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The Making of The Taxidermist

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THE MAKING OF *THE TAXIDERMIST*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Department of Drama and Communications

by

Justin Cain Thomason

B.A. Berry College, 2000

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Abstract

This thesis book details the conception and production of *The Taxidermist*, a narrative short film shot on 16mm color film. It tells the story of a loving father and his daughter who live in an isolated rural area. The over protective taxidermist tries to protect his daughter from all the ills of the world, but this also keeps her from experiencing the wider world.

All aspects of the production from writing through post-production are covered within the thesis. In particular the challenges and advantages of location shooting are covered. Post-production issues in the digital age are also covered in some detail.

Introduction:

For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated with films. My earliest clear memories are watching *The Empire Strikes Back* in the theatre with my parents. Considering I was two and a half when the film was released, it is obvious the experience left quite an indelible impression. There is an undeniable magic in settling into the seat as the lights go down and the flickering images are projected onto the screen. Nothing else can so draw a person into another world.

For most of my life, I was merely a fan of film. I was always eager to go to the movie theatre and see the latest blockbuster, and with the rise of home video I spent many summer afternoons watching and re-watching my favorite movies. I never really gave much thought to who made the movies, and only a cursory thought of how they were made. I just watched and enjoyed them. That changed for me during my sophomore year of high school. A friend of mine aspired to filmmaking, and he introduced me to the works of David Lynch. Suddenly I realized how much more films could be. The artistry of Lynch's films placed them in an entirely new realm for me. I suddenly began taking very careful notice of the director's name, and started to analyze films more than I ever had before. I began my move from a fan of film to a connoisseur.

Despite my new found appreciation of films and filmmaking, I still never considered filmmaking as a career choice. It wasn't until my freshman year of college when that changed. I expressed a fondness for film to a professor of mine, and he asked me why I wasn't majoring in it. I explained it seemed like an impractical choice for a major. This professor pressed the point,

and got me thinking about the possibility. By the end of that day, I had decided to major in film and strive to be a filmmaker.

It was pretty obvious my friends and family thought this was another one of my typical phases. I had discussed several different career options in the past, and none ever lasted more than a month or two. When I had made it through a couple of semesters without changing my mind, my friends and family were finally convinced it was more than a passing fancy. The more immersed in the study of film I became, the more I wanted to know. My undergraduate study centered on film theory, but my school did not have a production department. I felt a need to bolster my knowledge of theory with a stronger understanding of production. Thus I applied to graduate school.

My time in graduate study has been very productive. I have learned a great deal in my time here. Most of the practical lessons I have learned have come through mistakes. By working on projects and experimenting with techniques, I have discovered and refined working methods that are effective for me. In the following work, I breakdown the process I went through on my film *The Taxidermist*. It is my hopes that reading this account of my successes and failures will help other filmmakers avoid some of my pitfalls. No written work can supplant the importance of experience, but perhaps in some small way this work might assist with someone else's film project.

Chapter 1: The Writing Process

The Taxidermist tells the story of Shadrach, a rural man who works as a taxidermist and lives a solitary life with his daughter Lily. His wife has passed away, and Shadrach has turned all his attention to raising his daughter and keeping her from harm. She is reaching an age when she would normally begin school, but Shadrach is holding her back. He wants to protect her, but through his over protectiveness he stunts her social and emotional development. Tragedy strikes when Lily excitedly runs down to her father. She trips and tumbles down the stairs, breaking her neck. Unable to deal with his grief, Shadrach plies all of his skill and preserves his daughter, keeping her close to him even in death.

This script began as a writing exercise in my Media Preproduction and Planning class. As I was working on it, I had no real intention of shooting it; it was to be purely a screenwriting effort. It began in my mind with the final image. One morning I stepped out of the shower and had the gruesome image of a small girl preserved, doll-like, in the corner of a darkened basement. I liked the creepiness of it, and I started thinking of who this girl was and how she ended up this way. It didn't seem to me to be the result of violence. Rather it was a love for this child that had led someone to painstakingly preserve her. Immediately I considered a parent as the likely culprit; specifically a father who was a taxidermist by trade.

Growing up in the rural south, I had been exposed to preserved hunting trophies all my life. I always found them to be somewhat unsettling, but fascinating at the same time. These

were once living creatures, now frozen in time and relegated to home décor. I always found it more than a little morbid, and perhaps that is the subconscious seed of the story.

So, with two characters and a final image I began to write. The first draft was for the experimental exercise I was assigned in class. It came from the book *Crafting Short Screenplays that Connect* by Claudia Hunter Johnson, chapter 6, The Decision Screenplay. The decision I wanted to explore was Shadrach's decision to taxidermy his daughter. In its earliest conception the script was very short, only five pages or so. Shadrach and Lily never left the confines of the house and surrounding yard, and Lily's interaction with the world was much more limited. However, something there hooked me and I was unwilling to set it aside. I really wanted to make this film.

Through the rest of the semester I worked on the script, taking critiques from the other members of my class. Slowly the script expanded a bit, showing Lily's and Shadrach's lives outside of their home. The addition of the graveyard/church scene and the store scene were intended to open up their world and give Lily's growing up a bit more context. I felt it would help the story by playing on Shadrach's paranoia regarding Lily growing apart from him a bit more.

The other major plot difference expanding the script made was in the character of the mother. In the back story I had decided Lily's mother died giving birth to her. Shadrach gave over all of his affection to his little girl, and that affection grew into an over protectiveness. The trip to church gave Shadrach an opportunity to visit his wife's grave, and a chance for the audience to see Shadrach's attachment to her memory. By bringing the mother into the story as more of a presence, the bedroom scene is given more context. I felt the mother should be a character of sorts, resonating in the story as a presence. Shadrach weaves the story of her to help

himself remember, but the bedtime story is the closest Lily will ever get to her mother. It was my attempt to write the monologue as a story told by rote, possibly one told over Lily in the cradle. I believe I was at least moderately successful with this in the script.

Looking back, I believe there are elements of the script that could be stronger. There definitely could have been more conflict. I feel that Shadrach's arc is a little flat, and with some tweaking he could have had more of a journey. Specifically I believe we should have seen him go through some more reversals. He sort of holds one note, that of very over protective. Perhaps some minor plot alterations could have found him softening to the idea of allowing Lily to grow up. Maybe seeing how happy she was playing with the other children might have made him smile, but then perhaps a mean spirited kid might have pushed her down, so his protective instincts kicked in to save her. One lesson learned as a writer is definitely the importance of plenty of conflict, and adding those levels of conflict is something with which I, as a writer, still struggle.

Chapter 2: The Preproduction Process

Once I had decided to shoot the film, and I had a workable script, I began to seriously consider the pre-production aspects of the project. As stated before, I had no real intention of shooting the film when I began the first draft. In my mind I had always set the film in the rolling hills of north Alabama where I grew up. When I actually began to consider shooting the film, I had to consider locations. At the time I was working as part of the production team on the UNO Spring Film *Sunday Biscuits* directed by Mark Morris. Part of my duties had been some location scouting, so I had driven (or ridden) over much of southeast Louisiana. There were some areas, particularly north of Mandeville, I felt could work for my story. I thought perhaps I could take the crew on location for exteriors, and shoot the interiors (specifically the scenes in the basement) in the Nims Center studio. However, as I began to really consider the options, the hurdles became greater.

First, I knew from my *Sunday Biscuits* experience, it was not likely I would find a location less than half an hour's drive from New Orleans, and it would more likely be close to an hour. Secondly, I did not have any contacts in the rural community, and no firm leads on a potential location. Also, after working with the production of *Sunday Biscuits*, the true scope of actually building a reasonably realistic set hit me. Neither I nor anyone I knew really had the technical expertise or the resources to build a set I would be happy with.

It was just before the shoot of *Sunday Biscuits* that I really had the first inklings of what would become my eventual strategy. I thought of the film as being set in northern Alabama, so

why not take the production there. I knew I would be able to find all the locations that I would need in Cullman, my hometown, and the surrounding communities. They would be at most twenty minutes apart, and I would have a much easier time finding locations and convincing people to let me shoot there. There were, of course, complications with this plan, not the least of which being my crew were all UNO students and I would have to bring them up to Cullman and house them. Moving the equipment would also be a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of shooting six hours away was the preclusion of any reshoots. I did not want to bring the cast and crew back to Alabama, so I was determined to get everything I would need in the one weekend allotted for the shoot.

Despite the negative considerations, I saw many positives to taking the crew away to shoot for a weekend. First and foremost, I had a captive crew. I would have complete dedication from all members of my production team, if only because they had nothing else to do but my film. They couldn't leave early for work, or cut out early for other plans. I had them for the weekend, and they all knew that going in. Taking the shoot out of town was also a time saving strategy. There would be a total of twelve hours travel to consider; however, once we were in Cullman, we were there. As expected, I went on a scouting trip during the intersession break, and I found all of our necessary locations no more than twenty minutes apart, most much closer. This meant company moves and reshoots would be possible without necessitating an hour long drive to a location. Finally I had a great deal of help from my family. Aside from housing strangers in their home for the weekend, my mother and stepfather doubled as caterers. My father and stepmother also helped out with food, bringing and setting up lunch for the crew. Knowing I would have this sort of support helped cement the decision to take the company out of New Orleans.

Moving the shoot out of town placed one restriction on me that actually helped the shoot's efficiency. I had to minimize my crew. By that point I had decided on Pushkar Swarnananda as my director of photography. I sat down with him and discussed my concerns regarding crew size. Obviously I wanted to take enough people so we could move fast, but I also wanted to cut out any unneeded positions so I wouldn't have extra people with nothing to do. I decided to find people I felt were proactive, and who had expertise in overlapping areas. That way a PA could just as easily jump in and tweak a light, hold a boom pole, or dress the set. Pushkar felt he needed one other crew person, assistant camera. Pushkar would operate himself and do most of the gaffing. I talked to Jim Lyons about being my sound mixer. He agreed, and decided to go with a documentary style "one man band" approach by mixing on the DAT and booming the actors himself. I, of course would be willing to do whatever needed to be done, but we felt a couple of extra hands would be worthwhile. I talked to Zach Materne and Christopher Leigh who graciously joined our party.

Once I had a crew willing to travel with me, I began to consider casting. I met Stephen Thurber during *Sunday Biscuits*. He was very different from what I originally envisioned as Shadrach. In the script he is described as a hulking giant, and Stephen is far from that. However, I saw in Stephen a warmth paired with an intensity I thought would work very well for the character. During the *Sunday Biscuits* shoot I approached him about coming to Alabama for a weekend. He was very excited after my pitch and tentatively agreed before actually reading the script. With Stephen on board we had a total of seven traveling up from New Orleans to film *The Taxidermist*.

For the rest of the parts I needed to cast locally. That would lessen the passenger room needed for the trip up and reduce the number of people for whom we would need lodging. The

character of Mr. Ivey was a pretty easy call. Charlie White and his wife Cindy are advocates of independent film in north Alabama and I had worked with them before. I contacted the Whites and asked if they could come down to Cullman for a day to shoot a scene. They agreed quickly and were very supportive. The part of the shopkeeper I gave to an old friend of mine, Dillon Lee. We worked together on other projects and he has some theatrical training. I knew he would be up to the part, and casting him achieved two goals since he had a son about the right age for the shopkeeper's boy. I knew Bishop from birth, so I was confident he'd give me what I needed for his short amount of screen time.

Lily proved to be my biggest casting issue, and also my most pleasant surprise. I must reiterate I had no intention of shooting this film when I wrote it. If I had known it would see production, I am not sure I would have written it. The idea of working with a child, especially one with so much screen time, frightened me. One can tell from the script that I tried to give her as few lines as possible, but I knew that miscasting this role would be disastrous for the production. I explored a couple of avenues, but everything sort of fell through at the last minute. In early August, only two or three weeks before shooting, I went to Cullman to lock some locations and try to cast Lily, and my biggest lead at the time turned into a dead end. I had seen some photos of the child, who was a daughter of a friend and exactly the right age for the script. She was adorable, but the mother's family had some reservations. The child had been part of a protracted custody battle, and it was felt using her in a film could be construed as exploitative which might give the father new ammunition to fight for custody. I was not given all of this information until the day before I was to return to New Orleans.

I was in a bit of a panic. My sister suggested a child to whom she had taught dance, Victoria Nibblett. Victoria's mother had actually taught my sister dance when she was young,

and they were very close. Victoria also had a great deal of experience performing as she had been dancing since the age of three. The only problem I could see was her age. Victoria was about two years older than I had written the character. However, after considering that point I realized the fact she was older and still not in school actually strengthened that plot point. I called Victoria's mother after I got back to New Orleans, and we set up a schedule over the phone. My mother was making Lily's costumes, so I relayed to her the correct size information. I never actually met my Lily until the first day of shooting. It was nerve wracking, but circumstance dictated it. I was very lucky on that point. I would definitely start looking sooner and for more options if I had it to do over again.

Casting was definitely the most slipshod aspect of preproduction. I found Shadrach early and knew right away Stephen would be fun to work with. The other two speaking parts, Ivey and the shopkeeper, were friends who I had already worked with. Lily was a last minute desperation move that happened to work out. As for the local color, the children at the church were cast from the kids of people in my mother's office, and the old men were my stepfather's father and the actual owner of the store. It was a last minute, on the day decision to put them in the shot to add interest. I could have done a more thorough job searching for actors, but I was very happy with the final cast.

* * *

The scouting process was conducted over two week long visits home, one at the beginning of the summer right after the spring semester ended, and one early in August. The first was a preliminary search. I was most interested in finding a store, since I was guessing that would be the most demanding in terms of permission and shoot time. I was also thinking about

the house, and the basement. I didn't think the two would be in the same location, and was planning accordingly.

The house came easy. My stepfather is from a very small community outside of Cullman called Walter. His grandmother had lived there all of her life, and had recently passed away. Her house still belonged to the family and was kept in good repair. It appeared to be isolated, but was really only a half mile or so off the main road. It had electricity and some furnishings, running water, a working stove, but it was unoccupied. It was an ideal location. We also found the store in Walter. One of the very few business establishments in Walter, it was just down the road from the house. Once I talked to the owner, Roy Henderson, who was an old family friend of my stepfather's, I was set on it as my location. They were closed on Sundays which gave us a full day to get the store interiors without disrupting business.

I wasn't terribly concerned with finding the church – Cullman County has a huge number of churches – it was only a matter of finding the right one. The biggest concern was finding one with a cemetery nearby. By asking a few questions and making a couple of drives, I found a church that I thought was perfect. It had exactly the look I was going for, it was easily accessible, and there was a cemetery nearby. I called the pastor of the church, and asked permission to shoot there on a Saturday. He had no problem with it as long as it was all outside. I also spoke to the caretaker of the cemetery to make sure shooting there would be all right. He was a bit more wary, but when I explained it would only be a few shots and only on the edge of the grounds, he agreed.

The basement proved to be the most difficult location to find. Tornadoes are prevalent in Cullman, and most houses have some sort of basement. Growing up we had a creepy, dingy unfinished basement that was more or less the same size as the footprint of our house. As I was

writing the script I had the basement of my grandmother's old house in mind. It too was unfinished and rather spacious. Unfortunately, in the intervening years everyone had moved, and I no longer knew anyone with an unfinished basement. On my second scouting trip, Dillon Lee helped me out by reminding me of his aunt's basement. It was actually designed as a garage. It was close to standard single car width, but much longer. It attached to her driveway by two large swinging doors. All in all, it was far from perfect. It was much narrower than I would have liked, and the stairs came down into a corner. I was worried about the staging of the fall. However, time was growing short, and I knew we'd have free run of the place. I decided I could live with the compromises and we went with it. The design actually worked well for loading in and out of the set. We were able to pull right up to the doors and move large amounts of equipment in and out quickly.

As part of my second trip to Cullman, I set up an appointment with a local taxidermist. He showed me around his workshop and I watched as he worked on mounting a fish. He also helped me out by giving me a catalog of taxidermy supplies. It was from this catalog I ordered the glass eyes featured in the film. Talking to him gave me a sense of the work involved in the creation of a hunting trophy. He was very gracious in giving his time and answering my questions. I didn't use a lot of what he showed me, the drying room for instance, but it did give me a better understanding of Shadrach's trade.

* * *

Scheduling was a very important consideration. I knew that I wanted to shoot as early as possible in the fall semester since so many production classes are scheduled then. As it happened, Labor Day weekend was the first weekend of the semester, and it seemed a perfect opportunity. We planned to check out the equipment, leave on Thursday, shoot Friday,

Saturday, and Sunday, and then return on Monday. If we couldn't manage to get everything in on the weekend, we could use Monday morning to get our pickups.

I sat down with Pushkar and discussed the script breakdown. I knew I wanted a single location for the first day. We also had the complication of Victoria being in school. The earliest she could be there was about 1:00 Friday afternoon. We wanted to get the interior scenes of the house done that day. I asked Charlie White if he could come down that day. We decided to dress the sets in the morning, shoot every shot without Lily first, shoot Ivey's shots with Lily, and then get the last couple of scenes. It was an ambitious day, but it was to set the mood for the weekend. The next day, Saturday, we planned to shoot the scenes outside the church in the morning, breaking for lunch and a company move to the basement for the rest of the day. It was our intention to get all of the basement scenes shot in that day. Sunday was reserved for the store since it was closed for business. I was planning on shooting the Steadicam work for the exterior shots at the house, so I planned for Pushkar and most of the crew to go to the store in the morning to set lights and dress whatever needed dressing, and I would take a couple of people to the house down the road to shoot Lily playing outside. Hopefully we'd be done with the exterior work at about the same time they got set for the store interiors. If all went according to plan, we'd be done with the shoot Sunday night.

The next major discussion I had with Pushkar was about film stock choices. As this was a bit of an experiment for me I decided to go with multiple stocks. One reason was I wanted distinct looks for different places, but I didn't want anything too radical such as bleach bypass. Secondly, as a filmmaker, I wanted to play with different speeds and emulsion types. We decided on Kodak's Vision 320T as our all-around stock. It has a somewhat pastel character to its color representation which achieved the look I wanted for the outside world. I wanted the

basement to be a bit more ominous, so we went with Vision 200T which has a sharper, less pastel color representation. Finally for exteriors I wanted vibrant colors and low grain so we went with Kodak's EXR 50D. I was very happy with all the stocks and I think they did lend different looks to different locations, however, juggling that many stocks on so short a shoot did cost us some time. If I were to do it over again I would consider going with two stocks, one of the Vision stocks and the EXR, and separate only by interiors and exteriors. I think the different look I wanted to achieve in the basement could have been done strictly through exposure.

Chapter 3: Production

The actual trip up to Cullman was fairly uneventful. We loaded an SUV and a hatchback with our equipment and headed out on Thursday afternoon. Similar to our crewing philosophy, we tried to minimize the equipment we brought as well. Pushkar and I knew we'd be using practical locations with standard power restrictions, so we only brought two 1K fresnels and a tweenie kit for our hard lights. We also brought a Tota kit and one Lowell soft light. Lastly, we brought a set of the Lowell location lights to use as nook lights and to punch up practicals. We kept our grip package small, bringing a few C-stands and a grip kit of flags and scrims.

Our single largest piece of grip equipment was the Steadicam. I knew early on I wanted to use the Steadicam for Lily's scenes. I knew I lacked the expertise to get really fluid Steadicam shots, but my point was a free-floating look. I thought about handheld, but I was afraid it would be a bit too much. The other idea was the Steadicam could double for a dolly in the final shot of the film, the reveal of Lily in the basement. By bringing the Steadicam we didn't have to bring a dolly which would have taken more room.

Pushkar decided on the Arri SR-II as our camera because he personally preferred working with it. My first thought was to take the CP 16 that had been refitted for Super 16, but at the time we had only just gotten back and there was no time to run tests. It was deemed too dangerous to use without the tests, so the decision was made to shoot regular 16 and matte the image in post to 1:1.85 aspect ratio. I knew I wanted to shoot widescreen. I find it to be much more aesthetically pleasing and it opens more compositional opportunities than a standard 1:1.33

aspect ratio. With a wider screen space you can increase the dynamics of tension within the frame. The Arri has guidelines in the viewfinder for 1:1.85 compositions, so we used those as marks, and taped it off on our video tap monitor. All in all it worked well. We had a pretty good idea of what it was going to look like after adding the matte, but still had the ability to adjust composition slightly up and down in post if the need arose.

Our sound package was pretty slim. Jim Lyons wanted to run the show himself so he carried the DAT over his shoulder and used the boom mic himself. We brought one of the AT kits as our primary microphone. We had a couple of lavalier mics as back ups, but I do not believe they were ever used. This arrangement worked fine for this shoot, but I think if there had been more to this script, any more characters or setups, it would have been beneficial to have a full sound crew. I believe I made the right choice for this particular project, and all in all I was very happy with the sound captured on location.

With that and the rest of the incidental equipment such as stingers, sandbags, and the like, the vehicles were packed to the gills. Unfortunately, Christopher Leigh had a class conflict Thursday afternoon and agreed to drive up to meet us on Friday morning. One more vehicle on the day we left could have really eased things up. Regardless of the tight quarters, everyone seemed to have a good time on the road trip. I drove the Chevy blazer that carried the bulk of the equipment. I had room for one passenger so I carried Stephen Thurber. That way I was able to talk to my actor about the script and his character, and to generally bond with my lead. Zach Materne drove his Volkswagon hatchback and carried the rest of the crew. We arrived in Cullman late Thursday, and went to bed early to prepare for the weekend to come.

* * *

FRIDAY

Friday had a relaxed pace to start. We headed out to the location at around 9:00 that morning. We knew Victoria would not be arriving until 2:00, but there was a bit of set dressing to be done at the house. Upon arriving the crew got to work immediately. We determined the order of shots for the day, decided what would be in view, and decorated the walls accordingly. Charlie White, my Mr. Ivey, arrived late in the morning. We had decided to shoot his scene with Shadrach first. We had several shots where we couldn't see Lily, so we did those first. About the time we wrapped those shots Victoria arrived. We broke for lunch, and began setting up for Lily's shots in the living room. I went to meet my actress for the first time.

She was a little shy at first. I introduced myself and took her around to meet the crew. We got her to try on all of her costumes. Fortunately they all fit. Once we had her in her costume for the day, I got her together with Stephen so they could develop a bond. She warmed up very quickly to him and all the rest of the crew. I cannot begin to express how amazing the crew was with Victoria. They treated her like a star, and that really helped her confidence level. She was a marvelous natural talent, but the people around her really helped her to shine.

Soon we were ready for Lily's shots in the living room. The first was from the last position we had shot Shadrach and Ivey's exchange, so it was ready almost immediately. It took some time to set up the shot of Shadrach's entrance, and even more time to set up and block the rack focus shot of Lily through the window. For that we had to match exposure with the sunny exterior to the light on Charlie's face. We were limited to the 1K lights we had brought. In the end, we had the lighting instrument just out of frame and pounding Charlie's face. Upon close inspection it is apparent that Charlie's complexion is very red from the heat. We managed to take some of it out in the color timing, but we could not get all of it.

By the time we got done with our first scene it was already getting late. We were losing light and we still had two scenes to go. One was the breakfast scene, which I was hoping to shoot late in the afternoon, and the other was the bedroom scene which I planned to shoot after dark. By the time we got to the breakfast scene it was already dark, so we had to fake morning through lighting. It took time to get that looking right, so we were shooting breakfast at about 7:00 at night. By avoiding windows in the frame and cutting in to the table quickly we managed to fake it.

The last scene of the day highlighted my greatest mistakes. First, I confused Stephen when we were discussing the schedule. He had studied the wrong scene and was not prepared for the bedroom scene. Unfortunately, that was by far his wordiest scene. He studied in his down time, but really didn't have enough time to get it cold. My second mistake was over estimating what we could accomplish in what was essentially a half day. I'm not sure where I could have found the time to get the bedroom scene, but we probably should have called it a day after the breakfast scene. I considered that, and discussed it with my crew and my actors. They felt we should press on, so we did.

Victoria proved to be a real trooper, staying up well past her bed time and giving her all despite exhaustion. She barely complained the whole night. My final major mistake came in my directing of the scene. Because Stephen was not comfortable with the lines on a take or two we burned a lot of film. I had established a 5:1 ratio for myself, so there was no way we could continue this way. I made a decision to feed Victoria's lines to her one at a time and have her deliver them back to me. I should have done something else, given her cues or read Shadrach's lines off camera. Her performance in that scene was visibly stiff, and as soon as it went back to an interactive dynamic, the energy suddenly returned. By the time we got around to Stephen's

angle, he had his lines well enough to do the scene. After his angle and the lamp insert we wrapped for the night.

We sent Victoria home as soon as we could, but it was much later than I would have liked, sometime around 11:00. We began to load up, when I realized the Blazer's battery was dead. The vehicle had been thoroughly checked before we left, but apparently the battery had registered its last OK just before croaking. We were stuck 20 miles from town with no jumper cables. I went up to the 24 hour Wal-Mart and bought cables, but that was a forty minute trek there and back. I left the crew to finish loading the cars. When I got back to the house it was already past midnight. We jumped the Blazer and rolled out. About five minutes into the trip, the other car pulled along side me and started yelling they had forgotten the film. About that time, blue police lights lit up behind us.

We all pulled into a parking lot. I explained the situation to the officers. It took surprisingly little talk to explain two out of state cars filled with out of towners driving like madmen in the middle of the night. I told him we were shooting a film in Walter (he asked how we'd even found Walter), and that we had forgotten the film at our location, thus the crazy antics on the highway. He laughed it off and sent us on our way. I was the only one who knew the way home and who could find the location in the dark. I told the others to drive up the highway and I'd meet them at a gas station at the edge of Cullman. Stephen and I went back to Walter to get the film, careful to leave the car running. We headed back to town and picked up the others, and we all caravanned back to my mother's house. We found dinner waiting for us, cooked pasta and spaghetti. We ate a very late supper at about 1:30 and headed for bed.

SATURDAY

Though we had a late night the day before, we had made our day, so we weren't behind schedule. We had a full day planned with a fairly early call at the church. Rousing the troops was a fairly simple matter of walking through the house and shaking everyone – one of the biggest advantages of the “weekend getaway” production model I had chosen for this film.

After a quick breakfast we headed out. I dropped off my two floaters, Zach and Christopher, at the basement location. We were planning to shoot there that afternoon, so I had them working on clearing and dressing the set. The rest of the crew I took to the Church which was some 20 minutes from the basement set in Arkadelphia, Alabama. The children arrived on schedule and we shot the ring around the rosy scene. All in all it went rather quickly, and except for one three year old actress who got camera shy before the first take, they all did a fine job. We sent the kids on their way and found a suitable location to shoot Shadrach leading Lily away a short distance down the road from the church location. As soon as we had finished that shot I sent Victoria to my mother's house. Zach and Christopher had completed their tasks and had been picked up by my stepfather. I also sent Jim home since I wouldn't need sound for the remaining shots. With my camera crew and Stephen we shot the cemetery portions of the church sequence. With that in the can we headed home.

One shot in the sequence we had forgotten was Shadrach walking up and telling Lily it was time to go. We did Stephen's angle on that in my mother's back yard. It was a low angle shot, so with trees and sky in the background it cut together fine.

We took our time for lunch. My mother had once again prepared a marvelous meal. After lunch we all rested for a half hour or so, taking naps to help counteract sleep deprivation. After the siesta we packed up and headed to the basement.

I believe it was at this time we realized the perils of too many film stocks. The EXR 50D was in one magazine. 320T from the night before was in the second magazine. We needed to get the 200T into the camera for the basement work, and we didn't have any extra cans. Pushkar managed to juggle it, and I frankly don't know how he did it. This switching would plague us for the rest of the shoot.

We were sort of forced into a short day on Saturday. Victoria had tickets to an Aaron Carter concert and she had to leave early enough to drive to Birmingham for it. We managed to get a couple of takes of her going down the stairs before it was time to cut her loose. We reversed the angle and shot Stephen's half of that conversation after she had left. We then went in to shoot what we could of Shadrach, the inserts of his work table and his reactions, when Lily wasn't in the scene. This included his turn and look as she fell and the knife dropping to the floor.

We wrapped early, I believe around 7:00, and headed to my mother's house again for dinner. She had made chili and the leftover spaghetti was reheated. That night we took stock of what we had left to do, and the final decision was made to shoot for a half day on Monday. That would cut into our return time, but seemed to be the only way to make the pages. I also realized I had not procured a live turtle for Lily to discover outside the house. I had a meeting on the minds with my crew and Stephen, and we discussed options. Someone suggested it should be something relating to her father's work. Then the idea of the glass eye came up. They were at the basement set, but since Cullman is so small, it wasn't too far out of the way to pick it up. Needless to say, we turned in for an early night.

SUNDAY

I sent some of the crew on ahead to Walter to prepare the set. I swung by the basement set and chose a large blue fish eye for its visibility, and then headed out to meet with the rest of the crew. Once in Walter we got the Steadicam set up and I sent Pushkar on to the store to ready it for the afternoon. Once the camera was set up and the Steadicam was prepped, the exterior shots were done very quickly. We headed to the store after a quick lunch.

The first thing we shot there was the exteriors of Lily and Shadrach entering. The camera was already loaded with the daylight film, so it was only a matter of putting it on sticks and rolling. We decided that day to put Roy Henderson, the store's owner, and Harold Baker, my stepfather's father, in the film. They had been hanging around and helping out a lot, and they had a great look about them. We sat them on the bench and got them to ad lib about a granddaughter. Then as Shadrach passed, they waved. It was a simple shot, but I feel really helps sell the world Lily and Shadrach inhabit.

Pushkar had a great ambient light level set inside when we arrived. The plan was to shoot the two kids playing first so we could send Bishop home, follow that with all the other shots with Lily, and third shoot the remaining shots of Shadrach and the storekeeper. The Steadicam shots with the kids were where I burned the most film. Most of the time it was operator error in catching them in frame correctly. One shot had seven takes, another had five. The most I ever took with anything else was three. Also, directing Bishop was a challenge. He was almost four at the time, and could really only do one thing at a time. We had to tell him what to do as the camera rolled. After ironing out a few bugs in the first shot, we got fairly good at the process.

Two surprisingly tricky shots were Shadrach and Lily entering and exiting the store. We had to time it just as the sun was going down so we could expose for the interior without blowing out the exterior. We actually cut it kind of close, and had to break out of the angle we were shooting to get those two. We caught the sunlight just in time, and returned to the shots at the counter.

We wrapped Lily and sent her home around 7:00. We continued for awhile longer to get the last shots of Shadrach and the shopkeeper. We wrapped somewhere around 10:00. Roy Henderson stayed with us all day. It was much later than he usually stayed out, but he said he had a great time. Sunday was our most productive day. In the final count we got more than thirty shots in the can between the two scenes.

Despite the accomplishment, there are more than a few things I wish I could have done differently. First, the store had a little of everything, including groceries. This meant a large number of coolers and freezers that we couldn't really unplug as it would ruin the stock inside. It was a noisy location. I kind of wish now I had done wild lines somewhere quieter, or scheduled some ADR. I will discuss this more fully in the post-production chapter.

My other major mistake came in blocking. I sort of mishandled my angles, and ended up establishing a very unorthodox 180° line. Though I maintained it through the scene, and it worked when Lily entered the scene, it caused some screen placement problems between Shadrach and the Shopkeeper. I believe this problem would have been avoided if more planning had gone into the blocking. I needed to establish one line, and then another instead of trying to do everything with one. It was a somewhat complicated scene, and a relatively minor problem that I was able to minimize somewhat in the edit.

MONDAY

Labor Day came and our final day of shooting was upon us. We had gotten everything except for some footage in the basement, so that was our only location for the day. Our basic plan was to shoot Lily's footage first and then send her home, and if there were any other shots we needed to get with Shadrach alone we'd grab them before we wrapped. There wasn't much to shoot, but some of the more technically challenging shots were saved for this day – Specifically, Lily's tumble down the stairs and the final shot of the film. I had decided early on that the fall down the stairs would be a trick in the editing. I had considered the construction of a stunt dummy to throw down the stairs, but I quickly realized that was far beyond my technical expertise, so I scrapped the idea. It was my intent to find a set of stairs that were simple planks with no back. That way, the camera could be placed behind the stairs to capture a piece of the action. The theory was to get several short, intense pieces of the fall and stitch them together with some cutaways of Shadrach's reaction and a continuous sound effect.

As soon as we had gotten the last couple of takes of Lily's lines we began shooting the fall. Once again Victoria was a real trooper. She was willing to do most anything we asked of her to get the shot. We started small, getting the shot of her foot slipping. Victoria simply held herself up on the hand rails of the stairs and intentionally misstepped. Next we set up a shot from the side. For this angle, Pushkar held Victoria's feet through the back of the stairs. Jim Lyons was just outside of frame on the downside of the stairs. Victoria swung her weight as hard as she could down the stairs and into Jim's arms. With Jim to catch and Pushkar anchoring her, Victoria was perfectly safe. We did a few dry runs of this one until she felt comfortable with the set up. Finally we did the reverse angle through the stairs. This was actually rather similar, except it was Jim holding her feet and she sort of fell across his back.

The final set up for the stair fall was the wide angle shot from the bottom of the stairs. For this we used the 5.9mm lens and set it up on the high hat. Jim stood behind the camera to catch Victoria, and she did a controlled fall toward the camera. We chose the super wide lens for two reasons. The first more practical issue was the confines of the set. There wasn't much room in which to set the camera and get the picture. Secondly, the short lens helped with the effect. The exaggerated space made it appear the fall was greater than it actually was. It seemed Lily fell much further and faster than she actually did. We did each of these angles for two or three takes to give some options in the edit.

Next we did the high angle shot of Shadrach cradling Lily. This was a compromise from my original conception of the shots. I had imagined a basement with more room and the stairs coming down into the middle of the room. If I could have gotten on the other side of the characters, I would have composed the shot from the ground and set Shadrach and Lily in a pose reminiscent of a classical *pieta*. As it happened, there was no room. I believe it was Pushkar who helped me decide on the high angle shot. I really liked the way it distanced the viewer from this tragic moment. It gave Shadrach a moment alone with his baby, so to speak. Right after that we shot a close up of Shadrach's face by moving the camera to the far end of the basement and shooting through the longest lens we had. The idea was to get some separation from the background by throwing it out of focus. We set it up and did a take. The power in the performance was astounding and the shot looked great. I decided to move on after the first take to conserve both film and time.

After those shots were in the can, I sent Victoria upstairs with our resident make-up artist, Karen Lee – wife of Dillon and mother of Bishop. She was finishing up her cosmetology training, and though she had no experience with film make up *per se*, she had a very good

understanding of the way make up works. She decided to use a pale foundation on Victoria to drain her color. She then added some heavy rouge to make her appear overly made up. Similarly, heavy red lip liner and mascara gave the illusion of artificial touchups. Finally she added some shading to the cheeks to give them a sunken appearance. All told it took close to an hour to get her prepped. The cast and crew ate in shifts over this time. Pushkar worked on getting the lights set for the final shot. His idea was to light Shadrach with a hard top light – his signature in the basement – and to let everything else fall into darkness. Pushkar set up a single tweenie with a snoot to illuminate Victoria’s face. It was to look like a shaft of light from outside. He gelled it with a quarter CTB to accentuate her pale complexion, and the spectral highlight in her eyes gave a sense of them being made of glass. We sat Victoria up on a shelf and gave her an eyeline. The hardest part of the shot was getting her to stare without blinking until Stephen finished his line. We did several takes because of some blinking and also because of some technical problems with the stedi-cam. In the final take, Dillon actually stood across from Victoria to give her a place to look. They had a staring contest of sorts and she managed to hold her gaze until the end of the line. That is the take we ended up using.

After that we cleaned Victoria up and sent her home. We had a couple of quick inserts to get in the basement, and very soon we wrapped as well. By 5:00 we were done shooting and had the basement back in order. We went back to my mother’s house to have something to eat and pack up for the trip back to New Orleans. We started the drive later than I would have liked, but other than that it was an uneventful ride back. We finally got back sometime around 3:00 am. We were tired but in very good spirits.

Chapter 4: Preparations For Post-Production

I made the decision to edit the film on my own personal computer. I invested in a copy of Avid Xpress DV over the summer. I had tried to cut a short video project with the software and it became abundantly clear I needed a more powerful machine. I decided to upgrade what I had rather than buy an entire new system. I learned a great deal about computers through this, but I ended up essentially buying a new computer by the end. I probably would have done better by selling the system I had and purchasing a new one from Avid's list of supported systems. Looking back, I'm not sure which I would do if I had it to do over again. A prepackaged system would have been fewer headaches, but I would not know as much about my computer as I do had I gone that route.

I had almost the fastest processor my current motherboard could support so I decided I would need to do a full upgrade. I decided to go with a dual processor system since Avid supported multi-processor operation and there would be a substantial improvement for the type of operations I would be using the machine for. I chose AMD processors because they received good reviews and were much less expensive than comparable Intel processors. I also chose registered RAM over standard RAM based on some reviews and forum posts I read. Registered RAM was supposedly more stable and better for high end applications.

I stand by the decision to go with the AMD chips. They have been very stable and have given me no problems. Avid is written around the Intel architecture, and if money were less of a concern I would consider using Pentium chips. Particularly, now that they have introduced their

Hyperthreading technology, Intel does bring some more to the table. However, I think AMD does offer a substantial value for the price.

However I would not buy registered RAM for the system if I had it to do over again. It is approximately twice the cost of non-registered RAM and the two are incompatible. You cannot put both into the same system. So, to add more RAM to a system with registered RAM, you must continue buying the expensive option. Further research has shown me regular RAM to be comparable to registered. Registered RAM is really best for large server machines that must keep a network up and running. For an average desktop workstation it is overkill.

The main thing I learned from upgrading my machine was the unexpected cascading effect upgrading introduces. Upgrading one component or group of components exposes a weakness in one of the other parts in a system. The dual processors, for instance, ran hotter than my old set up had and my old case had inadequate ventilation. Thus, I had to spend another eighty dollars on a case designed for better airflow. This new case had many more fans than my old case, so I had to invest in a higher wattage power supply. That cost another sixty dollars. My old video card didn't support video overlay at a high enough resolution, so I had to spend another two hundred on a video card. Tailoring a computer to your needs is rewarding, but can become expensive.

There were also other upgrades I was not counting on. For instance, Avid was not exporting my footage. I constantly received a Buffer underrun error. I talked to Robert Racine about the issue, and it was his suggestion I upgrade to Xpress DV version 3.5. This meant an operating system upgrade, as 3.5 would not run on Windows 2000, my current OS. I spent one hundred dollars on the educational version of Windows XP Pro. After formatting my hard drive and installing XP, I realized I could not find my RAID array. This high speed arrangement of

hard disks was where I backed up my media. I called the manufacturer, and as it turned out the card I had wasn't supported under Windows XP. They suggested buying a newer model card, but I would not be able to retain the information on the current array.

I opted to buy a new, large capacity hard disk. I reinstalled Windows 2000, and formatted the new disk. After reestablishing the RAID, I copied that data to the new hard disk. Then, I formatted my system drive for the third time and reinstalled Windows XP. XP was able to read the single large drive, and I had my data restored.

I did manage to sell a good deal of my old parts as I made the upgrades. It helped to offset some of the costs. Either way, I think I would have been better off selling my old machine and buying a new one, either prepackaged or custom built. If I were to be in a similar situation again, I would certainly opt to buy a new system as a whole rather than getting stuck in a cycle of upgrades. If I had planned on buying a new system, I would have known my costs much better from the start. As it stands, I really am not sure how much my system cost me. My best estimate is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1500 - \$1700 dollars. That comes very close to what I would have paid for a new computer, and it wouldn't have taken me months to get it together.

Chapter 5: Beginning Post-Production – The Picture Edit

I sent the film to Summit Film Labs for processing and transfer. My main reason for this was a promotion they were running. They offered double student discounts for first time users of their lab. This turned out to be an excellent choice. They were very responsive and easy to contact. They did very good work, and charged substantially less than other labs were quoting for the same work. I never really considered a supervised transfer due to monetary constraints, but Pushkar and I did have a conference call with the colorist to talk about exposure levels. All in all he did a good job with what we told him. A supervised transfer would have been better, but what small problems I had with the timing were easily corrected in post-production

After a week or so of nail biting, the transferred footage arrived. I immediately set up a monitor to view it. I watched as my images played out, and I was delighted to see how well everything turned out. Of all the shots in the film I only had one disappointment. The close up of Shadrach cradling Lily was out of focus. It wasn't completely blown, but it was noticeably soft. I was really irritated at myself for not doing a second take for safety, but we had been running short on film and we thought it was technically fine on the day. I took it as an object lesson and decided to cut around that shot.

The next step was syncing picture and audio. With this in mind I had purchased an audio card for my computer that allowed a direct digital input. This let me record off of the DAT in a pure digital environment. By keeping it a digital stream, there was no added noise in the

transfer. Considering the audio card with the S/PDIF input was in the neighborhood of one hundred dollars, I think it was definitely a worthwhile investment.

My sound mixer had done a very good job of recording and slating so the syncing process was uneventful. This is by far my least favorite stage in the filmmaking process. It is arduous and long. When I shoot double system in the future, I intend to record with some sort of timecode reference and a timecode slate. If the picture is being recorded on video, then it is my intention to link all of the timecode signals so the audio, video, and slate all match. That will make syncing almost automatic in Avid which will greatly streamline this stage of the production.

* * *

As I had planned the shots from the start, the first pass at editing was not surprising. I more or less put the shots together the way I had planned to put them together, and everything seemed to work. There were no glaring errors to start. One mistake I made in my first pass was not overlapping my dialog. A line would end and I would cut. It made the dialog scenes very choppy. This was an early critique, and thanks to digital editing, it was a quick fix.

I also found a couple of 180 anomalies. First in the church scene Shadrach jumps the 180 when he crosses into his own POV. The camera is more or less directly on a central axis, so the error is not egregious. I decided it was better to live with it, than try to flip shots. I tried flipping some, but it ended up drawing attention to itself. All in all the error was much less distracting.

The other error I mentioned before. In the blocking of the store scene I did not fully account for the shift in axis when Lily enters the scene. As it was shot, the 180 degree line isn't actually broken, but it is awkward for the dialog between Shadrach and the Storekeeper. Instead of running through the two characters, the line runs perpendicular to their axis. The result is they

end up sharing the same screen space. Fortunately, the eyelines work, so once again, the error is minimized. I ended up zooming in on Steven a bit. This served to minimize Dillon's shoulder in the frame, which further diminished the 180 error.

* * *

The process of editing is, by and large, a process of discovery. In many ways, the one-man-band method of filmmaking so prevalent in film school is detrimental to the process of making the best film possible. When planning revolves around the most efficient shoot possible, it is very easy to lose sight of looking for the most effective juxtaposition of sounds and images. I had determined the shots and basic edits early in the preproduction phase. This was as much due to financial constraints as anything else – I needed to know what I wanted to shoot so I could get the most usable footage with the least film exposed. I set myself a very tight 5:1 shooting ratio. It helped me plan well and helped the budget, but hurt me in post. There really weren't many options on how to cut the film. Also, having the traditional position of an objective editor might have led to some fresh ideas in the edit. I had made my editing decisions months before I actually finished cutting the film, and it was very hard to change those ideas.

Having critical feedback from faculty members, particularly Mari Kornhauser, helped me break through some blocks I had put up. Mari's advice was focused on the scene between Shadrach and Ivey. She found the scene to be a bit ponderous, and it was her suggestion to cut it to the bone. I managed to cut four or five lines from that scene and it played much stronger for it. Her second major critique regarded the penultimate scene. After Lily fell down the stairs, I had cut to the high angle shot of Shadrach cradling her body, and let the scene play to the end. Mari found this awkward and suggested I experiment. Her suggestion was jump cutting through the action to punch up the moment. I considered this, but felt it was the wrong feel and tone for

the film. All in all the film had such a languid pace and traditional style it seemed to me the jump cuts would be jarring and outside the established aesthetic of the film. I decided to try dissolves through the action. This served to shorten the length of the shot significantly while keeping with the feel of the rest of the film. While playing with this, I introduced a layering effect at the end, so Shadrach was superimposed on himself. I found this very effective for getting into the subjective headspace of Shadrach and also muddying the actual time he is in the position. Adding this nontraditional moment also had an added benefit. The soft focus close-up of Shadrach with Lily suddenly became usable. The soft nature of the image fit within the aesthetic of the moment, and I was able to save a performance I dearly regretted losing in the first place. I treated the shot with the “Radial Blur” filter in Avid, centering the blur on Shadrach’s face and using a relatively large diameter. This blurred the edges of the frame more than the center of the filter. The subtle effect helped to focus attention to Shadrach’s face, and further justify the softness of the image. The final effect worked very well in my opinion, and the process made me realize the importance of considering other options in the post-production phase.

* * *

My other major discoveries in the post-production process had to do with writing. It became clear to me while working with the footage that there could have been more drama in the film. The major lacking factor was conflict – there should have been more of it in more variations. Dramatic conflict is an aspect of storytelling I still have trouble executing. I definitely need to work harder to introduce more opposing points of view and opposed characters in my scripts. A few classes I have taken here have stressed this aspect of the story, but for some reason it never seems to take hold with me. I guess part of this is how much the idea is beaten to

death from the early high school on. Every literature class discusses conflict, to the point that the Big Three – man vs. man, man vs. nature, and man vs. himself – all sort of lose some of their punch. I had conflict explained to me badly so many times I now have a hard time considering it when I write. Recently, however, I feel I have had a breakthrough. After some outside reading, and some critique of my work, I am beginning to see this fundamental flaw in my writing, as well as noticing how elegantly good filmmaking and drama introduce conflict into a story. For me, conflict is simultaneously the simplest and most elusive element of storytelling.

Chapter 6: Finishing Post-Production – Sound And Music

Once I had the picture locked, I turned my attention to some of the sound issues.

Looking back at the process, I realize even after bolstering the soundtrack, it is still rather thin.

The audio post production class I am taking this semester (DRCM 4567) has gone a long way already in teaching me how to better analyze a soundtrack. I think if I had it to do over again, I would do a much better job.

Regardless, by working with the location sound, and adding more elements to it, I was able to fix some problems inherent in the original recordings. In fact, I did not have to rerecord anything from the production track. I am not completely happy with the store scene. As mentioned before, there were refrigeration units present that we were unable to shut down. As a result, the production track was very noisy. I was able to reduce the worst of it by using an equalizer plug in, and by layering a constant room tone under it all, it is at least somewhat unified. I also added the sound of the distant train which helped unify the space and time of the film somewhat. I would, however, consider ADR for that scene if I had the project to do over again.

My other major problem with the sound came in the bedroom scene. Due to the tightness of the set, we got some heavy camera noise on the production track. Jim Lyons did take the two actors aside the next day and recorded them playing the scene in a side room, but it was obvious to me the rerecorded scene lacked the emotional intensity of the original. I used another equalizer which minimized the camera noise, and by adding the rhythmic sound of crickets to the

background, the camera noise was almost entirely masked. My other major problem with the scene came from the directing mistake I had made on the day. By feeding Victoria her lines one by one, she had given her most forced performance by far. It was really amazing to see the difference as she moved through the scene – in a few takes we started with the method outlined earlier, but as soon as Stephen was comfortable with his lines, he started saying them. The difference in her performance was astounding. I began to look to Victoria’s performance from Stephen’s angle and realized it was much stronger on the whole than her performance when the camera was on her. I began to experiment with syncing audio from these off angle takes to Victoria’s lip movements. Much of the audio worked fine. It had been my writing strategy with Lily to keep her lines as short and sparse as possible. Having these short lines was a real blessing when I began stitching audio together.

My one real challenge with this was the line “Tell me about her, Daddy.” On her off angle, Victoria switched it to “Daddy, tell me about her.” I started out by recutting the line to the original word order, but the problem became the unnatural cadence imparted by this. Because I was finishing the sentence with a word that actually started, her emphasis was too strong on the final word. It took some thought and work, but my final solution was dropping the level on the first syllable of “Daddy,” and adding the sound of an owl over it. By this combination of masking and lowering of the signal, the line played as if she had swallowed the word a bit. It didn’t really affect intelligibility, but made the cadence sound much more natural. I also went back in the timeline and layered the owl hoot in quietly earlier. This introduced the element, so it didn’t draw so much attention to itself. I was very pleased with the way this moment turned out.

My major sound effects creation challenge was the tumble down the stairs. I needed to get a thumping sound that had some weight, but also some arrhythmic pattern to the thumps. I brought some recording equipment home with me when I came for a visit late in the fall. By using the same microphone type and returning to the same basement location, I was able to get an ambience behind the thumps that was very similar in character to what was recorded on the day. After talking to several people about possible sound sources, my stepmother suggested a sack of potatoes. It was a perfect idea.

I went to the grocery store and picked up a bag of large baking potatoes. I also bought a bunch of celery. I put several of the potatoes into a pillow case and headed over to the basement with my sister, Catherine, as an assistant. Catherine took the sack up the stairs and tossed them down so the sack rolled down the steps thumping on one after another. We did three or four takes to give some variations for editing. While there I also had Catherine break two or three stalks of celery at a time to get a wet crunch for Lily's neck breaking at the end of the fall. Finally I had Catherine go upstairs and, after getting permission from Dillon's aunt, she ran back and forth over the basement. This I used to represent Lily's footfalls before she entered the basement scenes.

I really wish I that I had been trained in sound design more fully before this film. I realize now how much I limited myself by focusing on concrete sound elements. Every sound effect I added was very much motivated by the environment, and I missed an opportunity to be more expressive with the soundtrack. With more planning for the sound design from the start of pre-production, it would have been possible to weave sound elements and motifs through the film, further unifying and enriching the world of the film. Sound design should be taken into account from the beginning, and not tacked on as an afterthought. Though I wanted to make the

soundtrack more than simply a cleaned up presentation of the production audio, by waiting until the end to consider the sound design, I had effectively locked myself out of considering much of anything other than what was obvious in the production sound. If I had thought my way through the sound design from the beginning of pre-production, I may have come up with ideas for really interesting sound choices completely separated from the reality of the production.

If I had the opportunity to try the sound design again, I think I might think in terms of auditory motifs. Maybe natural/animal sounds to represent Lily. That could be contrasted with colder, more mechanical sounds representing Shadrach. By carefully mapping the emotional arcs and dominance of the characters through the film, I think the sound design would weave the character's sounds in a manner complementary to the emotional content of the film. These elements would greatly strengthen the impact of the film.

* * *

The last major element to add to the film was the music score. I was pretty sure I wanted to have music in the film, but I didn't have any real solid concept of the sound I was after. I felt like bluegrass strings would be a good fit, but outside of that I was open to suggestion. Around Christmas break I started to ask around in an attempt to find a suitable musician to score the film. I was expecting to spend some money for it, and was willing to spend up to \$1000 to have the music composed and recorded.

On my trip home over the holidays I shared with my family the ideas I had for a score. Once again the small town connections came through for me. My stepfather's cousin owns a recording studio in town, and has a small bluegrass ensemble he plays with from time to time. I approached him with the idea of scoring the film, and he was very excited about it. I was out of town for a good deal of the process, and it was good to have Dillon present in town to do some of

the work for me. We had discussed the feel of the music I was after, and I was very confident he understood what the film needed. In a preliminary meeting, Dillon took a cut of the film into the studio and sat down with Charles Baker, the owner, and his friend Chuck Carpenter. They watched the film, and Dillon discussed the mood of the music we wanted. After that, they sat down with a guitar and a banjo and sort of jammed along with the film. They recorded this little jam session, and Dillon sent it to me on CD.

I was thrilled with the rough audio. I went into the audio file and cut it into sections. I dropped it into the timeline in Avid just to see how it played. I could not have been more thrilled with it as a first step. I printed the cut with the music out for the next time I headed home. With that in hand, I sat down with Charles and showed him how it played. With some music to use as an example, I was able to be more specific with my requests. He took some notes, and I sat down with him and we set up a recording session. Chuck came in to play the instruments, and Charles worked as engineer. They used a variety of instruments, but the main voices were banjo and mandolin.

By this time I had a final picture cut, and I brought a copy with me. Charles played it during the recording to use as a reference. It wasn't the most scientific method of scoring, but it seemed to work fine. Unfortunately I had to leave town before the end of the session, and I didn't have the complete score. I left it in Charles Baker's hands and headed home. I set up an online storage account, and gave the username and password to Charles. Once he finished the recording and mix process, he uploaded the files to the server, and I downloaded them from the site. That way I had the pure digital audio without ever taking it through an analog conversion.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect to this part of the production was the fact Charles didn't charge me a dime for his services. He did it because he wanted to score a film. I ended up with

original music that fits the film better than anything I could have found, and I didn't have to pay for it.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The process of creating *The Taxidermist* was a very positive experience for me. Despite some setbacks with my computer upgrades, most elements of the production went very smoothly. One truth about filmmaking is the film you see when you are done is not a reflection of the filmmaker you are, but a reflection of the filmmaker you were. Filmmaking is inherently a learning process. Making it through a production takes perseverance and problem solving, and the lessons learned through the mistakes made are taken with you and applied to future projects. Starting with the script which came to life as a workshop exercise, all the way through getting the score completed on a shoestring budget, *The Taxidermist* was a constant learning experience.

Probably the best lesson learned – the one I hope to take with me as I continue growing as an artist – was using what you have at your disposal to its most effective ends. By taking stock of what I had access to, and being willing to take some risks with the production, I created a film for very little money outside of the cost of raw production materials like film stock and lab charges. By shooting in my hometown, I had a support network that helped immeasurably, not only with production and transportation, but also with catering, craft services, and lodging. In the end, I used the connections I had in my town to get a good deal of my film made for free. Almost anyone who is interested in making an independent film can save money in this manner. By asking around and thinking the production through, one can find a great deal of in-kind help. Find local musicians looking for exposure who might be interested in recording a score. Take time to cook easily stored and transported food and literally hundreds of dollars can be saved on

the average food budget. With these and other similar ideas it is possible to get the most production value for the budget of the film.

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Appendix A
***The Taxidermist* Shooting Script**

EXT. CABIN - DAY

A small whitewashed frame house sits just in the edge of the woods. It is in good repair, but obviously old. In front of the house, beside the drive, is a hand-lettered sign nailed to a fence post. It reads "TAXIDERMIST" in red block print lettering.

LILY, a five year old girl with flowing blond hair, bursts out of the front door and onto the porch. She wears a simple white sundress of rough woven cloth. She is bare foot and runs about the yard with the wild abandon of a wood sprite.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

A hand picks up a scalpel. The blade moves across the frame to the furry form of a raccoon. The knife deftly cuts into the animal's pelt.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Lily gathers dandelions from the open clearing beside the house.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

The hand searches through a small box of glass eyes looking for a match. A yellow one is pulled out and moved to the raccoon.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Lily places on her head the crown of dandelions she has just completed. A truck pulls up and she looks to see who it is.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

The hands are still working when a slamming door upstairs brings them to a halt. There is a light, quick set of footsteps heard overhead. The basement door opens, and Lily runs down the stairs.

LILY

Daddy?

She nears the bottom.

For the first time SHADRACH McNULTY steps into the light. He is an imposing figure, a bit over six feet tall, with nearly three hundred pounds of muscle. His black hair is lank and thinning, and very unkempt. He is wearing overalls, black work boots, and a cotton, button up work shirt. He moves slowly, and purposefully as if to avoid accidentally breaking something.

SHADRACH

Lilly, I told you there are lots of dangerous things here. Stay upstairs.

LILY

I know Daddy, but Mr. Ivey is here.

SHADRACH

Thank you, sugarplum. Now run upstairs and tell Mr. Ivey I'm on my way.

INT. CABIN - DAY

Mr. IVEY waits in the main room of the cabin, near the front door. He is a late middle-aged man of the land. His face is tanned, and wrinkled. He wears jeans and boots with a light flannel shirt.

Shadrach walks through the basement door carrying a large mouthed bass mounted on a wooden plaque. Lily runs past her father to play outside.

IVEY

Boy Shad, you out done yourself. That's a mighty fine trophy.

SHADRACH

Thank you, sir. It were a mighty fine catch.

IVEY

Well, you sure made it beautiful.

SHADRACH

It's God makes animals beautiful,
Mr. Ivey. I just keep them that
way.

IVEY

Here you go, Shad.

He hands Shadrach a handful of bills. Shadrach pockets the
money without counting it.

SHADRACH

Thank you kindly, Mr. Ivey.

Shadrach's eyes drift to the window where Lily is visible
outside. Ivey follows his gaze.

IVEY

Shadrach, don't you think Lily
ought to be with more children her
age?

SHADRACH

I don't reckon so. I never played
with other children - don't see
why Lily ought to neither.

IVEY

Kids need to be with other kids,
Shad. It's part of growing up.

SHADRACH

Lily's happy here with me. I want
her to be happy.

IVEY

I know that Shad, but you need-

SHADRACH

-I don't reckon it's none of your
business what she needs. She's my
daughter - mine! - and I'm keeping
her here.

IVEY

(sighing)

Fine Shad, whatever you say. Just think about it. I'll be seeing you.

He turns and leaves. Shadrach returns to work.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

The Kitchen is illuminated by sunlight slanting through the window. Shadrach dishes up a simple breakfast of biscuits, fried sausage patties, and eggs. Lily sits at the kitchen table. She still wears the dandelion crown. Shadrach brings her plate.

SHADRACH

Here you are, sweet pea.

LILY

Thank you, Daddy.

He brings his own plate to the table. Shadrach finally gets a small jar of honey, and places it on the table between them.

SHADRACH

I bought this for your biscuits.

LILY

Thank you, Daddy.

He begins to spoon a bit onto Lily's biscuit. Lily touches his hand at the jar.

LILY (CONT'D)

I can do it.

She takes the spoon.

SHADRACH

Just one spoonful.

LILY

I know, Daddy.

She deftly spoons a dollop of honey onto the biscuit. She returns the spoon and Shadrach sits back, smiling.

SHADRACH

That's the prettiest hat I think I
ever seen.

Lily smiles.

LILY

I made it.

SHADRACH

You're such a smart girl, Lily.
So clever.

Shadrach smiles, and reaches out, gently pushing back
Lily's golden curls.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - DAY

Shadrach stands before a small grave marker in the
cemetery. He wears his Sunday Best, a classic cut, well-
worn, dark suit and a striped tie.

He places a lily on the grave.

Shadrach looks up and sees Lily playing a game with a large
group of church children - Ring Around the Roses is
appropriate.

Shadrach walks over to the group, towering over the
children.

SHADRACH

It's time to go, Lily.

LILY

But Daddy -

SHADRACH

- Now.

LILY

Yes, sir.

He leads her off. She looks back towards the children.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Lily is climbing into bed. Shadrach sits down beside her
to tuck her in.

LILY

Daddy?

SHADRACH

Yes, Dumpling?

LILY

Why can't I go to school?

SHADRACH

Because I need you to be safe,
Lily. I can't protect you if you
ain't at home.

LILY

But the other kids from church are
going.

SHADRACH

The other kids ain't special like
you, sweetness. They ain't as
beautiful and smart.

Shadrach tucks Lily in for the night. He gently sweeps
back her curls.

SHADRACH (CONT'D)

You know Lily, you look more like
your Mamma every day.

LILY

Tell me about her, Daddy.

The story has been told and retold so many times, the words
have become a liturgy.

SHADRACH

Your mamma was the kindest, most
wonderful woman that ever walked.
She was so wonderful, in fact,
that God took her back to heaven
to live with the angels. But God
gives when he takes, and he gave
me you. I know your mamma, and
she wouldn't leave her baby. You
can bet she's watching over you.

LILY
Does Mamma miss me?

SHADRACH
I know she does.

LILY
I miss her.

SHADRACH
Me too, sugarplum, But I have you
now, and you have me.

Shadrach kisses her forehead.

SHADRACH (CONT'D)
Good night.

He blows out the oil lamp now on the night stand.

EXT. STREET - DAY

A battered pickup stops by the curb along a block of old fashioned storefronts. Shadrach gets out of the cab and lifts Lily from her perch in the bed.

SHADRACH
Thanks Jimmy, I'll meet you here
in a couple of hours.

The truck drives off.

Shadrach and Lily walk down the sidewalk through a quaint southern town. They walk up to the door of a general store.

INT. STORE - DAY

The shelves are full of tools and hardware. One section has hunting and fishing gear. The SHOPKEEPER stands behind the counter at the till. Shadrach walks to the counter. Lily scampers off down an aisle to find what treasures she can.

SHOPKEEPER
Morning Shad. You doing all
right?

SHADRACH

I reckon so. My order come in?

SHOPKEEPER

Sure did. Got it right here.

He pulls out a box.

SHOPKEEPER (CONT'D)

Total comes to fifty-one ninety seven.

Shadrach examines his order of taxidermy supplies and pulls a wad of money from his pocket. He counts the bills out and gives the money to the Shopkeeper. Meanwhile Lily continues her exploration of the store.

As she rounds the end of a shelf unit, she comes face to face with the shopkeeper's young BOY. He's a little bit younger than Lily with curly blond hair. He smiles. Lily returns the smile.

The boy darts off down an aisle. Lily gives chase.

SHADRACH

Thanks for the order.

SHOPKEEPER

This reminds me, Shad, I bagged a pheasant yesterday. Can I bring it by latter?

SHADRACH

Yes sir, That'd be just fine.

As the adults continue their conversation, the children continue their game. They dash about the store, rounding aisle end-caps in an impromptu game of hide and seek.

SHOPKEEPER

It really is a beauty. You're the best in the county. You know, I swear I seen some of your trophies move.

Shad smiles.

SHADRACH

I aim to keep them close to the way God made them. The Lord gives life and takes it, but I hope to halt it there.

SHOPKEEPER

That you do, Shad.

Suddenly the boy runs out looking over his shoulder back at Lily, and runs headlong into Shad's leg. He looks up, scared of the imposing figure towering above him.

SHOPKEEPER (cont'd)

Ash! Get back here. What have I told you about running around the store.

Ash walks to his father chastened.

SHOPKEEPER (cont'd)

I'm sorry Shad.

SHADRACH

It's all right. They was just being kids.

Lily peaks out from around a shelf, an impish grin on her face.

Shadrach sees how happy she is and beams.

SHOPKEEPER

(seeing Lily)

My word, that can't be little Lily. She's growing like a weed. I believe I have something back here for you, sugar.

He pulls out a Dum Dums lollipop

SHOPKEEPER (CONT'D)

You like cherry?

Lily goes to the counter. Shadrach watches intently.

LILY

Yes sir. Thank you.

SHOPKEEPER

You're welcome.

He hands her the candy.

SHOPKEEPER (CONT'D)

Lordy, but she's getting big,
Shad. And pretty. She'll have
all the boys wrapped around her
little finger.

SHADRACH

It's time to go Lily.

He takes her by the shoulder and leads her out of the shop.

SHOPKEEPER

I'll bring that bird by first
thing tomorrow.

Shadrach rushes Lily out of the door without turning. The
shopkeeper is left in silence.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

Shadrach continues work on the raccoon.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Lily explores the edge of the woods, and finds a box
turtle. She picks it up and runs back to the cabin.

INT. BASEMENT - DAY

The pattering sound of Lily's excited footsteps. The door
at the top of the stairs opens.

LILY

Daddy! Look what I f-

Lily trips as she runs down the stairs tumbling to the
bottom. She lands with a sickening crunch.

Shadrach runs to her.

SHADRACH

Lily!

Shadrach scoops her up, cradling her to him. Lily's head
lolls about, and a trickle of blood runs from her mouth.

Shadrach stares at his daughter. He brushes back her hair with a gentle sweep of his hand. His tears splash on her pale cheeks. Shadrach weeps. He gently rocks back and forth with his baby. He stops; takes a breath. Shadrach looks back down at the lifeless form of his girl. Gently, Shadrach scoops his daughter up, and carries her to his bench.

INT. BASEMENT - DAYS LATER

Shadrach is working on the pheasant. As he works he talks.

SHADRACH

You know Sugarplum, your mamma loved flowers. She'd spend hours in the summertime picking wild flowers. I always said I'd till a spot for her to have a flower garden. Never found the time though. I named you for her favorite. When I held you for the first time, all soft and white, I just knew what your name should be. I only wish your mamma could have seen how beautiful you are. The prettiest thing in creation.

While he speaks the camera moves to take in the basement. Beside the workbench sits Lily - doll-like in her perfection. Her glass eyes stare into the camera as the shot pushes in.

FADE OUT.

Appendix B
The Taxidermist Summary Budget

LINE ITEM	CASH	IN KIND	TOTAL
Salaries	\$0.00	\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00
Production Department	\$25.00	\$1,130.00	\$1,155.00
Art Department	\$140.00	\$400.00	\$540.00
Camera/Lighting	\$0.00	\$2,900.00	\$2,900.00
Audio	\$21.00	\$1,200.00	\$1,221.00
Film and Lab	\$1,148.00	\$0.00	\$1,148.00
Post Production	\$0.00	\$3,800.00	\$3,800.00
Contingencies (10%)	\$133.40	\$1,153.00	\$1,286.40
Grand Totals	\$1,467.40	\$15,583.00	\$17,050.40

Item	Unit	Rate	Cash	In Kind	Total
SALARIES					
Cast	4 days	\$250/day		\$1,000.00	
Crew	4 days	\$1000/day		\$4,000.00	
Salaries Total			\$0.00	\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00
PRODUCTION DEPARTMENT					
Food	4 days	\$150/day		\$600.00	
Production Vehicles	4 days	\$20/day		\$80.00	
Location Fees	4 days	\$50/day		\$200.00	
Insurance				\$250.00	
Stills			\$25.00		
Production Department Total			\$25.00	\$1,130.00	\$1,155.00
ART DEPARTMENT					
Props			\$100.00	\$200.00	
Set Dressing			\$20.00	\$100.00	
Wardrobe			\$20.00	\$50.00	
Makeup/Hair				\$50.00	
Art Department Total			\$140.00	\$400.00	\$540.00
CAMERA/LIGHTING					
Super 16mm Camera	4 days	\$350/day		\$1,400.00	
Stedi-Cam	4 days	\$200/day		\$800.00	
Camera Accessories	4 days	\$50/day		\$200.00	
Electric	4 days	\$75/day		\$300.00	
Grip	4 days	\$50/day		\$200.00	
Camera/Lighting Total				\$2,900.00	\$2,900.00
AUDIO					
Recorder and Mics	4 days	\$300/day		\$1,200.00	
Tape Stock	3 tapes	\$7/tape	\$21.00		
Audio Total			\$21.00	\$1,200.00	\$1,221.00
FILM AND LAB					
Film Stock	5 Rolls	\$95/Roll	\$475.00		
Processing	2,000 feet	\$.08/ Foot	\$160.00		
Transfer	2 Hours	\$250/ Hour	\$500.00		
Tape Stock (MiniDV)			\$13.00		
Film and Lab Total			\$1,148.00	\$0.00	\$1,148.00
POST PRODUCTION					
Avid Offline Rental	5 days	\$200/day		\$1,000.00	
Titles and Graphics				\$200.00	
Color Correction	8 Hours	\$250/ Hour		\$2,000.00	
SFX and ADR				\$200.00	
Music Recording				\$200.00	
Music Rights				\$200.00	
Post Production Totals			\$0.00	\$3,800.00	\$3,800.00
TOTALS					
Sub Total			\$1,334.00	\$11,530.00	\$15,764.00
Contingencies (10%)			\$133.40	\$1,153.00	\$1,286.40
GRAND TOTAL			\$1,467.40	\$12,683.00	\$17,050.40

Vita

Justin Thomason hails from Cullman, Alabama. He attended Berry College in Rome, Georgia for his undergraduate studies, spending one year abroad at the University of Reading in Reading, England. He graduated *cum laude* in 2000 with a BA in Cinema Studies. Upon graduation, Mr. Thomason began his graduate studies at the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2001 pursuing an MFA in Film Production. After his graduation, he hopes to work in the entertainment industry.