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**Errol Morris'
Golden Rules**



SHOW THEM YOUR SHORTS

IF YOU'VE GOT IT, FLAUNT IT IN ITSY-BITSY FILMS

BY PENNY PENNISTON

ILLUSTRATION BY KYM BALTHAZAR

Size doesn't matter. A great short film can be as powerful as a feature. While Hollywood loves oversized lingo (big screen... big stars... big box office), many moviemakers

start with only their shorts. Short films are practice grounds for new artists, launching pads for new ideas and calling cards for new opportunities. So jump into some shorts... You never know where they'll take you.

FIND THE RIGHT FIT

With a short film, everything is skimpy—including your resources

and amount of time. Whatever the limitations, don't let them hang out there for the world to see. Choose a story idea that discreetly covers your weaknesses. If you're in Los Angeles, don't attempt that Russian mafia story set in St. Petersburg. If you're using twentysomething actors, don't write a drama about 40-year-olds on the cusp of a midlife crisis.

“SHORT FILMS ARE PRACTICE GROUNDS FOR NEW ARTISTS, LAUNCHING PADS FOR NEW IDEAS AND CALLING CARDS FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES.”

Smart moviemakers stretch their resources, but resources can only stretch so far. If you try to cover too much with too little, there will be gaps. Your St. Petersburg mafia story will have palm trees in the background and your midlife crisis drama will feature college sophomores in bad makeup. The deficiencies in your production value will parade around like a guy in a badly fitting pair of briefs, exposing things that no one wants to see. Cover your butt. Tailor your story to conceal your limitations.

IF YOU'VE GOT IT, FLAUNT IT

Every moviemaker has unique assets. Create a concept that plays to these strengths.

LOCATIONS • Brainstorm a list of 20 interesting or unusual locations within a one-hour drive from your home. If you're having trouble coming up with a list, you might try zooming around on Google Maps, asking friends for suggestions or just taking a walk through some local neighborhoods. As you brainstorm, consider both interiors and exteriors. Be specific. Where would you point a camera? Where would the action take place? When you've finished brainstorming, do some research and narrow down your list to 10 options. Which locations allow filming and fit within your budget?

ACTORS • Make a list of any actors

you know you can get for your film. Write down each actor's age, gender and race. Consider each actor's strengths. Is there a particular type of character for which he is well-suited? Which adjectives would you use to describe the vibe she brings to a role? Does the actor have any unique talents?

Put your notes onto index cards. Mix and match different actors with different locations, looking for intriguing combinations. I tried the exercise myself and here's what I came up with:

“SMART MOVIEMAKERS STRETCH THEIR RESOURCES, BUT RESOURCES CAN ONLY STRETCH SO FAR.”

Location: An urban train platform. Actor 1: 30-year-old female with tomboy looks who happens to be an excellent tap dancer. Actor 2: 40-year-old male with a laconic, intellectual vibe.

Location: A child's playroom. Actor 1: 26-year-old female with bubbly, loopy energy. Actor 2: 45-year-old aging playboy with a punk rock look.

These are not yet stories, but they are environments in which a story could easily take place. Review your notes. Select your most interesting cast/location combinations. Which one makes the best environment for your film?

Now, make a list of possible production resources. What sort of camera and lighting equipment are available to you? Do you know anyone with exceptional production or post-production skills? Or a great animator? An amazing composer, maybe? How might you use these resources to enhance the environment of your film?

When you match your most talented actors with your most interesting location—and then enhance

that with your best production resources—you create a framework for a successful short. Because you scavenge this framework from your available resources, the film will be achievable. Because you forge it with your unique assets, the film will be unique. Because you build it on your strongest elements, the film will show off your talents in the best possible light.

STRIP IT DOWN

Feature films can afford a bit of fat; with two hours to tell a story,

the screenwriter can dress up a chubby script with layers of supporting characters, plot twists and locations. Short films do not have this luxury. With only minutes to tell a story, the screenwriter must stuff the entire experience into a pair of tighty whities. A short film must be lean. There's nowhere to hide the flab of excess writing, so cut the lard out of your dialogue, hone your visuals and slim down your plot.

In the previous section, you combined characters with a location to create an environment for a film. Turn that environment into a story with one step: *Make something transform inside it.*

The transformation could be physical or personal. It might be the transformation of a situation or of a relationship. Whatever the transformation, there must be a clear difference between “before” and “after.” This is the dividing line that creates a story. With a single transformative event, you now have a beginning, middle and end to your story.

The beginning: The situation



“CUT THE LARD OUT OF YOUR DIALOGUE, HONE YOUR VISUALS AND SLIM DOWN YOUR PLOT.”

before the transformation.

The middle: The transformation.

The end: The changed situation resulting from the transformation.

One transformation provides an entire plot for a short film. But how do you make this transformation happen? Get a character to do it.

Characters are very good at changing things. Sure, there are other things a writer could put in his or her script that would, without the help of any characters, cause things to change. Lightning could strike, for example, or a wild animal could go on a rampage, but those things aren't very reliable. Characters have free will and intelligent brains. A character has many more tactics at his disposal than a wild animal or a bolt of lightning. If you motivate a character and give him a specific want or need, he will work to make things different. He will take action to transform something within the world of your film. The character, in pursuit of his goal, will create your plot.

GOOD TO KNOW

“[DOCUMENTARIANS] ARE PEOPLE WHO WANT TO FIGHT FOR THE THINGS THEY BELIEVE IN AND HAVE A REALLY CREATIVE VOICE WHILE DOING IT.”

—MORGAN SPURLOCK, DIRECTOR,
SUPER SIZE ME

BOXERS OR BRIEFS?

How short is your short? The single transformative event will define the length of your film. However, the more resistance your character encounters, the longer the transformation will take. The difference between a one-minute film, a 15-minute film and a 30-minute film is the strength and tenacity of the forces resisting the transformation.

The resistance might come in the form of an antagonist, another character who tries to thwart the transformation. Or it could be a specific thing that causes trouble during the transformation. Whatever the resistance, the struggle will play out over the length of your film. When the resistance is gone, and the transformation is complete, the film is over.

In the world of your film, what or who is resisting the transformation? How do they resist? What does your character do in the face of this resistance? How long will this struggle take? Clear answers to these questions will indicate how much material you have for your short.

NEARLY-NAKED MOVIE MAKING

The short film shoot works like any other film shoot, only with less time and less money. Identify the unique challenges of your production and be strategic about how you use your limited resources.

My short screenplay, *One in a Million*, is about a bride who, on the night before her wedding, encounters all the lives and loves that might have been. With match cuts and alternate realities, the film created a challenge in tracking continuity issues. Fulton Market Films (the co-producers) and I decided to bring in a script supervisor for the shoot. This was a luxury for our meager budget, but we would have been lost without one.

YOU CAN NEVER HAVE TOO MANY SHORTS

Your first short should lead to the next, and the next and the

STRUT YOUR STUFF

Once you have completed a great-looking short, it's time to show it off to the world.

Submit your short film to a festival or enter your short script in a competition.

- Withoutabox (www.withoutabox.com) connects you to thousands of festivals and competitions around the world. Search for opportunities that match the niche of your project, send electronic submissions and create a digital promotion kit.

Share your short film on the Internet.

- Campus MovieFest (www.campusmoviefest.com)
- Vimeo (www.vimeo.com)
- YouTube (www.youtube.com)

Get an inside look at the big leagues.

Bring your film to a short film market. You'll have the opportunity to pitch to distributors and get a behind-the-scenes look at the professional marketplace.

- Cannes Film Festival - Short Film Corner (www.shortfilmcorner.com)
- Palm Springs Shortfest (www.psfilmfest.org)

—Penny Penniston

next... Build on your successes and learn from your mistakes. Shorts will make you confident as a moviemaker. It's your career, after all. You shouldn't have to go commando. **MM**

Penny Penniston is the winner of the 2005 Sloan Screenplay Prize at the Tribeca Film Festival. Her numerous stage plays and screenplays include *now then again*, *Love is Brilliant*, *Spin* and *The Roaring Girl*. Her short screenplay, *One in a Million*, is being produced in association with Fulton Market Films and will be released in 2012.