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Fast & Furious

Lights, camera, chaos! Making a film in 48 hours is hard, crazy work, but you can't beat the fun

BY NANCY NALL DERRINGER



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NICOLE LADOUCEUR

With a blog, everyone's a journalist. With software, every musician can make a CD. And with digital video, everyone's a filmmaker — theoretically.

Just owning the gear doesn't entitle you to call yourself an auteur, however. For that, you have to make a movie, which is what I found myself doing as part of a team competing in a 48-hour movie challenge, the latest twist in do-it-yourself filmmaking.

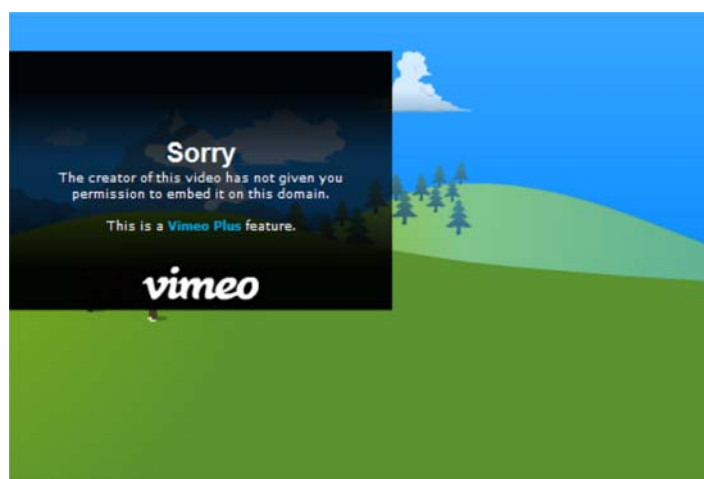
The oldest, the 48 Hour Film Project, is in its ninth year, and it's the prototype. Contestants have two days to produce a four- to eight-minute film from scratch. The playing field is leveled by the element of surprise: In the opening minutes, teams are given a randomly chosen genre and set of elements that must be in the finished project, usually a location, prop, and line of dialogue.

Our challenge was part of the inaugural Detroit-Windsor International Film Festival last summer. My friend Michael Einheuser and I, amateurs to the core, scrambled a team, thinking it might be fun. The narrow window appealed to me because it would, by necessity, eliminate or at least streamline the worst part of moviemaking: its agonizing slowness. We'd get it done or we wouldn't, but by 7 p.m. Sunday, it would be over.

Our Craigslist ad was more fruitful than we could have imagined. Within a week, we had a camera operator, editor, actors, a makeup artist, composer, even a fixer — a guy with a million contacts who could get us anything from access to a big, empty house to a stretch limo, free. At our all-hands meeting, we sketched out some stories we could adapt to one of the six genres we'd been told were in the mix (sci-fi, action-adventure, horror, chick flick, mockumentary, and crime). We made Michael's Royal Oak law office our home base. And we went into Friday ready for anything, which, any fool will tell you, is how you feel right before everything falls to pieces.

Our representative, Diane, headed to the kickoff event near downtown while we sat around a speaker phone in a suburban conference room. The call came as she approached the wheel of fortune where the genres would be assigned. There were two we hadn't been told about: superhero and musical. The rules stated that if we landed on a genre we truly felt unprepared for, we could spin again, but the second spin was non-negotiable. Diane spun and landed on superhero. We took it. The prospect of getting a musical on a

second spin was too much to risk.



Gas Man (2008) from M-1 Studios on Vimeo.

The other required elements were these: We had to use a “for Dummies” book as a prop, one character had to be a used-car salesman, and we needed to use two locations in Detroit, including the Ambassador Bridge. Our mandated dialogue line was: “What’s that? It smells like cheese.”

Diane hung up and we stared at one another. The starter’s gun had just fired, and we needed to conjure a superhero with no costumes, no special effects, and no way to drop Kirsten Dunst off a building. But over a few hours of brainstorming and false starts, we hammered out a script for Gas Man.

Rules mandated that the film had to be recognizable as belonging to its genre, so we gave Gas Man an origin story, an evil adversary (in a limo), and a happy ending.(Actual superheroics we were a bit short on.)

We lost our first crew member to creative differences Saturday morning. He hated the story. (We hated his alternative more.) But we couldn’t spare time negotiating with him; we had to start shooting at first light. We soon learned what everyone who tries it knows: Filmmaking is painstaking, slow work, and everything that can go wrong, will. One of our actors needed to ride a bicycle — and couldn’t, at least not smoothly. Cars with faulty mufflers drove through our scenes and spoiled the sound. We had no permits to close streets and dress the sets, so we shot guerrilla-style, which led to the fun and some surprising creative touches.

A semi lumbered through an establishing shot of the bridge and made a cool transition. Keith Christmas, our tireless and fearless director of photography, had a great eye for this stuff. He could grab a shot of our villain’s limo crashing through manhole steam without needing to stop traffic.

As the weekend wore on, I started to see that the point wasn’t the destination, but the journey. I noticed my teammates, many of them professionals who earn their livings doing wedding videos and training films, were having a blast. Our makeup artist, Dan Phillips, transformed a pretty actress into a bombshell, so we changed her role from M.D. to moll. He assured us he could apply a latex facial burn in 10 minutes, so we wrote one into our story. After shooting all day Saturday and into Sunday, our editors took over, and drove Gas Man down to the wire. We turned it in with nine minutes to spare.

Judging and screening were the following weekend, and alas, we didn't place. Honestly, at that point I didn't care. I had my own movie to replay in my mind: Keith braced in the open back door of Michael's minivan, shooting our 1977 Lincoln Continental stretch cruising Woodward, Dan's look of concentration as he brushed shadows onto our actors' faces; Robert Young, our villain, rehearsing lines I wrote, making them his own. I think I slept 10 hours out of 48, but I haven't felt so awake in a long time.