How Technology Turned My 37-Year-Old Film into a 2023 Film Festival Contender

By Bill Blaney

"In books, as in life, there are no second chances. On second thought: it's the next work, still to be written, that offers the second chance."
- Cynthia Ozick

As human beings, most of us rarely look back. We forge ahead in our lives through school, then work, and family. We keep ourselves busy with events, chores, entertainment, and the business of maintaining our lives, be it financially or otherwise. Now and again, however, there are fleeting moments when we reflect on our past, wondering if there's anything we could have done differently or, in some cases, having regrets over missed opportunities.

As for my original drive from my youth to become a movie director, which didn't quite pan out, I have no regrets, but I did, for a fleeting moment, regret a few technical mistakes I made on my final ambitious student film. It likely wouldn't have changed the course of my life, but it certainly put a damper on the present, as it was 37 years ago.

Senior year. 1986. Temple University Department of Communications and Theater. For four years in school, I had the ability to expand on what I used to do as a teenager with a Super 8 camera – take a fictional narrative in my head and turn it into some form of reality. Filmmaking is difficult. There are few, if any, filmmakers whose first films are worth anything. It's an art that takes time and experience to learn what to do and how to create something that looks and feels professional enough to stand on its own. Furthermore, depending on where you are in the evolution of technology, your equipment, or lack thereof, becomes a great determiner of how professional your project could possibly look, skill and talent notwithstanding.

I had a need to produce something more ambitious than what the school required of me. Why do anything if you can't challenge yourself, right? So, before I graduated, I decided to apply for a Special Project in my senior year – an opportunity that allowed a student to get credits for a project he or she proposes within their major. I knew that this would be my last opportunity to have access to my school's vast array of production equipment, along with time in the editing room where I spent two of my last 4 years as a student instructor.

My project? A fictional 44-minute drama about a stoner culture from my high school, an expanded version of a bare-bones 8-minute Super 8 version I did in Freshman year which, despite being painfully primitive, garnered some positive feedback. I wanted to create something that was as close to a professional film as I possibly could, but we had many limitations. The equipment was old 16mm cameras that weighed a ton, were difficult to handle, sounded like freight trains (which created an extra obstacle when shooting synch sound), and lacked any image stabilization,

Long Island 1982.
God help Jim and Craig.

THE THREE PHASES OF FERN

guaranteeing that any attempt at a professional dolly move would look more like an earthquake than anything you'd see in a Spielberg movie. Lastly, I had a small budget of $4,200 - $2,200 saved from a summer and a half as a deli clerk at Waldbaums and $2,000 my folks graciously pitched in.

I petitioned for a two-week shoot, having storyboarded two-thirds of the film and mapping out a total of 165 individual camera setups. To complete what we needed to shoot would require 10-hour days for 14 days during the latter part of June. Much to my disappointment, we were given a total of 9 days to shoot since priority went to Grad students, two of whom had projects in the summer and the added benefit that the equipment room supervisor, Sam, was also a grad student and their cameraman.

So, we took the 9 days. To accommodate the schedule, I decided we needed to have 15-hour shooting days and any shot that did not include dialogue would be shot with the silent, smaller Bolex. We would record ambient sound and sound effects later, to be placed in during editing.

Shooting was hectic. All of us were new to this. My sound mixer, Tom, did the best he could with one directional microphone, and since my cameraman's car broke down in Jersey, I had to shoot, light, and direct. With few exceptions, we got the work done, and I spent 3 months editing the traditional way – with film and audio cuts hanging from bins, splicing tape and glue. In the end it was A/B rolled, the audio merged and all of it sent to an optical house for an expensive inter-negative and final release print. My one distant hope back then was that I could see this film on a large screen in a dark cinema. Maybe with a festival, that could happen.

It was when I finally got the release print back that I became deflated. The credits now looked primitive, a color shot that was supposed to be processed as B/W was still color, a few scenes now felt like they ran too long, and, oblivious to all of us, a camera light could now be seen at the corner of a moving shot. In 1986 terms, going back to re-edit was not an option. I no longer had access to the equipment, and reworking any of the anomalies would cost me somewhere around $9,000 in current dollars.

I didn't have it. I couldn't do it. I wasn't going to send it out to festivals like this (In 1987, festivals cost more than today to enter and required you to get several prints of your film at huge costs), and I had to find a real job. So, I bit the bullet, considered it an ambitious failure, put it in a box in the closet, and moved on.

Enter the pandemic of 2020. While cleaning out a closet no one had been into in 20 years, I found this dusty box. Underneath short ends and small reels of 16mm film outtakes and audio, I found the inter-negative, which I thought was lost to the world. Having spent the previous 15 years video editing as a Creative Director to accommodate for some limited budgets, I figured I could get a 2K digital transfer and make this a fun side project. Finally, technology had met my moment. I could do today what I would never have been able to do for decades – get rid of all the mistakes that clouded my memory of this film and kept it from being worthy of my consideration.

Tony DeRiso and Jon Howard in The Three Phases of Fern.

Through Final Cut Pro and an array of plug-ins and functions, I was able to replace my credits with professional ones, edit out all the scenes that I felt slowed the film down, rework scenes and audio to move quicker, color correct over-exposed or washed-out moments, layer in new ambient sound to smooth out transitions, rebuild shots and smooth out shaky camera work, cut away any remnants of splicing glue at the edge of frames, and shave a 44-minute original cut down to 32 minutes – all at the cost of maybe $300.

Then I watched it, not on a dim project screen but a sharp LCD TV and there it was. The film I intended to make 35 years earlier. Even though I was too close to it to make a final judgment, I

had the sneaking feeling that, despite everything I knew prior, this film might actually work. After showing it to some co-workers whom I could count on to have a critical voice, I was surprised to find that no one nodded off, and it kept them involved throughout the film's runtime. Sure, it was far from perfect. As the filmmaker, I could never see it fresh, but having, for the first time, an audience's opinion from people who were not involved in the production of it was something new.

Thanks to new technology that I used for over a decade in marketing, I was able to get to a point where I could submit this film, finally, to festivals. Maybe now I'd finally see it on that large screen in that dark cinema. There were impediments, however. The film was still long for a festival short, it looked nothing like the slick productions that were possible with today's cameras, sound devices, and image stabilization. Nonetheless, entering was affordable, and what did I have to lose?

Nothing, actually. The first festival it was accepted into was one of the first I hoped to get into, a 26-year veteran called the Long Island International Film Expo. The film was given a slot on opening night, shown on that large screen to a receptive audience, was nominated for 3 awards, and won the most prestigious of the festival for its category - Best Short Film. It also helped reconnect me with some of the cast, was a time capsule for the town it was shot in and the culture that was its inspiration, and now, thanks to advances we marvel at and sometimes gripe about, is no longer a past memory gathering dust in a closet. In the future, with the advent of AI filters, we could possibly turn a rough 16mm aesthetic into a crisp 35mm-styled film, making 1986 look like yesterday.

So, in short, the old quote about second chances does require some reworking as well because, yes, there are second chances, but sometimes the next work isn't necessarily something new, but something renewed. And, as a result, an old film with no foreseeable future somehow gets a new narrative. Who'da thought.

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Bill Blaney, SMM's Creative Director, has been the subject of several articles due to his film "The Three Phases of Fern." His sound designer, Tom Varga, is today a veteran of over 100 films and was nominated for an Academy Award for sound on "Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)". "The Three Phases of Fern" recently premiered at the Long Island International Film Expo and is currently at the beginning of its year-long festival run.