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How To Be Alice: A Feature-Length Screenplay with Production Package

Alison Joy

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How To Be Alice:
A Feature-Length Screenplay with Production Package

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Television/Radio/Film

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Date: April 23, 2014

Abstract

This Capstone consists of a feature-length dramatic screenplay of 110 pages along with a production package including schedule and budget. The production documents, created using Movie Magic software, detail a shooting schedule of 21 days and a budget of \$890,979.

The film centers on a successful magazine editor who loses her job and her fiancé in the same day. Professionally disgraced, financially stunted, and unexpectedly hearbroken, she is forced to take on a “How To” blogging gig to pay the bills while she gets back on her feet. She begrudgingly accepts mentorship from an eccentric older neighbor to help her along the way, but what begins as a peculiar pairing becomes a deep friendship that challenges her intrinsic understanding of what it means to be successful.

Developed from many of my own experiences, this film seeks to give attention to the female gaze, allowing powerful women to command the audience’s attention.

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Executive Summary

This capstone project consists of a feature-length drama, coupled with a production package detailing the hypothetical schedule and budget if the film were to be produced independently. The narrative centers on a successful magazine editor who loses her job and fiancé in the same day. Professionally disgraced, financially stunted, and unexpectedly heartbroken, she is forced to take on a “How To” blogging gig to pay the bills while she gets back on her feet. She begrudgingly accepts mentorship from an eccentric older neighbor to help her along the way, but what begins as a peculiar pairing becomes a deep friendship that challenges her intrinsic understanding of what it means to be successful. Having never written a screenplay of more than twenty pages, this project quickly became a massive creative endeavor that challenged me in almost every way.

After settling on a direction with which to take my project, I began to brainstorm story ideas. Not much stuck until I spoke with my mother one day over Facebook chat, tossing around some pitches. We began to reminisce about my mom’s brief stint as an eHow blogger, a less than desirable at-home gig she had taken on while in the midst of a career identity crisis. Mom would choose blog topics from a long list mandated by the website’s curators, each post more ridiculous than the next. Overqualified in every way, she would slave over such obscenely mundane pieces as “How to Bake Pizza on Stone Trays” or “How to Make Goop from Laundry Detergent” (both actual articles that are still accessible via the eHow website should your curiosity so drive you to visit them.)

Revisiting this set the gears in my mind turning, and I began to toy with the idea of a highly intelligent and professionally overqualified woman very begrudgingly stuck writing “How To” blogs for a living. I created my protagonist, Daisy, from this seed, and began to play with the rest of the story and the characters. Daisy’s sidekick, Alice, was inspired by another woman who very poignantly touched my life, and whose over-the-top and eccentric personality was too good not to pay tribute to in writing.

After the initial brainstorm, I began phase two: notecarding. My Capstone advisor, Professor Keith Giglio, had also been my professor for an introductory screenwriting course. He taught us to start the writing process by creating a beat sheet with forty story beats. Beats are significant parts of the story that move the narrative along, essentially synonymous with plot points. Therefore, the beat sheet is a list of all the significant moments within the diegesis. There are many different formats for a beat sheet – Blake Snyder’s very popular version is only fifteen beats long, as detailed in his screenwriting guidebook *Save the Cat!* – but Professor Giglio’s is quite in depth and especially useful when fleshing out an original narrative. The basic structure divides a screenplay into three acts: Act I makes up 25% of the script, Act II covers another 50% and Act III spans the last 25%. Act II is divided into two sub-acts – Act IIA and Act IIB – which are separated by the midpoint. Each beat is generally two to three pages in length when actually written out, meaning that a feature-length film would be 90-120 pages upon completion. As each page translates to one minute of screen time, this would mean a film with a runtime of between 90-120 minutes.

The development of the beat sheet was very time-consuming, and was never static. The story I have produced only partially resembles the original projection of the arc, as I began to write furiously and as certain events in my own life came to pass. I worked throughout the summer and the fall semester to come up with a first draft, though my mother's unexpected passing in November of 2013 put a temporary halt on my progress. I had been toying with the idea of Daisy losing Alice, and writing about Daisy's reaction to Alice's death became oddly therapeutic. A project that had been created from my mother's experience also ended with it.

With a first draft in hand at the end of my winter break, I came back to campus ready for the rewrites to begin. Professor Giglio had mentally prepared me for up to ten, but we settled on a more realistic goal of between three and five. He would read through my screenplay every few weeks after I had made the alterations we had discussed, and then I began to incorporate the suggestions made by my reader, Evan Smith, though it seemed their comments were often fundamentally at odds. This seemed to prove, more than anything, that writing is decidedly subjective. It also proved to be fairly disheartening, as progress with one advisor became a hindrance to another. Sorting through their feedback was challenging, but looking at the reasoning behind each critique was also insightful; questioning their reactions made me look closer at my characters, examining the story logic and the emotional responses of the people I had shaped. Eventually, Professor Giglio and I had to lock in a draft so that I could begin the final stage: scheduling and budgeting.

In the spring of my junior year, I took three one-credit modules in Production Management taught by Professor Chase Clifford. The first covered scheduling, the second covered budgeting, and the third module was centered on case studies. Production managers (also called Unit Production Managers or UPMs) are those who work on TV and film sets and are the masterminds of everything taking place behind the scenes. They are constantly in contact with the production staff, both above-the-line (the “big guys” like directors, producers, talent etc.) and below-the-line (grips, DPs, camera operators, craft services etc.) and are responsible for ensuring that everything runs as smoothly as possible from the development stage to post-production. They control the schedules, make sure the production stays on budget, deal with any on-set problems as they come, and make sure that all rules and regulations are followed. Their job is to make sure the director’s creative vision is fully realized. I found this career path to be overwhelmingly enticing.

It was not until August of my senior year when I was already underway with writing that I decided to build on my knowledge of production management through this Capstone project. In Professor Clifford’s class, we had briefly toyed with Movie Magic Scheduling & Budgeting, attempting to budget hypothetical films, TV pilots and series. The creator of the software even Skyped in to give us a personal tutorial. I still did not feel completely comfortable with it, and wanted to learn more on my own, thinking it would be a marketable skill were I to pursue production post-graduation. I wrote a proposal for Crown funding through the Honors program, and was awarded the funds to purchase Movie Magic

Screenwriter, Scheduling & Budgeting so that I could create my production package alongside the screenplay.

My existing knowledge of the software (coupled with many YouTube tutorial videos) allowed me to produce professional production documents that would be useful for shopping the screenplay around to investors, or during the packaging process when trying to attract directors and producers. Having numbers and logistics to show alongside my story would make it that much less risky a project in the very unpredictable film business. I was able to import my screenplay from Movie Magic Screenwriter; create breakdown sheets for each scene; group sheets by shooting day based on their location, cast, and estimated shooting time; and predict the number of days that would be required to shoot the entire film.

From that schedule, I moved to Movie Magic budgeting, taking into account how long each cast member and crewmember would be needed. Their salaries were calculated, along with budgets for such categories as props, meals, transportation, and equipment. Using the timeline laid out in the schedule, I could account for what I would need, and when I would need it.

What follows is a screenplay of 110 pages (just under 2 hours of screen time), a shooting schedule of 21 days, and a budget detailing expenses that come to \$890,979.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to my dedicated advisor, Keith Giglio, who helped me through many brainstorming sessions and drafts and somehow managed to always bring fresh perspective and boisterous conversation. Thank you to the friends and family who endured countless story pitches and the resulting frustration of many a writer's block. Thank you to Kelsey, Ashley, and Rosie, my dearest friends: you provided unyielding support at all times throughout this very difficult year.

Most importantly, thank you to my mother, Judy Bourassa Joy, who passed away on November 12, 2013. This, and everything I do, is for you.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Do not procrastinate! You will think you can. You will think you have time. But you do not.

In all seriousness: treat this project as something that you will carry with you for the rest of your life. Do not let your work stop when you walk across the stage in Hendricks Chapel and earn your Honors degree. Do not tuck it away in some quiet forgotten place. Be proud of this work and take ownership of it. April may be the official deadline, but your project is complete when you would be willing to defend every inch of it.

Chapter One

Drawing Inspiration

It was shockingly difficult to commit myself to one Capstone project for – gulp – two years. As I sat in the cushioned chair of the Honors Library in January of 2013, smugly chatting with the other Capstone Planning Seminar students about our semesters in Florence and Madrid, I realized how far I had to go. I had a myriad of ideas: start a student film festival, try my hand at production management by scheduling and budgeting existing screenplays, or work with a local non-profit to create video content. My interest in so many fields, coupled with my inability to stick with one topic, proved instantly to be my Capstone curse.

I had grown up in a family where reading and writing were paramount. My mother had published a YA science fiction novel and was developing a children's book series at the time, my sister had just decided that her passion for creative writing and poetry were reason enough to major in English at Stonehill College, and my younger twin brothers were speeding through a new book every week it seemed. Much like the rest of the Joy family, I had long found deep gratification through reading and writing, and realized that now would be the optimal time to test my screenwriting skill. Thus it was decided: I would write a feature-length screenplay. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Then came the hard part. I wracked my brain for characters, subjects, and plot lines. Everyday experiences became opportunities from which to wring out

stories. Nothing stuck. Everywhere I turned, I seemed to get the same inevitable response: “write what you know.” My sassier side wanted to shout back “Well, maybe I don’t know anything!” but instead, I pored over the people and events that stood out to me as most fascinating.

In high school, I had met an enchanting woman called Suzy G through my boyfriend at the time. His stepmother’s closest friend, she would live in their home for sporadic bursts of time before traipsing off to start some new adventure. Suzy seemed to know everyone and everything. She had owned a jazz club in China, a restaurant in Switzerland, and had studied massage in Chile. She was a psychotherapist by trade, a chaplain at a nearby hospital, and a trained palm reader. She could talk to you on any subject, though most of the time she seemed to be making things up as she went. She took me to vegan restaurants, moon worship ceremonies, and Buddhist chanting sessions. We worked hard to grow an organic garden in the backyard, and then relaxed together on the porch overlooking the river. She gave me a string of pearls she had acquired during her time in Beijing and ooh-ed and ah-ed over my prom dress. When my boyfriend and I ended things, she still called me, hoping to get lunch. I was enamored by her.

However, Suzy’s seeming perfection was almost frustrating to me. I held her up like an idol for much of the time that I knew her, but something always felt off. She had a tendency to fall through, to make empty promises, or to talk herself up and fall flat. Sometimes, she was larger than life in a way that just didn’t work, and there were days when it seemed like she was just a fantasy. It was this

vulnerability that made her all the more fascinating to me, and I began to think of ways in which to pay tribute to her character. Alice was loosely based off Suzy, though she became much more than an imitation in the end.

I had a character to write about, but I was still short on story - the most important element of any screenplay. I made lists of possible narratives in a notebook that I carried around, but they all ended up scribbled out in black ink as I ruled them out one-by-one. Nothing stuck until I spoke with my mother one day over Facebook chat, tossing around some pitches. We began to reminisce about my mom's brief stint as an eHow blogger, a less than desirable at-home gig she had taken on while in the midst of a career identity crisis. Mom would choose blog topics from a long list mandated by the website's curators, each post more ridiculous than the next. Overqualified in every way, she would slave over such obscenely mundane pieces as "How to Bake Pizza on Stone Trays" or "How to Make Goop from Laundry Detergent" (both actual articles that are still accessible via the eHow website should your curiosity so drive you to visit them.) Revisiting this set the gears in my mind turning, and I began to toy with the idea of a highly intelligent and professionally overqualified woman very begrudgingly stuck writing "How To" blogs for a living.

Right around the time I was mapping out the story, I had an identity crisis of my own. I was nearing my senior year and post-graduation life seemed to be fast approaching. I began to think about what it meant to be successful, and how to balance the pursuit of one's goals with the pursuit of one's needs. Happiness and contentment were very different things, and I was worried I would settle for

the latter as I pursued my professional goals. This personal struggle would become a driving theme within the story, and my protagonist, Daisy, would fight the same mental battles.

After this initial brainstorm, the rest seemed to come fairly naturally. From my screenwriting classes, I recognized that Daisy would have to lose it all in order to gain it all back, emerging a stronger and fuller person. By taking away the things she held most dear – her career, her financial stability, and her engagement – she would be forced to reevaluate what it was she really wanted as she struggled to regain her losses. This change in philosophy and resetting of values would not come naturally; Alice was her impetus. She would push Daisy and challenge her until her original goals became obsolete and new ones emerged in their place. As my reader, Evan Smith, points out often in his writing courses, character wants are very different from character needs. Daisy *wanted* her old life reinstated, but she *needed* to understand that she was free to pursue her dream of writing. When she lets go of her aggressive desire for power and prestige, she ends up getting it anyway in a much more fluid manner.

After all this brainstorming, I had characters and a story. Now I could write.

Chapter Two

The Writing Of

With a basic framework developed, I began to map out each plot development within the narrative. I began by identifying major turning points: Daisy loses her job and fiancé, takes on a how-to blogging gig to pay the bills and reluctantly turns to Alice for mentorship, feels their growing friendship threatened after a confrontation, rejects her ex-fiancé's attempts at reconciliation, and ultimately, deals with Alice's death. These turning points represented major story shifts and character developments, and would determine the structure of my beat sheet (a list of forty story beats that outline the course of the narrative.) These forty beats would then serve as starting points during the writing process, each beat usually representing about 2-3 pages of the entire work when fleshed out (See Figure 1.)

With a beat sheet to work off of, I began to set daily page quotas for myself. Some days were better than others, and I would knock out ten or fifteen pages. Most days, I was lucky to write two or three. On the really bad days, writer's block took over, or I combed over what I had already written instead of moving forward. Mapping out the story seemed comparatively easy once I had entered the grueling beginning stages of the writing phase, and that 90-page count seemed to always be hanging over my head. Inspiration came too sporadically.

As Professor Giglio likes to say, Act II is where the majority of screenplays die. As soon as I reached the midpoint and crossed that mental hurdle,

A-OPENING	B- Set Up	C-New World	D- MIDPOINT	E- Development	F - CRISIS	G - LAST GREAT DEC	H-RESOLUTION
1 OPEN WITH A HOOK - TONE - THE WORLD Daisy at the office	6 REFUSAL OF THE CALL Moves out to dingy apartment; Chinese food every night	11 ENTER THE NEW WORLD Starts her first how-to assignment in a cute café	16 SECOND ATTEMPT Same timepiece; Alice and Daisy run into each other again in the café	21 MAJOR CHARACTER SHIFT Daisy becomes more enthusiastic; strut in her step, giving change to street musicians	26 A FINAL PUSH Daisy visits Alice in the hospital, brings her flowers; she seems tired/weak	31 THE BIG GLOOM Alice is in an unresponsive state, Kent seems unconcerned	36 BATTLE Daisy finds her old business cards; throws them out, decorates her place, puts up photos of her and Alice
2 DEFINING ACTION She's uptight and too strict; rude to interns and assistant when they make mistakes	7 MEETING WITH THE MENTOR Friend offers low-pay how-to blogging job	12 INITIAL GOAL How-to blogging = short term way of proving she deserves a chance at her old job	17 HOPE AND FEAR Alice seems naive and persistent; Daisy mentions new article and Alice knows someone to interview	22 DEVELOP THEME Starts pitching her own ideas for blogs; calling Alice on her own time	27 REWARDS/ SETBACKS Daisy is getting positive feedback, but misses Alice's companionship	32 WHO AM I? Torn between "traditionally successful" role and new Daisy through friendship with Alice	37 CONVERGENCE Daisy writing book; taking care of Alice at home as caretaker
3 STATUS QUO POLE TO POLE TRANSFORMATION Daisy is successful and driven, but stubborn and over-confident	8 DRAMATIC QUESTION: Will Daisy take the job? Will she then be able to get her old job/bf back?	13 NEW RULES/ APPEARANCES Daisy peels off the layers of professional clothing; leaves the blazer at home	18 TRACK THE SUBPLOTS Daisy calls Kent, gets his voicemail/doesn't speak when he answers	23 NOT JUST ABOUT THE HERO ANYMORE Alice goes to Alice's apartment and they cook dinner together	28 EXPPOSE THE CHARACTER WEAKNESS Runs into Kent at a bar and goes home with him	33 HELP FROM THE MENTOR Alice wakes up; she and Daisy chat and Alice tells her to get rid of Kent and be herself	38 RESURRECTION/ SACRIFICE Meeting with agent goes well; Daisy gets call from Alice asking for help, she sounds frail
4 EXPOSITION Coworker clues her into company restructuring but it's too late; Daisy is let go, told she should "take it easy"	9 THEMATIC QUESTION Will Daisy be able to listen to others and re-evaluate her concept of success?	14 PROMISE OF PREMISE Alice slides over to Daisy's table; badgers her with questions	19 RAMPING UP Alice comes to Daisy's apartment; helps her clean up and edit her article	24 INTIMACY THROUGH FAILURE Daisy overhears voicemail from Alice's daughter (surprise!) -- > "stay out of my life"	29 CALM BEFORE THE STORM Kent talks her into staying with him, Daisy does though she promised to visit Alice	34 TICKING CLOCK Nurses say Alice isn't doing so well, Alice refuses to believe this and demands to go back home	39 MAGIC FLIGHT Runs home to Alice's side with manuscript in hand
5 POINT OF ATTACK Comes home early after being fired to find bf in bed with intern she yelled at earlier	10 PROTAGONIST AND OBJECTIVE Shopping at the store, buys beautiful journal - it clicks, she takes the job	15 FIRST ATTEMPT FAILS Daisy is turned off by Alice's eccentricity; obliges her for now but gives her a fake number	20 THE MIDPOINT- Apparent defeat/victory Positive feedback; Alice and Daisy make plans for more	25 THE UNEXPECTED Daisy brings Alice to the hospital after she faints suddenly	30 END OF ACT TWO (1) All is lost (2) new goal (3) final battle Alice has a stroke	35 LAST GREAT DECISION Kent suggests Daisy move back in; says he'll make some calls to get her job back - she turns him down	40 RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR/ NEW ME Alice knows she is dying, Daisy reads the dedication of her book to her

Figure 1 - Original beat sheet

the difficulty began to lessen. I was getting to know my characters, and I was learning what made them tick. The writing process didn't seem so strenuous. It became an evaluation of emotional reaction and story logic as I spent time in the world I had created. I still had a long way to go, but the stress of producing something substantial diminished as I became more enthusiastic about accomplishing my goal of two pages each day. I set aside blocks of time each week, and wrote until I was where I wanted to be. In early January, I finished my first draft, gave myself a pat on the back, and then buckled down for more.

When I began the rewrite process in the spring, I was also enrolled in a course on Script Development taught by my reader, Professor Evan Smith. We were focused on examining story structure in such films as *Shrek*, *Royal Tenenbaums*, *Die Hard*, *African Queen* and countless others of all shapes and sizes. We discussed structure as it related to genre, classic storytelling tropes, evolution of subplots, and character archetypes. As the course went on, I began to get a much firmer grasp on who my characters were and what I wanted them to do. I identified my film as a female "buddy movie" that relied on a protagonist and a contrasting foil to provoke significant character development. I knew I had to create more initial resistance to result in a greater payoff. The course, alongside Professor Giglio's story consulting, was instrumental in my decision to make some major tweaks to the existing narrative that would help make it both stronger and more believable. As a result, my screenplay began to resemble the beat sheet pictured in Figure 2.

A-OPENING	B-Set Up	C-New World	D-MIDPOINT	E- Development	F - CRISIS	G - LAST GREAT DEC	H-RESOLUTION
1 OPEN WITH A HOOK - TONE - THE WORLD Daisy as the managing editor of 24/7 Magazine	6 REFUSAL OF THE CALL Daisy goes apartment hunting; signs for a gorgeous new penthouse	11 ENTER THE NEW WORLD Daisy moves in; meets neighbors Bob and Alice	16 SECOND ATTEMPT Alice makes breakfast for Daisy; Daisy blows up at her out of frustration.	21 MAJOR CHARACTER SHIFT Daisy begins to seek out Alice's friendship; Alice helps her forget about Kent.	26 A FINAL PUSH Daisy takes on responsibility of caregiving for Alice.	31 THE BIG GLOOM Alice has 2-6 months to live. End-of-life caregiving by Daisy and Bob begins.	36 BATTLE Daisy rushes to hospital; Emily is waiting there.
2 DEFINING ACTION She's the office tyrant but all-knowing; relationship w/ Kent seems superficial	7 MEETING WITH THE MENTOR Daisy's financial advisor informs her that she's broke; offers her a cheap subplot	12 INITIAL GOAL The bills are piling up and not much is panning out; Daisy desperately takes how-to blogging gig	17 HOPE AND FEAR Daisy hopes she can make it on her own, but fears she'll need to accept Alice's help	22 DEVELOP THEME Is Daisy's old life really the life she wants? New life becomes more appealing, comfortable.	27 REWARDS/SETBACKS Alice has a fractured spine but is allowed to go home. She is upbeat and joking.	32 WHO AM I? Kent asks Daisy to go on their already-booked honeymoon trip. Should she give it a try?	37 CONVERGENCE Alice is honored to be Daisy's subject. Emily helps Daisy as she writes furiously.
3 STATUS QUO POLE TO POLE TRANSFORMATION Daisy is successful and driven, but stubborn and overly confident	8 DRAMATIC QUESTION: Will Daisy get back on her feet? (Financially, professionally, and emotionally)	13 NEW RULES/NEW APPEARANCES Daisy struggles with blogging - it's "beneath her"	18 TRACK THE SUBPLOTS Daisy calls Kent, gets his voicemail	23 NOT JUST ABOUT THE HERO ANYMORE Alice agrees to partner; Daisy writes, she supplies stories	28 EXPOSE THE CHARACTER WEAKNESS Daisy runs into Kent in a cafe; he wants her back	33 HELP FROM THE MENTOR Alice tells her to live for herself - a paradise vacation won't help.	38 RESURRECTION/ SACRIFICE Daisy's bride wear arrives. She and Emily try on in jest.
4 EXPOSITION Coworker clues her into company restructuring; Daisy thinks she's getting a promotion	9 THEMATIC QUESTION What is true happiness? Success?	14 PROMISE OF PREMISE Alice helps Daisy with her first article about kickboxing	19 RAMPING UP Daisy apologizes; Alice agrees to help her with an article on NYC culinary trends	24 INTIMACY THROUGH FAILURE While helping Alice in her apt, Daisy overhears angry voicemail from daughter.	29 CALM BEFORE THE STORM Daisy is firm with Kent, but softens. She seems uncertain.	34 TICKING CLOCK Kent needs to confirm trip; Daisy offered staff position if she writes about Alice	39 MAGIC FLIGHT Emily and Daisy rush to Alice's side, manuscript in hand. Alice and Emily make amends before Alice dies.
5 POINT OF ATTACK Daisy is fired; Kent cheats with intern	10 PROTAGONIST AND OBJECTIVE Daisy needs a new place on the cheap. She accepts Dana's offer - for now.	15 FIRST ATTEMPT FAILS Daisy fails at both kickboxing and writing about it. Boss wants better.	20 THE MIDPOINT- Apparent defeat/victory Trip to Smorgasburg yields a successful article. Daisy is hopeful.	25 THE UNEXPECTED Daisy and Alice fight about daughter Emily; Alice has a bad fall and goes to hospital.	29 END OF ACT TWO (1) All is lost (2) new goal (3) final battle Alice is diagnosed with blood cancer.	35 LAST GREAT DECISION Dumps Kent - for good.	40 RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR/ NEW ME Post-tutorial: Daisy gets book deal; close with Emily/neighbors; rejects 24/7's "40 Under 40"

Figure 2 - Final beat sheet

My original beat sheet only vaguely resembles the final version of the screenplay, as I recognized how to make it more dynamic. I needed a better excuse for Daisy and Alice to have constant interaction, so I made them neighbors. I wanted Daisy's defeat to be all encompassing, so I bankrupted her to force her into a crummy little apartment in an eccentric neighborhood, far away from her Upper East Side comfort zone. Her original path to Alphabet City did not seem as fluid, so I planted the option of the open sublet directly into the dialogue rather than moving her there with no exposition.

One of the bigger changes was downplaying Kent's narrative involvement because his subplot wasn't playing well with the "A-story." When I originally created my beat sheet, Daisy's heartbreak seemed like it would need more screen time. Professor Giglio and I both realized, however, that he was eating into conflicts that deserved more pages, and so his role was significantly diminished.

As I had set out to write a film about the female experience, I upped the importance of Alice's daughter, Emily, and her relationship with Daisy. This emphasis resulted in the film ending on an upbeat note, with Daisy fully engrained into the Goodman family dynamic, and providing her with a close friend after Alice's passing. I also played with the idea of a romantic interest for Daisy, adding in flirtations with a local bartender to resolve some of the tension left from her breakup with Kent.

Most significantly, I allowed my experiences with my mother's cancer to influence the direction of Alice's narrative. I had originally penciled in some ambiguous illness without giving much thought to it – it really only served as a

plot device - but I ended up pouring my heart into Daisy's struggle with Alice. As I continued to write, the characters began to feel like personal extensions, and while I was hesitant to put too much of myself into the screenplay, it felt more intuitive that way. I had experienced it and I knew what it felt like. I could show my characters what to do.

In early April, I locked in my final rewrite. The creative portion was finished, and I was happy with the narrative. Now it was time to let my left-brain take over as I analyzed the logistics of what it would take to make this story come to life.

Chapter Three

Movie Magic Scheduling

Because I was fortunate enough to secure a Crown Award, I was able to purchase the Movie Magic Suite, considered to be the premiere program for production management. I had limited experience with scheduling, but I knew the basic goal: to maximize the budget by cramming everything into the tightest number of days possible. I can now very confidently say that scheduling is an underappreciated artform with so many moving parts that it seems impossible to ever perfect – I hope the schedule I have prepared comes close to it.

My finished screenplay contained over one hundred scenes. Each of those scenes required a breakdown sheet that would tell me which actors I needed, where I would be shooting, how much content we had to get through, what props would be necessary, how many extras I would need, and what location I would need to secure (just to name a few factors.) I was lucky to be working on Movie Magic Screenwriter, which allowed me to import the screenplay and automatically created breakdown sheets for each scene that listed the primary cast members and the set location. However, I had to comb through the script very carefully, picking out the details by hand, laboriously entering in all the data, and giving a brief synopsis until each scene was as comprehensively described

as possible. Even for someone who considers herself to be detail-oriented, this was quite an undertaking.

My breakdown sheets created, I could begin putting the puzzle together. I began with a strategy of grouping scenes by shooting location. I knew that my core sets – the apartment complex, the hospital, and an office – would be easy to group, and so I started with that.

Professor Clifford had instructed us to schedule a maximum of six pages per day. Scenes that are easier to produce (i.e. dialogue-driven in controlled locations) would command less shooting time, and high-labor scenes (i.e. montages, scenes with many extras, stunts or in high-traffic exterior locations) would often need full days. Thus, the number of pages displayed at the end of each shooting day will vary according to the nature of the content shot.

Once I had grouped by both page length and set location, I had a solid 21-day schedule. The next step became consolidating when actors would be needed on set. A day-out-of-days sheet provides quick reference for when people, props, locations etc. will be needed. I wanted to make sure that actors wouldn't have huge gaps in their work schedules, and that minor characters would start and finish work on the same day. The nature of my script, however, made this a bit more difficult. Kent's extended absence throughout Act II, and the necessity for several ensemble scenes peppered throughout the narrative, made it nearly impossible to have all schedules completely consolidated. In the end, I weighed the cost of a

company move as greater than the cost of an actor's per diem, and left one or two actors with the occasional day off. Perhaps the time away would bring fresher performances!

I felt confident about my shooting schedule, because it was in the exact range I had estimated. I had asked my contacts in the independent New York film scene about their schedules, and almost unanimously, I heard a number somewhere between 18-25 days, though one really bare-bones comedy shot in just nine. I looked at hypothetically comparable productions: Lee Toland Krieger's indie romantic comedy *Celeste and Jesse Forever* shot in 22 days, Gillian Robespierre's abortion comedy *Obvious Child* shot in 18, and Scott Coffey's indie drama *Adult World* shot in 22 as well – right here in Syracuse, no less (McNary, 2013; Lurie, 2014; Niedt, 2012). I was right where I wanted to be.

My final schedule was solid enough to move onto the last stage of my Capstone: budgeting. By looking at the amount of time that cast and crew would be needed, I could begin to get a sense of what my film would cost to make.

Chapter Four

Movie Magic Budgeting

I had now reached the final stage, and perhaps the most challenging in the classical sense of the word. My screenplay had been a test of creativity in storytelling and my schedule had been a puzzle to assemble, but my budget was all hard numbers, costs and estimates. What made it especially difficult was that it was completely hypothetical. However, using the Minimum Basic Agreements (MBAs) agreed upon by each union proved to be a solid option when trying to ballpark figures.

Each entertainment union – e.g. Writers Guild of America (WGA), Directors Guild of America (DGA), International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) – has an MBA that outlines the minimum salary for each position under their jurisdiction. These salaries correspond to certain film budget brackets, so my strategy was to use the minimums outlined for low-budget productions. I input these pay rates for a two-week prep time, four-week shoot, one-week wrap, and four-week post-production time. This point of reference made calculating salaries much more feasible.

Many of the production figures I found through cold-calling film rental houses, production office rental companies, craft services companies, and car rental services. Others I based off of numbers given to me by those working in the field or from sample budgets that Professor Giglio had put together for past projects. No number was entered haphazardly; each was strategically researched.

I combed through my budget extensively, comparing it to those that had been sent to me by friends (and friends of friends): a production coordinator, a locations manager, a director and a producer. I pored over budgets available online and went back to the samples provided in my Production Management textbook from Professor Clifford's course. It checked out.

I then went back to the films I had used as comps for my schedule; much to my delight, *Celeste and Jesse Forever*'s budget of \$840,000 was nearly identical to my own. With a relatively microscopic financial backing, its domestic gross of just over \$3 million could be considered a success because of its low financial risk (McNary, 2014). Though the film had bigger names like Rashida Jones and Andy Samberg, they had been passionate enough about the project to take upfront paycuts and settle for more of the backend profits. Suddenly, my microbudget didn't seem so limiting. It was impossible to be sure without attached stars or a director, but I was proud of what I had. I was one step closer to a real film.

Chapter Five

The Final Package

I knew from the beginning of this project that I wanted to go further than was expected – to really and fully test my limits, and see if I could put what I had learned in my courses to work. As I prepare for this project to come to a close, I can go forth recognizing that I have known true experiential learning, and have grown academically, professionally, and personally.

Scheduling and budgeting is not a skill that is expected of Newhouse students – or screenwriters – to have. However, I wanted to prove to myself that I was capable of conquering a massive creative endeavor, and that I could match it with a test of logic and business smarts. As the daughter of an artist/engineer and novelist/business analyst, I have been raised to understand the value of exercising both sides of the brain. I wanted to get a taste of both the writing and development process by taking it all on myself as a one-woman pre-production team in place of a studio. I am ending this project feeling like I accomplished that goal and then some.

In writing this film, I have learned much about the choices I make and the values that I hold. I have used my narrative as a tribute to my mother, to Suzy, to friends past and present. I have harnessed its thematic tone to work through my own qualms about the future. Most importantly, I have grown confident in letting my ideas take form, sharing them with other people, celebrating when they are

good and acknowledging when they are bad. Constructive criticism is a wonderful thing!

As I walked away from a meeting with my advisor Professor Giglio last fall, I jokingly shouted over my shoulder, “Hey, maybe this will actually get made one day!” That doesn’t seem like such a silly idea to me anymore.

Works Cited

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