with a suitcase" sleeping on the beach. Local Police Chief Timothy Berg sets out to find the drifter and send him out of town. Fearing for Greg's safety, Julie offers him refuge in an unoccupied beachfront home.

With the help of his 18-year old nephew, Brett, however, Chief Berg soon finds Greg's suitcase hidden under the boardwalk. Its contents only add to the urgency of his capture. When a jealous Brett discovers the secret relationship between Julie and Greg, he blows the whistle that reveals Greg's troubled past, unintentionally threatening to rip apart Julie's family and destroy the life of his own uncle."

~ Synopsis for "Tomorrow is Today"

From idea to page to screen; that's the process used in making a motion picture. The idea leads to a concept, which in turn leads to an abstract and the abstract leads to the pitch. The pitch sells the idea, which leads then to the production. How this all comes together has built Hollywood legends and provided fertile ground for film school studies. It is the "stuff that dreams are made of," and for many the dream becomes a reality.

"Tomorrow Is Today" just screened to exceptional reviews at the Montreal World Film Festival. Directed by Frederic Lumiere and written and starring Mark Hefti, the film had its official World Premiere at the Rhode Island International Film Festival this past August. Just who are these filmmakers and how they created their vision?

I spoke recently with both men and was able to learn a bit more about dreams, commitment and friendship; key elements that lead to the creation of their collaborative work.

GTM: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got involved in filmmaking; your educational background and some work history?

Frederic Lumiere: I was a stage actor in France and moved to the U.S. to pursue an acting career in LA. Didn't go so well, my accent was too strong and I was

young and naive. I eventually moved to Hawaii where I did more stage performing and started making shorts films and documentaries. Years later, I moved to San Francisco where my last non film related job was Chief Information Officer of Hooked on Phonics. I made another documentary in SF called "Six String Man" about homeless street musicians. Took some classes at the Film Institute there and moved to LA to make films full time. I started Lumiere Media, our production company with my wife and moved to the East Coast. We now have a beautiful 5 month-old baby girl named Jane.

Mark Hefti: For many years I worked as a stage actor, in many different productions around the U.S. While doing this I began writing scripts, mainly just for my own pleasure. Eventually as I got better at it, I realized that it was something I could see doing as a career. I've always been interested in individual and group behavior. I studied Sociology and Psychology at the University of Minnesota, and although it may seem like this is a long way off from being a screenwriter, I find that analyzing behavior is something that every screenwriter does naturally whether they realize it or not, and I think that this background helps me very much when writing a script. This progression to screenwriting is also what began to fuel my desire as an actor to concentrate on more film and television projects. I believe that working as an actor has strengthened my abilities as a writer and vice-a-versa. Plus, although they are both very creative, they offer much different rewards.

GTM: What drew you to this project; tell us a bit about its development.

Frederic: The idea for this film came to me after losing my wife's grandmother to a brain tumor. She was an exceptional human being. I was staring at the ocean on the Jersey shore where she spent many, many summers, and I imagined what she must've been like as a young lady. This is how the character of Julie came about. Elizabeth Eler (My wife's grandma) was a very caring person, always interested in the life of others and always wanting to help those in need.

I called Mark whom I'd known for a very long time (he was my best man at my wedding) and pitched him the story. He loved it, came to the shore to get the feel for the area, went back to LA and wrote the script over the next few months.

Mark: The initial inspiration for "Tomorrow Is Today" came purely from Director Frederic Lumiere. He called me one day with the idea of the movie, and I was instantly inspired by his passion for it. We talked about some rough ideas for the story, and then I went out to the New Jersey Shore to soak up the locations and culture, then returned to Los Angeles and immediately began writing the script. Once the script was finished we sent the script out to people we wanted to work with, and the response was overwhelming. We found our financing, hired a great cast, and crew and somehow made it happen. I can't even express how lucky we got with involving some very hard working people in the production. We pulled off shooting a feature film in just 16 days of filming, which was a pretty amazing feat.

GTM: This work was shot with Sony HD equipment. What were the reasons you worked with this medium?

Mark: I'll leave that one for Frederic, but all I can say is that working with HD, and video is very actor friendly. It allows the actors to try different things, and have numerous takes without worrying about burning expensive film stock. This also give the editor many more options to work with, which is gives us actors many more chances to look good.

Frederic: First reason is an economic one; the equipment being so affordable. Next, my technical expertise matched the format (HDV) since I developed a software called Lumiere HD to allow HDV editing in Final Cut Pro (Mac platform).

Finally, Kevin C.W. Wong and I loved the image quality this camera is capable of. It's quite exceptional for a \$5,000 camera. We decided to crop the 1920 X 1080 frame to have it cinemascope 2.35:1, which also really helps the cinematic feel. This was especially important since the Jersey Shore is a major character in our film. In my opinion, some of the most beautiful beaches in the U.S. are in New Jersey.

GTM: How supportive was Sony and how did you build that relationship?

Frederic: Sony was extremely supportive, they let us use some of their latest equipment including a prototype HD LCD field monitor which was a godsend. They are also helping us co-promote the film because they feel that this is some of the best footage they've seen from the Sony HVR Z1U.

I met the Sony guys via my software development efforts.

GTM: What were the dynamics of working with such a hands-on writer like Mark Heffi, who was also your lead actor?

Frederic: Terrible. We could never get anything done. Mainly because of his ego...

Kidding of course. Mark is an incredibly talented and generous artist. I also consider him part poet. His writing has a freshness to it, I think because he is an actor and acts out all his dialogue when he writes it. He is also very flexible which is so important when you collaborate on such a huge project. Art is subjective so it can be tricky but Mark and I are best friends and can tell each other anything.

Another challenging stage of making a film is post-production. Especially when your lead actor is also the writer and you are the director/editor. We had many discussions about some of the cuts I made. A lot of cuts went out and came back in. Some stayed out. I think the main thing is to leave the ego at the door and keep as open minded as possible. Everything is worth a try. If an idea doesn't work, we don't have to keep it. But I can't stress enough the importance of remaining objective when cutting a film you directed. You are already

starting with a skewed opinion of what works and what doesn't, and often you want to keep scenes and shots in for the wrong reasons. For instance, a certain setup took us 5 hours. We kept only a few seconds of that scene. It's painful but story should always come first.

Mark: Well from my perspective I'll just say that working as both a writer and actor on this project was very tough. For numerous reasons, we were making last minute story changes while we were still shooting and it was tough to get it all done. many times I was sitting on set with my laptop, doing re-writes and then would run on and shoot one of my scenes and then get back to writing. It was pretty crazy. Luckily Frederic and I are such good friends that we are able to be very open and honest with each other without taking it personally. He really is a great director. I've known him for years, and some of the things he was doing with the actors on the set really impressed me. I thought I knew all of his tricks, but Frederic is just so talented he continued to inspire me throughout filming.

GTM: How was this experience different from other productions you've been involved with professionally?

Frederic: It was better than anything I've done before mainly because Mark and I have great chemistry and a lot of respect for each other. We also have something else that isn't very common in this industry. We want the other to succeed as much, if not more than we want to succeed ourself. I consider Mark as my younger brother and nothing would make me happier than him succeeding in a big way. So there is a lot of trust coming from that.

GTM: Tell is about the process that went into creating the film you were involved with from concept to execution.

Frederic: Well, we are very hands on. We did little pre production mainly because by the time we found the money to shoot we had a limited window to start principal photography. There is so much to get done before you shoot and we also produced the film, which I don't recommend. Producing and directing was tough. I was exhausted before we started shooting.

We got an attorney very early on in the process. The main thing to remember is that filmmaking is a business and it's important to think of it that way. You wouldn't bring in investors, hire people in another business without making sure your attorney oversees all the legal aspects, it's the same when you make a film. If you want to sell it at some point that is. And don't want to take the risk to have to shut down production in the middle of the shoot.

We shot the film in 16 days. It was exhausting for everyone but we all remained friends which is a good sign I think. We fed everyone very very well. So even though we expected a lot out of them, they knew we really cared and appreciated their efforts.

I'll let Mark continue on that topic.

Mark: For us this was a definite labor of love, passion and trust. This was our baby that we had to nurture from conception through development. I have never been involved so thoroughly in a project before, and the experience has been extremely rewarding. It has also been rewarding in the sense that I made a movie with my best friend that we can be proud of, and I am very proud of what Frederic has accomplished with this film as both a director and an editor. We had been talking about it for years, and to actually see our product on the big screen for our world premiere at the Rhode Island International Film Festival was very rewarding to say the least.

GTM: What were the pros and cons of promoting the film through the film festival circuit?

Frederic: I can't really think of any cons. The pros are that if you love show and tell, and I really do... it's a fantastic way to show your film.

Mark: Film Festivals are such a great way to expose your film to the public. Festivals offer a very nurturing environment for filmmakers, because they want you to succeed. Most people that are involved with festivals, or who just like to see movies at festivals are there because they appreciate the art of filmmaking and storytelling. Plus film festivals are a great place to network with other filmmakers, distributors, cinephiles, artists, and just all around good people. If there are any cons to the festival circuit, I would just say that it is tiring. For those of us independent filmmakers who aren't on multi-million dollar budgets with major advertising money, we are out there promoting our own films and trying to help fill the seats. It is fun but can also be exhausting, and depending on how many film festivals you choose to do it can be costly as well.

GTM: If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?

Mark: Well we will do it again, and we will do many things differently, I'm sure! The learning curve for us on this project was very high. The biggest thing that I think we have learned would be to spread out the duties, and not try to take on so much ourselves. Frederic is an amazing editor, and he edited every second of the movie by himself. The problem is that he is also an amazing director, and producer as well. I would have loved for him to get a break on one of these duties because he is a perfectionist, and really sinks his soul into everything he does. On the plus side to him working his tail off on the project, his talent really shines through and when you watch the movie you are truly watching something with his stamp on it.

Frederic: I wouldn't produce and direct. I would only direct.

GTM: Did you learn anything about yourself from participation in this project?

Frederic: Absolutely. I love filmmaking even more than I thought I did. I also discovered that my favorite part of the filmmaking process is working with the actors. Exploring characters together. Searching for these emotions.

Mark: I think from this project I got a glimpse of what I am capable of doing, what Frederic is capable of doing, and what we are able to accomplish as a team. Potential revealed is exciting to me. I think this movie reveals some of our potential. I also learned that film can make a difference, and that we have the power as filmmakers to truly move people. After screening the film for the first time I felt a sense of responsibility to make movies that will somehow touch people.

GTM What did it feel like watching the audience reaction to your film after its first major screening?

Mark: After showing the film in Rhode Island I felt like it was all worth it. All of the hours of thinking about it, talking about it, and working on it became justified. We had some feedback that was truly inspirational. To watch an audience go through the emotions with the characters, and take away something from it, is quite an amazing experience. I can't wait to make another movie!!

Frederic: It was nerve racking. After seeing the film so many times as an editor and after changing the cuts so many times, I didn't know if it was good or bad anymore. The audience was very emotional and vocal after the screening and it made this whole process so worth-it. I was also surprised by the demographic of people who loved the film. The surprising thing is that there really isn't one in particular. We've had people from all ages come to us in tears telling us how touched they were by the film. We had a 18 year old girl come back 3 times here in Montreal and she brought every friend she had who was willing. In Rhode Island, a 40 year old man told me this was the best film he'd ever seen. So that was surprising... not only women above 30 love the film, it's people from all walks of life and all age ranges. That's pretty awesome.

GTM: As with any artistic work, audience response can vary, as well as critical reviews. Your film has won many awards, and has wowed audiences; how do you keep yourself from taking journalistic criticism personally, particularly when you have to wonder if they've really taken the time to view your film?

Frederic: Sometimes I feel that film critics should be called film cynics. I remember loving the film "Vanilla Sky" and reading terrible reviews afterward. That's when I decided not to pay attention to reviews as much anymore. But we are artists, and we are sensitive so you can't help but let it affect you. Sometimes, a critic won't like a film for reasons that have nothing to do with the film. For personal reasons that skews his view of the story.

The most important people for us are the people who respond to the material. They make it all worthwhile.

Mark: I think that you definitely have to keep both the praise and the criticism into perspective, and definitely not take either one too personally. It is a movie, and some people will like it, some won't. The most wonderful part about making a movie, and also the worst part is that you are allowing yourself to be vulnerable. You are taking a chance and showing something that has come from your heart. It is a truly liberating experience, and also quite frightening when you realize that your heart will be dissected in front of (potentially) millions of people. No matter how fantastic your film is, there will be plenty of vocal people out there who will hate it. If you are proud of what you've done, and keep it in perspective, nobody can take that away from you with a harsh word. Film critics have the word "Critic" in their title... it's their job.

GTM: What advice would you give to other filmmakers about undertaking such a commitment?

Mark: Surround yourself with talented people who are passionate about the project, and who you want to spend 13 hours a day with. Really make sure you have a story, and then develop strong characters. Follow your dreams and find a way to make it happen!

Frederic: Take it one step at a time and remain realistic as to what you have. Try not to be delusional about your material, might it be a script or a finished film. Listen to feedback but remember your vision. Look for patterns of feedback before you act on it.

Don't fall in love with the idea of making a film. I see too many people who are so focused on getting a film done they forget about making the film (story, technique, etc.).

Finally... don't give up. If it's your passion, the journey is where it's at.

GTM: Indeed!

About the Author:

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