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Through Doors: Every door takes you someplace completely new

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Through Doors:

Every door takes you someplace completely new
Do you ever stop to wonder why we watch movies? Movies are the topic of a lot of conversations, and yet when most people stop to think about it, they don’t know why they love movies so much. My two cents would be that we all love stories and story telling. I would hope that we all remember the stories that our parents told us. Movies are a way of continuing that tradition, but intensified. No more soft comfortable beds, no more lights to keep us from getting scared. We are now seated in a dark room with a huge screen that screams at us from high-powered speakers. Our parents no longer have any control over what we hear or see; stories seem to have evolved into a new kind of monster with almost unlimited access to our emotions. I have heard some of my friends tell me that they don’t trust films anymore because of the tricks that the films will play on them. They feel that they are opening themselves up to something that might cheat them into feeling something that they don’t want to feel.

So how does all of this relate to my honors thesis? Since my objective was to make a film from writing to distributing the finished product, I knew that I
must be careful in my creation. Do I deceive my audience with my stories? Do I play with their emotions? How much will I leave to their imagination and what will I choose to show? Never has there been such a powerful medium as film. It is something that can be seen by the masses all over the world and convey any message the director chooses to tell.

Finding the Knob

Since *Through Doors* was my first short film, I was, of course, compelled to put in as much as I could; I wanted to tell a feature-length story within 30 minutes. The premise behind *Through Doors* is: “What if every time you walked through a door it took you someplace completely different?” The protagonist of the movie, Tyler, finishes up a long day at work and gets ready to go home. He is anxious to get back to his place because he has a blind date later in the evening. But when he opens the door to put his equipment away in a janitor’s closet, he ends up in a college student’s apartment. The student, Kat, walks into the room a few seconds later and screams when she sees Tyler in her room. Tyler, in turn, freaks out and tries to escape. Eventually both characters leave through Kat’s door. This door takes them into an office building where they meet another character named Yeah. Tyler pushes the trio through a variety of doors in his rush to get home. He is determined to get to his date on time, but at every turn he meets another wacky character and another door leading him in the wrong direction. Eventually, when Tyler thinks all is lost, he finds his way to the blind date and leaves his new friends behind. However, Tyler finds that his blind date was everything that he didn’t want in a girl, so he runs back to find his new
friends. But alas, he finds himself trapped in the labyrinth of doors once again and he must venture through them to find Kat, Yeah and the others.

The biggest problem that I faced while writing this script was finding out what the real drive was that made Tyler move through these doors. I worked out quite a few ideas before I settled on the idea of a blind date. The rest of the script came together quite nicely. I finished the final draft of the film during the spring of 2004, a few months before I was going to start shooting. We tried to stick to the script as much as possible, but sometimes what you write doesn’t always seem right when acted out and certain things don’t always fall in place. When you read the script (see Appendix 13), you will notice that there are cops following the characters through the doors, as opposed to Kat’s roommate, Roxy. Roxy came about when Syracuse University wouldn’t let me use one of their officers in my movie because we were shooting off-campus. In situations like these, it helps to have a creative crew who is good at problem-solving.

Through Doors was a little difficult to cast because most of my acting friends from the University were going home for the summer. So when I put up flyers calling for actors who would be interested in helping out with a summer film, it wasn’t a surprise when only fifteen people showed up to try out (see Appendix 4). Thankfully, out of those fifteen I was able to cast three of my main characters and the rest I cast later. Overall, I think that the cast was incredible for having so few to pick from.
For the character of Tyler, I was looking for someone who could agitate the other characters in the scenes and sometimes come off as a jerk. When Kevin Osborne showed up for auditions, I knew that he had the part because of his intensity and ability to stay in character. Kevin was always very serious about his work, but after every take he would lighten up and smile, which would make shooting with him a great pleasure.

For Kat’s part I was looking for someone who could really blend into the background of almost every scene while Tyler was looking for a way to his date. I wanted her to be pretty but not gorgeous, cute but not adorable and fun but not funny. To say the least, this was a hard character to cast, but Sarabeth Wager did a great job at her audition and was initially cast as Kat.

For Yeah, Ram and Naomi, I was looking for actors who could play it up and just go overboard with their character’s personalities. Yeah was a little kid stuck in a grown-up situation that needed his mommy. That made it easy to cast my friend, Tyler McAndrew. Tyler looked the part and was able to display that innocence. Ed Perry was cast for Ram because of his enthusiasm for the character during auditions. He was loud and funny and really threw himself into the part. Andrea Higgins fit the character of Naomi because she was able to play a snotty, stuck-up, egotistical girl. I was looking for someone who could be full of herself at times, but who underneath it all was a little sad and lonely.

Then there was the character of Gabe, who was played by Gehad Darwish. Gehad had me meet with her four times outside of rehearsals to get her part just right. I needed her to be a lot of things that she herself really wasn’t. Gabe was everything Tyler didn’t want in a girl. So we made her character a little ditsy, a little crazy and a little air-headed. All in all, I think my entire cast did a great job with their parts and the film was well cast considering the resources that were available.

For my crew, I looked up any of my filmmaking or theater friends who were around for the summer and asked them if they could crew for me. I asked Dan Sky, who is majoring in photography at SUNY Purchase, to be my
cameraman. I asked Jake Powell, a fellow film major here at Syracuse University, who is also working on his own Honors thesis film, to be my lighting director. Lauren Shaw was asked to become my assistant director. The rest of my crew was made up of friends and students from Le Moyne College and Syracuse University.

All of the actors in my film have signed contracts which I still have on file (see Appendix 1). These contracts are called “actor release forms” and are a less complicated version of the ones used every day in the production business. Each contract spells out who owns the rights to the images and sounds that are captured during the filmmaking process. It protects me and any of my successors from being sued on account of the film. It binds the actors to me and my film under normal circumstances. It’s also a way of logging everyone who was involved with the film so that I can thank them properly later. There aren’t really any contracts like this for the crew at this level, even though they are just as important as the actors.

Finding locations for Through Doors ended up being the most difficult process for me as a filmmaker. In hindsight, it would have been best for me to ask someone to be my location manager and have at least two people work with the location manager to share the work load. The stress of finding locations can be very intimidating and cause many scheduling problems. Since I did most of the location searching myself, I spent almost all of my free time during the work week calling up the managers of the locations I wanted to shoot at trying to find
a way to shoot my film within their schedules. I learned that it is always better to go in person to meet with your location contacts. You have a chance to show just how enthusiastic you are about your work and how much their help really means to you.

I had five main locations to worry about during my filming process: Kat’s apartment, Yeah’s office, Ram’s TV station, Naomi’s pizza shop and Alto Cinco. I tried to book the locations at least a month before shooting, but certain locations, like Kat’s room, fell into place only days before we shot there. The room that we used for Kat’s apartment was almost completely empty. We were able to dress the room to fit the characteristics of Kat and even fit a whole crew and lights in there, too. If you look closely, you will notice during the scene in Kat’s room just how hot it ended up getting with all the lights in such a small space by looking at the sweat on Tyler’s face.

Yeah’s office was shot at V.I.P. Structures, located in downtown Syracuse. I was looking for a real office space, not just a few cubicles at the end of one room. To my surprise V.I.P. Structures was able to make arrangements for someone to stay in the building with me so that I could shoot after hours. This was one of my favorite locations because we were able to use all of the space in the building to follow the characters as they searched for a way out. This space was so important to the film because it helped give the feeling of the characters being lost through a number of doors and not being able to find a way out.

Ram’s TV station was located here at Syracuse University in Newhouse II, in Studio A. I was able to use their old TV station set-up before they tore it down. Permission was granted to me by the staff, with the catch that I had to be supervised by a full-time employee of SU. This location was also essential to the film’s look and feel. It allowed me to show how Tyler was trapped inside, even though he was in such a large space.

Naomi’s pizza shop was filmed at Movino which is downtown near Armory Square. The owner, Mark, was excited to have a film shot in his restaurant. He instantly gave me permission and even the keys for one night and
told me to close up when I left. The colors of the store were perfect for the film and really contributed to our visual strategy. I think that visually this scene is the most interesting.

The last key location was Alto Cinco, essentially because it was written into the script. If we were not able to shoot there, the scenes that we had already shot would no longer make any sense. Because of this situation, I learned not to write a location into my film unless I was absolutely certain they would let me film there. Thankfully Jen, the manager at Alto Cinco, was okay with it.

There were many other ancillary locations, but there is no need to elaborate on them. I will, however, talk about location contracts. These are not as essential as actor release forms for a student production, but they did help me and the location managers agree on the making of the film. A location contract (see Appendix 3) is a contract between the filmmaker and the owner/supervisor which binds both parties for the dates and times when the filmmaking is going to happen. Again, it protects the filmmaker from being sued. All of these issues about contracts and agreements aren’t as serious to student filmmakers as they are in the professional world, but it is very good practice.

I had an idea from the conception of the first script of what I wanted the costumes to look like. The idea behind the costume design was to work with colors while adjusting brightness, contrast, hues and tones to create a playful sense of the story line. For help with costume design, I hired Lauren Shaw, who
works at Syracuse Stage doing theater design, to help me. We worked well
together, feeding off of one another’s ideas and coming up with solutions to fix
problems with the film. For instance, we were looking for the orange jumpsuit
that Tyler wears during the film, but we couldn’t find it anywhere. We knew we
wanted something that would look like a janitor, along with the feel of an escaped
convict. In the end, the jumpsuit that Tyler wears is a real jail suit, but is modified
with the words “Parks and Rec” on the back. The suit works well because at some
points the character really is confined within his situation. In certain scenes, we
would highlight the orange and use contrasting colors to add attention to Tyler
when we wanted his reactions to be foregrounded.

A fun character to design was Kat. She’s that girl that you don’t notice at
first, but has something special about her that won’t let you get her out of your
head. I remembered a pair of green shorts that one of my friends had worn once,
which said “Catch Me” on the back. That was exactly the girl that I wanted to be
placed in front of Tyler, a girl who knows she has something special but doesn’t
disguise it by dressing up and acting differently than who she really is. The rest of
her costume was built around the green shorts to include a black tank top, sandals
and an arm bracelet.

Yeah’s costume was designed to bring out Tyler’s good side. Yeah had to
be a little brother to Tyler, a kid who has taken on too much in his life and even
though he can do everything an adult can do, he will always seem like just a kid.
Yeah wears Pillsbury Doughboy slippers, a light blue-striped shirt and pants. His
hair was ruffled before the shoots to give him a bed-time look.

We had a great time finding Ram’s costume, from his cut-off shirt to his
Converse sneakers. Lauren and I worked with Ed Perry to make him feel
comfortable in his costume. The character of Ram was fun to put together. We
just toyed with the eighties characters of Bill and Ted from the movie *Bill and
Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. After some runs around the Salvation Army and
through a couple of malls, we completed his character. Ram is pretty cliché, but I
believe that Ed did a good job at making him fun and interesting to watch.
Naomi introduced another type of girl into the film and some competition for Kat. If you ever watch Japanese animation, or Anime, you will see the references that I am making. Even if you haven’t seen any Anime, you will notice Naomi’s rough, tough and violent nature through the actress Andrea Lee Higgins. Lauren and I set out to create a half-jacket for Naomi, which is common in Anime. She also wears a bright red plastic dress, a beret and tall black boots.

Pastel colors were a theme that we wanted to use for Gabe, an over-the-top character of a date gone totally wrong. Gehad Darwish was really serious about her performance, so when it came to costume design, she spent hours on it. If you only get one scene in a movie, everything’s got to count. Tyler’s costume also changes in Gabe’s scene to a royal blue suit that he gets from Naomi’s boss. His suit was chosen to match the location, showing how he blends in and Gabe doesn’t (see Appendices 5 and 6).

Through Doors was my first time directing anything on this scale. I have completed other pieces of work with a cast and crew, but all of those projects where either co-directed with a partner or so short that I didn’t feel that I got a chance to really work with and get to know my cast and crew. With Through Doors I had the chance to know all of my actors and crew members really well. After shooting for a month and a half, with long hours and in sometimes cramped situations, you can’t avoid becoming close with them all.

Where do I start when I know I have to direct a film? I make lists and schedules and then more lists and more schedules. I do all of this to try to be as
prepared as I can be, knowing that no matter how hard I try to plan things, I will never be able to prepare for everything.

I would be so nervous walking onto my sets before a shoot. Sometimes I would forget to eat beforehand and halfway through the shoot realize that I was rather hungry. But I would try as hard as I could to hide this from my cast and crew. Even when I had no clue how something was going to work, I would keep my cool and think things through. It’s tough when fifteen people whom you have asked to come and give you their time are all waiting for you to make a decision.

I remember once we accidentally recorded over some footage we had shot on a previous day. Of course, I felt terrible, but as soon as I realized that the tape was reading the wrong numbers, I called “cut” and asked everyone to take a break. I quickly looked at the footage to see if I was correct and we really were shooting over completed footage. When I confirmed it, I talked the situation over with my assistant director and looked at the camera shooting log for the day that we had originally shot the footage (see Appendix 2). We agreed that it was possible for us to set up that day’s location and re-shoot the footage we taped over. It was times like these that I learned how to act on my feet and not let one bad moment ruin the rest of the shoot.

Scheduling can be a nightmare if you start late, but if you start early and let everyone know the general dates and times that you are planning on, you will have solved almost half of your problems. Dates switch and plans get moved. When this happens, and it will happen, shooting dates have to be moved and reorganized. I had to be very open-minded to work with everyone’s scheduling needs. I always tried to be very courteous and thank everyone who helped me out along the way.

One of the major problems that I encountered early on during the scheduling process was that Sarabeth Wager, who was originally cast as Kat, was going to be leaving two weeks before we were done shooting. This was told to me after most locations were locked and everyone else had agreed on the current schedule. So what did I do? Did I freak out and call the whole thing off? Did I
rearrange everything to fit into her agenda? Nope. I searched high and low for a new actress and found Heather Gangemi, thus avoiding having to reorganize the whole filming schedule. If you’re serious about making a film and people see that in you, then you are able to accomplish just about anything.

When I look back at *Through Doors* now, I think to myself, “Was I really directing or was I behind the camera?” I now believe that it is almost impossible to direct your actors while looking through a viewfinder. I now know that if I want to direct, I have to focus all my time and energy on directing. I have to watch my talent and pay attention to their every move. I will try to compliment them when they complete a stunning performance and give them time to breathe between takes. I wish I had been there more for my actors. Directors and their actors have to have a relationship. There has to be sparks flying and all of those butterflies inside your tummy when a scene goes well. A camera will just get in the way of this experience. I should have left the camera work to my talented cameraman, Dan Sky.

I enjoyed working with all of my actors and crew members. While making *Through Doors* I soon learned that I had to trust all of them. And I guess that goes with finding people whom you can trust. In hindsight, I could have trusted all those who helped me and I should have.

For my film *Through Doors*, I used the DVX100 provided by the Television Radio and Film’s department chair Michael Schoonmaker, who was very helpful with getting my project off the ground technically. When he
learned that I was a VPA student looking for help from Newhouse, he became excited at the chance to bring the two schools closer together. I decided early on that it would be a great idea to use the school’s new 24p camera because of its ability to shoot at 24 frames per second, just like a film camera.

The lighting for Through Doors was created by the imagination of Jake Powell. At most, Jake had about eight lights set up and would be running around during a film shoot, turning lights on and off. Jake and I would drive around to locations and take pictures of the sites, noting things like outlets and space. If you look at the scene in Movino, you might notice a black strip on the wall, which we placed there before the shoot. When we visited the location, we noticed a strip of mirrors along the wall at about chest height. The mirrors worked well for the pizza shop, but mirrors are a tough situation to film, since the viewer might catch the camera and the crew in them. So we measured the mirrors and decided to buy black paper to cover them.

Dan and I would sit down almost every weekend and hammer out the storyboards. Before we started shooting, the actors and I had rehearsals for a week, every night from 7 to 9. During the rehearsals, I set up a camera and recorded the way the scene was choreographed. Then Dan and I would play the footage back and draw out the scenes that we were going to shoot. We worked out how to make the camera tell the story along with the characters.

During these times, we would come up with some pretty crazy ideas. One such idea was to build a huge Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup and have Yeah dwarfed by its presence, after which we would cut to a reverse shot of Yeah dwarfing the peanut butter cup. There were other ways we showed this theme of having things that are small and seemingly inconsequential in our lives make such a difference. For example, the film starts out with a shot of a leaf in extreme close up, then zooms out to a few leaves, then to a bunch of leaves, then to a tree, then to a field, then through the title of the film. Everything we touch, think, do and say affects the outcome of our lives. In my film, I wanted to have the feeling that there are things around us that will affect our lives, no matter how small.
The editing for this film was a trip. I shot nine hours of footage and ended up with a thirty-minute finished piece, which means I had a shooting ratio of 18 to 1. Once I was done shooting, I transferred all of my footage onto a hard drive. After the footage was all logged in, I began editing the project on Final Cut Pro 3. By the end of the project I had upgraded my editing software twice, from Final Cut Pro 3 to Final Cut Pro 4 and eventually to Final Cut Pro HD. Every upgrade helped me edit faster and allowed me to see what my film looked like in real-time without having to worry as much about rendering the images until the end. In Final Cut Pro HD, I was able to lay down multiple audio and visual tracks, along with adding effects to both and printing to a QuickTime file in the end.

I worked towards the final cut for eight months. I made numerous edits and revisions as I received feedback from my teachers and peers. There is a reason why directors don’t usually edit their own films and that is because we are too connected to the footage. When I look at a shot and see that it cost $200 and took fourteen hours to shoot, I will be more apt to keep that shot in the film, whereas an editor will look at the same shot and see that it just doesn’t work for the film as a whole and should be cut. Editors don’t care how much time or money a director spent on getting the shot; their focus is to determine whether the shot works or doesn’t work in the film. Since I was both director and editor, it was difficult to decide what shots to keep for my first edit. You can probably guess what happened after the first edit was complete. It was a disaster. At fifty minutes long with every shot possible in the film, it was a wreck for its first review. My
advisors had a hard time watching it; one even fell asleep. As a result, I was given a goal by my second viewer to take out at least 15 minutes of footage.

I also created a trailer for the film when one of my advisors told me that it would be a great way to find out what is truly essential. I sat down at my computer and started to cut and paste everything that I thought was important. Working on the trailer was truly a great idea and I thank my professor for pushing me to create one. I found out from the trailer edit that my film worked better when I focused on the characters moving through the doors rather than having lengthy talking sequences in between them. I felt I should cut to the chase and get the movie rolling.

So for winter break 2004-2005, I sat down with my footage. By then I was so far detached from my film that I could play the role of editor. I strove to get my theme across more clearly, to show more of the connections between Tyler and Kat and the movement between doors. I began to take out things that distracted from these ideas. I worked on music placement to add to the emotions of the characters. I took out scenes and any distracting dialogue. I test-screened the film on my family and friends as I edited to see if the cuts I made helped to get the story moving. In the end, I knocked off 20 minutes of footage. The film then moved with a rhythm that got the audiences more into the idea of moving through doors.

During this second edit, I started contacting local artists all around Syracuse. I was looking for music that would work with my themes. I needed something with a fluid movement to it, something that would not distract from the images with strange beats and tempo changes. I found Joe Driscoll first; he sings locally and has a few CDs of his own. His underground alternative hip hop music is full of rhythm and beats that really worked with my images to produce an interesting and creative spectacle. I also met with local artists Gregg Yetti and Ryan Zara. They gave me their CDs and offered to re-record new music if I needed it. Ryan and Gregg’s underground alternative work was different from Joe’s, but in a way those differences helped ground the film. While Joe’s
music was interesting, it was also very distracting to listen to while the characters were talking. So when there was dialogue, I would work with Ryan and Gregg’s music to fill in the void. I was able to have each of the artists sign a permission contract for their performances so that it would be legally okay for me to use their music in my film (see Appendix 7).

With a full soundtrack, I took the film out for its pre-screenings. I showed it twice here on campus. The first showing I advertised and told all of my friends to come. I typed up a page of questions for all of my pre-screeners to fill out. Questions included: “What did you think of the concept of the film?” (i.e., script, theme, structure, etc.); “What did you think of the artistic merit?” (i.e., cinematography, acting, directing etc.); and, “Would you recommend this film to anyone?” Twenty students showed up to watch the first pre-screening which took place on February 24th. Right after the screening I answered questions and had an in-depth discussion about the film. This was an interesting process. Some students would attack my film and others would defend it for me. We talked about issues such as how the music was too loud, how the acting worked in Naomi’s scene but not in Kat’s scene, how Yeah’s character came off as a little annoying and how the cinematography worked well for the film (see Appendices 8 and 9).

Afterwards, I was so excited that I went straight home and started editing the film again.

My second pre-screening was for Mrs. Nicolette’s Monday night media studies class where I happened to run the slides and projectors. Mrs. Nicolette gave me permission to show the film to her forty students and some professors because she was interested in showing her class some current work from the University. I was unable to have a question and answer session with the class but I did get all forty students to fill out my pre-screening forms.

The third and last pre-screening took place at Nottingham High School. Mr. Fonte, a soon-to-be-retired drama and film teacher, allowed me to come in at 9:45 on a Tuesday morning in April to show Through Doors to a film class that he was teaching. I forgot what it was like to be in a room full of high school
students. When the opening music started playing, the students started tapping on the desks and talking in the background. Eventually, they all calmed down when some of the dialogue scenes started, but at that point they got a little too quiet. There weren’t as many reactions from the high school students when compared to the college students. After *Through Doors* was over, I chatted with the students for a little while. The students seemed too shy to really bring up any important issues about the film, but they did write about them. The comments that I received about the film were invaluable. High school students are so honest and sometimes very blunt about how they feel about things. Braden Lentz wrote that the film locations were “a little distracting because I knew all of the places, and I think it would be better if the places were more abstract, and unfamiliar, but someone not familiar with Syracuse wouldn’t have that problem.” One encouraging comment from Sam Ehienreich was, “You certainly give me some inspiration to make my own film” (see Appendix 10). I’m glad that the students were able to see some work come from a student who once attended Nottingham High School and I hope that this project has inspired one or two of the students to try to direct a film someday.

It was tough to take all of the criticism that seemed to come from these screenings, but I believe that they only made the film better. I couldn’t change my film so that everyone would like it, but I was able to see what was working and what wasn’t. I was almost compelled at one point to try to re-shoot the ending of the film, changing the whole adventure through the doors from a reality to a fantasy. In the end, however, I took what I could get out of the pre-screening process and finished my film.
Imagine a Way Out

The project doesn’t stop after it’s completed and the final edit is locked and printed. *Through Doors* is going to be sent out to film festivals all over the United States in the categories “short narrative,” “experimental,” “adventure” and “fantasy.” I hope that the film will play at a few festivals to help me learn more about how film festivals work. In addition I will be making 500 copies of the DVD to give back to the community. Emerald City Videos promised me that they would hold a few copies of my film at their video store for rental. I would also like to give copies of the film to the locations I shot at and the cast and crew of the film for all of their hard work. The DVD was designed by my older brother Brendon Manwaring, the art director of Pharos, a small paper making company in Rochester. The DVD will be sent out with my résumé to serve as a demo of my work.

Throughdoors.com, a web site to promote the film, will also be up and running for about a year after this thesis is due. A trailer for the film and information on how you can get a copy of it for yourself will also be posted on the site. Other information about me and my latest work will be up on the page so that people can check in and see what I’m up to. The website is designed by my younger brother, Jordan Manwaring, who is currently attending Syracuse University for computer graphics.

It will be an adventure to see how far *Through Doors* will get. My hopes are that the film will be accepted into a few festivals and that I will be able to talk with some professionals about my work and see what they think of me as a filmmaker. I also hope that the film will be seen by many more people through the DVD that I have created for it and this will also be a great way for me to
communicate with the people who are interested in the same things that I am. Who knows? Maybe an honors student will watch my film some year in the future and call me to do a follow-up.

Finding the Next Door

Just to sit in a room full of people who are enjoying your film is reward enough for such a project. Even though my heart would be thumping out of control, the excitement of showing my work to others is overpowering. I know that not everything that I was hoping for in the film worked out, but then again, some things that I hadn’t expected made up for what I missed. In that case, all short films can be seen as a rough draft for a feature-length film and I hope to someday be able to write one for Through Doors. I now know its weaknesses and strengths, and with all the feedback that I have gotten I believe that I can actually sell this idea to a producer someday (see Appendices 11 and 12).

Either way, this honors thesis project has been a giant step for me. This has been a push for me to research and learn more than I could have otherwise by just sticking to the film curriculum at VPA. Not to say the program is missing anything, but college is really only the first step and I know that I will now be little better prepared for the next couple hundred that I will take when I graduate this May. I hope this paper has been an inspiration to my readers, and I hope that I have brought some insight into the fast-paced career of filmmaking. Look for my name on the big screen.