HELL AT HEATHRIDGE: A STUDENT FILM

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by

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CHAPTER 1
MY FIRST BABY

"Making a movie is like having a baby," Professor Traci Williams announces during our first production meeting. She actually introduced this metaphor to me earlier in the week while I was having some conflicts with our music department. As my thesis advisor and co-producer of Hell At Heathridge, Traci, in the manner of kicking me out of the nest of safety, has always managed to find the perfect balance between showing me how to fly and letting me plummet to the ground. Having spent almost two years on this project, I have learned that even though making a movie is one long process there are many steps and changes along the way. It sounds silly, but Traci was right. Making a movie is like having a baby.

There is no way to really prepare for this process. It’s grueling, painful, stressful and amazing all at the same time. There will be arguments. You will be irritable, tired, exhilarated, and emotional all of the time. You might even feel nauseous at times. There are days when everything is going wrong and you want to give up, but you don’t because it’s all worth it in the end. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. When the baby is finally born, nothing else matters. You did it! You’ve accomplished something incredible. You’ve made something.

All of your hard work leads to that perfect moment when you’re sitting in the back of a theater at the sold out premiere, and you’re watching your completed
movie for the first time ever on the big screen. Surrounded by all of your family and friends, you can finally take a breath of relief because that moment you’ve been waiting for and working toward has finally arrived.

The truth is, you never really know how to make a movie until you’ve actually done it. I am still learning from this experience today. It’s been almost a year since filming has ended, and I still find new things to take away from this experience each and every day. Just because the filming, the editing, or any other aspect has ended does not mean the learning process ends with it.

Ultimately, I am very proud of this film. I am proud of my crew, my cast and everyone that was involved. However, there are still many things that I would change for next time. I made a lot of mistakes. If this was the “real world,” and I was directing a film with a multimillion-dollar budget and billions to lose, I absolutely would have been fired within the first week of pre-production. But that was the true purpose of this project: I learned what I did wrong, what I did right, and what to do differently next time in the future when there is even more to lose.

Throughout this thesis project, I have learned that there are specific key elements needed to make a successful film. The first of these elements is the script. The story is the foundation of any movie. Without a compelling or interesting story, the actors will look bad, the director will look incompetent, and the audience will not be impressed.

The next key factor in creating a good movie is having a talented crew that knows what they’re doing. Not only does the crew need to be skilled, but they also
need to know how to communicate with each other. Good communication begins with the leaders in the group, the department heads, the producers and directors. Without good communication and sufficient leadership, the production will fail.

Along with the script and the crew come the actors. Having talented actors is what really drives a script and makes a movie entertaining to the audience. “The actors become these written characters. They bring the story to life” (Tomaric 118). A director can only guide an actor so far, but it is up to the actor to deliver. “They are the lifeblood of your story. Their portrayal of the characters they play is more engaging to the audience than virtually any other aspect of the moviegoing experience” (Tomaric 121). Actors must not only be able to give a performance, but they also must understand the filming process in order to do their job properly.

The last of these key factors include time, money and promotion. You can’t make a movie without any money. I don’t care who you are. It doesn’t matter how talented the group is, how brilliant the script is, without any money, the movie is not going to get made. It just won’t. In addition, creating a decent film takes a lot of time on everyone’s part. If the actors or crewmembers are too busy to come on set each day, the filming process will never be completed. This goes with any production. Five pages of a script take an average of twelve hours of filming on set. Once edited together, those twelve hours end up only being about five minutes on screen. It is a very time consuming process. Many people outside of this field do not understand how much goes into each take.
Along with money and time, exposure is equally important. Marketing and advertising is necessary to get the word out about your film and kick-start the process. It’s necessary in order to create and maintain an audience and also promote the film. If a tree falls and no one is around to hear it, does it even make a sound? It doesn’t matter how great your final product turns out. You could create the best movie in the world, but, if no one watches it, there will be no impact. It would all be for nothing.

With the above key elements there are many essential sub-elements needed for making a movie. Each of these falls within the three stages of the filmmaking process: pre-production, production and post-production. All three stages are necessary and equally important.

Pre-production is the first step. It is essential for developing of the script, seeking sponsors for fundraising, choosing crew members, casting actors, booking locations, choosing costumes, scheduling, creating storyboards, making shot lists, drawing blocking diagrams, rehearsing, and getting everything else ready for production.

Pre-production is the longest stage of the filmmaking process. It can take anywhere from a few months to a couple of years to complete the pre-production process. The film Avatar spent over ten years in pre-production, but most films spend about a year or two. On Hell at Heathridge, we had one semester for pre-production. With a crew primarily made up of students, the time spent during pre-production was extremely limited. Not only were we getting everything ready to
make a movie, but the majority of us also had a full course load, jobs and other responsibilities we had to uphold throughout the process. Completing pre-production by June in its own was a great accomplishment given the small amount of time we had to do so.

Once the summer began and pre-production was finished, it was time to start filming this movie, the most intense part of the process. We filmed about five to six days a week, twelve hours a day for eight weeks. Not only were we working twelve-hour days, but my co-director Caroline Abbey and I would also spend another four to five hours after each day getting everything ready and planned for the next.

When filming was completed in August, it was time for the final step in the filmmaking process: post-production. This stage of the process is when we take everything that was shot and put it together to create a movie. It not only includes cutting together our scenes, but it also involves adding sound effects, music, foley effects, background noise, room tone, visual effects, color correction, color grading, and mixing it all together for the premiere. Even after the movie has been released, post-production does not end. A DVD needs to be created, with interactive menus and bonus features. Then the movie needs to be submitted to film festivals and distributed.

Right now, I am in the festival and distribution phase of the post-production process. Over the summer, an agreement was made with Family Video to purchase DVD copies of *Hell at Heathridge* and rent them out at each of their stores across the U.S. and Canada. With this, I’ve currently been working on getting the DVDs
packaged and ready for distribution. In addition, I am working with a new audio team to remaster the mix and make adjustments to the soundtrack before submitting these final DVDs.
CHAPTER 2
THE SCRIPT

“The script is the blueprint for the story and contains dialog, character movements, and scene descriptions” (Tomaric 5). Pre-production began with a script writing competition. The competition was open to everyone, not just Kent State students. Twenty-seven scripts were submitted, and a development team that included myself, Caroline and a few other students reviewed and discussed each of them. We chose our top four scripts, and each of those writers was then asked to pitch their stories to our executive producers. Traci was one of those producers, and she worked alongside professor David Smeltzer and recent graduate Estee Hodge.

Of the four stories pitched to our producers, writer Bryan Kelly’s Hell at Heathridge was chosen as the winner. The interesting thing about this decision was that he didn’t actually submit a script. What he submitted was a ten-page treatment.

A treatment is similar to a script, but it is written in story format rather than utilizing dialogue to advance the plot. Choosing a treatment over the other scripts was a risk, but the concept behind this story was so unique and alluring, the producers decided to take the chance and bring Bryan on as our writer to complete the script. This decision was unanimous between all of the producers. Over all of the competition, Hell at Heathridge by far had the best concept. It was the clear favorite.
among all of us. After Bryan’s concept was chosen, we gave him a little over one month to complete the first draft of a script.

When I read the first draft of *Hell at Heathridge*, I thought that it was a really good start. It was creepy. With our resources, we could realistically create this movie. I could definitely see the potential and was getting very excited about this project. However, this version of the script still needed a lot of work.

This was the first script that Bryan had ever written. As a psychology major, he had no former training or experience in writing for television or film. Considering this, his first draft was actually quite impressive. I anticipated that we would be working very heavily with our writer, using our specialties to help develop the script so it was ready in time for the students to get rolling on our pre-production tasks.

Filling numerous plot holes and unanswered questions were some of the changes that needed to be made to this script. Many situations did not logically make sense, and the dialogue was rough. Dialogue is usually one of the hardest parts to writing a script. In many cases, this area ends up going through multiple revisions. In addition, we needed to add subplots to make this story more interesting and realistic. But most importantly, the characters needed to be more dynamic, grow, change, and develop their relationships with one another.

“Characterization is an ongoing process; characters grow over the course of a film. They change as they are shaped by events and by their interactions with other characters” (Miller 30).
The audience needs to be able to relate to what they are seeing on screen. This script was strongly driven by the plot, and the characters were used as an aid to this plot. One of the concepts that many amateur writers do not first grasp is that, in order to have a successful film, the characters should drive the plot so that the audience can relate to them. This allows the audience to feel like they are living the movie and not just watching it. In this case, since it is a horror film, the audience really needs to feel for our main characters, understand their struggles, and grow to care for them. This fear that something might happen to one of our characters makes the climax that much more impactful.

Right away, I brought this to the attention of our writer. We read the script during our second production meeting, and everyone gave Bryan his or her feedback. There was a lot of work to be done with the script, and most everyone could see it. In addition to cleaning up the story, the ending was yet to be written. This was the most important part, but also the most difficult to write. Following the production meeting, we would wait for the next version of the script.

The crew was expecting a lot of changes so we focused our energy on tasks that did not depend on this newest version of the script. We set up a fundraising campaign, began casting and setting specific roles for each member of the crew. Weeks went by, and it became time to really focus on our specific pre-production jobs. Locations needed to be booked, props needed to be made, and days needed to be scheduled. All of these tasks depended on our new version of the script.
Finally, the second version of the script was delivered, and it included 70 pages of disappointment. The dialogue was still mediocre, at best. Again, there was no definitive ending. The changes made were minor and actually ended up making the story worse. It was clear that either Bryan did not understand our feedback or he chose to ignore it. My gut sided with the latter, and I could tell right away that this person may begin cause some issues with the production process.

Quite often, we have to work with different personalities that do not coordinate well with our own. It is important to adapt and learn to work with these individuals in a productive way. We’ve all had professors that teach in a way that doesn’t align with our own learning style. There is always going to be a co-worker that hinders our ability to fully enjoy the workday, and, no matter what, there is going to be someone in our lives that makes each day a little bit more challenging. This is life. We are not going to get along with everyone. We cannot control the people around us, but we can control ourselves and learn to work with these people. It is not the situations that define a person but how we react in those situations.

Bryan was going to become this person for me. I could see it right away, and I knew that I would need to cater my methods in order to overcome the challenges he would induce. It is when conflict hinders the success of a project that these difficult people go from an annoying mosquito biting at your arm to the West Nile virus threatening your life. Trouble was on the horizon.
CHAPTER 3
GETTING BEHIND SCHEDULE

Ultimately leading us through seven drafts, we did not end up having a final version of the script until two weeks before production. Waiting on Bryan put us behind in many areas of pre-production, and there still were many flaws in this version of the script. As directors, Caroline and I had to stay optimistic. Whatever was lacking in the script, we had to make up with production quality. This just drove us to do our jobs better.

There were just a couple departments that gave us trouble during the filming process. I knew right away that these areas would cause issues but did not yet know to what extent. Troubles with the wardrobe, makeup, marketing, set design and music departments along with Steve Savanyu’s post-production audio class led to a much weaker film. In the end, though, it all came down to the script. All other problems aside, this was by far the weakest part of our film. After reviewing audience feedback from the premiere and beginning to submit *Hell at Heathridge* to festivals, it was noted immediately by critics that audio issues and significant flaws in our script were the primary factors that led to the downfall of our final product.

At this point in time, however, I did not anticipate the extent of how much these issues would pose a threat to the production. I was still very new to my role as a director. I had never created a movie before or worked on a project of this scale.
My gut told me that these problems would arise, and we would begin to fall behind schedule. However, at the time all I had to defend my words and actions were instincts. Instincts that later ended up being spot-on, but instincts nonetheless. This wasn’t enough to show that I knew what I was talking about at the time. At this point in time, I just had to roll with the punches.

Trying to resolve some of the production issues as soon as possible, I ignorantly began taking things into my own hands. Starting with the script, Caroline and I began making revisions. We knew what changes needed to be made. However, things with Bryan were taking too long. He didn’t seem to be cooperating effectively, and we could not understand why our producers did not yet see this.

Each of our producers had their own specific strengths and weaknesses. Dave is an award winning documentarian. Throughout this process, he focused more on the technical side of production and teaching those aspects. On set, Dave would question many of my methods. I loved that he did this. It was almost like being in class. Everything I did had to have a purpose behind it, and I had to know how to defend and explain each of my methods. Ultimately, this has made me a better director and will help me excel on future projects.

Dave, however, hadn’t worked on a horror film before and actually doesn’t watch or even like this genre. His skills and experience made up for this lack of exposure though. Caroline and I had both been watching horror films since we could talk. I think I’ve seen every single one out there, and, in addition to our research completed prior to pre-production, no one would know this audience better than us.
Between the two of us we knew what worked and what didn’t. This caused a little bit of tension with our producers, but ultimately helped the film in the end.

Estee worked on the television show Charmed for many years and understands the overall process very well. She brought many key elements to the table as a producer. I learned a lot from her about how things really run on a major set. However, there are many differences between television and film, especially in regards to the writers.

Traci is an amazing motivator and communicator. She has worked on some huge projects in Hollywood including ones with George Clooney and other top actors. She knows how the industry works and has top-notch business skills. Of anyone I know, Traci knows exactly how to get what she wants and what the production needs at the drop of a hat. A mastermind and brilliant mentor, even the top dogs can be strong-armed when presented with the right leverage. Little did I know at the time, Bryan had this leverage.

From my perspective, Bryan was very adamant about his ways. I watched as he began influencing each of our producers, and I saw him as a very malicious character. This would pose many threats in the future and challenges that I would need to overcome. If this experience was a movie itself, and I was the protagonist, Bryan would be the villain.

Overall, troubles with Bryan began to set us back each week. Noticing this, Caroline and I began to intervene with his tactics. But still new to our positions, our word was weak. We had yet to prove our capabilities and skills. Being too direct and
very naïve, we went about things the wrong way. In the end, it did not work out so well for us, but we would later learn how to better handle these conflicts.
Many people assume that the director is the boss, the head of production. This is a common misconception. At the end of the day, money influences power. It is one of the key elements needed for making a film. The executive producers, the ones in charge of either funding or gathering funding for the project, will always have the last say. They control where the money goes and who gets to use it. They are the ones in charge, and they can fire anyone and everyone below them if they want to. The director is responsible for the production, but it is the producer’s job to make sure that this production happens. Working more heavily in pre-production and post-production, the producers take charge primarily in business-oriented tasks needed to complete and distribute the film.

Directly below the producers are the associate producers, the writers, and the directors. Associate producers essentially help take care of tasks needed by the producers to run the production. This may include locking in donors, generating contracts, managing conflicts or filling the roles of necessary crewmembers. With *Hell at Heathridge*, we didn’t have anyone in our craft services department. It was then the responsibility of our producers to make food for everyone on set each day. In the simplest of terms, the producer’s job is to make sure we have everything
needed to make this movie. It is the director’s job, however, to actually lead the making of the movie.

The director is in charge of creating the vision for the film and effectively communicating this vision to each of the cast and crewmembers. This is essential for everyone in the production to effectively complete his or her jobs on set. One of the biggest challenges for me was figuring out how to attack this project and do it properly without stepping on anyone’s toes.

The writer’s job is to write the script. The director then takes this script and interprets it. It is the director’s interpretation, based off of the given script, which becomes the vision for the movie and the source for the team to follow. Typically after the script has been written, it is then purchased by the producers and used as the foundation for the director to interpret.

Sometimes the writer’s job is completed once the script has been purchased. Sometimes the producers will hire a writer to adapt a previous script. Other times a producer will already have a story in mind with key elements, and they hire a writer to create a script based upon that idea. If the producer wants any changes made to the script, they can hire the same writer to make these changes or have someone else add in these elements. In many cases, the director is actually not involved in this process. However, there are specific areas of the script a director may be able to change on set if needed to properly complete the production.

On television, many times there is a creator. That person is a writer but also fills producer-like roles. That creator or “lead writer” has a team of writers to help
create each episode of a series. Typically one person from the team will take charge each week. This person changes every week and, typically, so does the director. In television, especially after the writer’s strike that began in 2007, it is the writers that hold the majority of the power. The directors are really just there to execute the writer’s vision. Many times they don’t have much say at all. Unless the director is also a writer or producer, their power is very limited.

For a film, however, the writer’s do not typically play as big of a role. They write the script, make any changes the producer wants, and then they get out of the way. But this isn’t always the case, and it certainly was not the case with Hell at Heathridge. Between the writers, the associate producers, and the directors, the chain of command is not always clearly defined. It really depends on the contract details of each individual and the relationship between that person and the executive producers. In some cases all roles could be equal. In many, it’s a close tie between the director and the associate producers, with the writer having less influence.

For this project, we pretty much were all on the same playing field below our executive producers. Determining who would get the final say depended primarily on who became closest with the producers, who was the most manipulative and who seemingly provided the most value to the production. It’s a dirty business, and, with Bryan already beginning to cause problems, I needed to learn how to roll around in the mud.
CHAPTER 5

CHALLENGES OF A DIRECTOR

There is a lot of pressure that rests upon the shoulders of a director. We are responsible for everything that affects the outcome of the movie. We are the ones with our names right below the title and will be the most criticized for any shortcomings. Whether or not it was our fault or even our job to take care of, the audience will blame us, and our image is on the line with every movie we do.

Directors are in the line of fire, everyday. Alongside actors, we are in the spotlight getting interviewed and promoting the film in any way possible. If anything goes wrong on set, it’s our fault. On the flipside, when things turn out spectacularly, we get all the credit. Although we may want to, the director cannot do everything. Each person has a specific job and we are there to guide these individuals. Ultimately, a director is only as good as his crew.

The crewmembers are the branches to our tree. A director cannot complete every task alone. A director cannot even be a part of every task sometimes. We have to leave many specific jobs up to other people. We must rely on our crewmembers and trust that they will not fail us. This was a very difficult concept to grasp. It actually took until after filming to finally realize that the best directors are the ones that know when to step back.

Pride gets in the way. I felt like, “I’m the director. I need to do everything. If I’m not the busiest person here, I’m not doing my job right.” When in reality, we
need to let everyone do their jobs and give them that freedom. It’s a scary thing to do, especially working with a crew that doesn’t have years of experience.

Working primarily with students ended up becoming a very difficult task at first. This was anticipated though. It took a while for us to find balance and fit comfortably in our roles because not everyone knew what he or she was doing, and no one had actually done this before. There were many times that I would see a problem before it would happen, but I couldn’t do anything about it because it wasn’t my job.

In the beginning, I would try to fix these problems before they occurred. It was easier if I just took care of things rather than watching someone fail, fall behind in production and have to pick up the pieces later on. This got me into a lot of trouble right away. My producers would tell me, “Focus on your job. That’s not your responsibility.” But then once something went wrong that I didn’t prevent, it was suddenly my fault. I was lost.

Being pulled in so many different directions led to a lot of confusion on my behalf. What really was my job as a director? What do I need to do? What can I actually do? What are my limits? How can I make sure everything gets done properly without doing it myself? These were the questions I needed to ask myself. The answers came one day at a time throughout the process. But during this time, I was vulnerable.

The issue for me was that I got emotionally attached to the project. “Hell at Heathridge could be my in,” I thought. “This could be huge if we do it right.” From
the very beginning, I was blinded. I saw what this movie could be and not what it was. I was distracted and too busy trying to do everyone else’s job that I was starting to lose track of my own.

I wanted to get *Hell at Heathridge* into theaters. In order to do that, we needed better marketing. I would try to reorganize this department because I saw that it was beginning to fall behind. Then, something else would occur. I would try fixing those problems. I was trying to do everything rather than rely on other people. This person needed to do that. They weren’t doing this. He said that, but did this. She’s not doing her job. Wait... All of the sudden, I’m not doing mine either. I got so caught up in trying to make this movie something it never was going to be that I lost touch with what I really needed to be doing.

I wanted to make everything perfect. I expected too much from everyone, and now I wasn’t even doing my job. Time was moving by too fast, and I needed to snap out of it. I took a step back and asked myself, “What do I need to do?”

First, I needed to figure out how to properly do my job. I had to realize that one person could not do everything. I had to accept that this was a team effort, and some people wouldn’t be pulling their weight. Then, I needed to learn my place in alignment with the producers. I had to stop trying to run the show. A lot of our problems catered around the fact that this was a student film. The team was inexperienced. We had no money and no audience, yet, and the production was tied in with this class element.
This was an educational project. Things were run a little bit differently than they would be on a major production, but that doesn’t mean my actions could change because of this. At the end of the day, this was a learning experience. I overstepped my ground in many situations because there was so much at risk for me. I did not want to waste this opportunity. But in doing so, I would get into trouble with my producers. I would see things that they couldn’t, and this frustrated me. In a sense, I was trying to do their job and mine because I thought I knew what I was talking about.

In many cases I did know what I was talking about, but so did my producers. We were just on different pages. It was in the midst of all of this, when we really were beginning to have issues with the script. A couple months went by, and I felt each version of the script was getting worse. Bryan was getting harder to get in contact with, and we were still waiting for some very important changes to be made in order to start working on some essential areas of pre-production. Caroline and I would bring up these issues to our producers without receiving any results. “Stay out of it,” they would say. “We’ve got it handled. Just stick with doing your job.”

Blinded by all the chaos and desperate for making this movie the best it could be, Caroline and I began making changes to the script ourselves. “If Bryan isn’t going to fix this thing now, we’re going to do it,” we thought. Little did we know, we were crossing a very fine line within the chain of command.

After finding out what we were doing, Traci and Estee sat us down in the production office and basically told us that in the “real world,” this is where we
would be fired. All we wanted to do was make the script better and get things done in a timely manner. Although Bryan wrote the script, this was our baby. In many cases though, the directors do not have the power to make significant changes to the script. There is a very strategic business method that we must follow in the movie business. In a way, it’s Hollywood politics. Never disobey your producer. This is what we did wrong.

Next time, when I would see changes in the script that had to be made, I needed to be much more strategic with my actions and better develop my communication techniques. Trying to intervene and take things into my own hands only caused more problems. It created a gap between my producers and me, a gap Bryan would continue to fill. At the end of the day, never violate the terms of your producer. Trust what they say. There may be more to the story than you know.

We were unaware, at the time, that there was a reason Traci and Estee did not want us messing with the script. They knew changes needed to be made, but they also were tied to a strict contract with Bryan. Rewriting the script could have put us in deep water according to his contract.

Knowing that by the time Bryan would give us a first draft of *Hell at Heathridge*, he had forced our producers into giving him more authority in the production. There were many provisions added to his contract, including one that stated he alone was the only writer. Any changes to the script needed to be made by him. A single word of dialogue, whether changed on set or before hand, could result in him pulling the script and leaving us with nothing. This made a director’s job very
difficult. Especially on set, there are many times when an actor says their line and it doesn’t have the same effect as it did on paper. In addition, there are many other cases where it is absolutely was necessary to changes things based upon the circumstances presented by the day.

Having what I felt was a subpar script was bad enough. But what made it worse and caused many problems on set was that Bryan really believed it was top notch, flawless. His philosophy on “evil” and how he wanted this movie to play out made sense to him. But it wouldn’t translate properly on screen, and he didn’t see this. He refused to take any input from others.

After my controversial discussion with the producers, I realized that didn’t have time to worry about the script any longer. My time was precious, and I had a lot of other very important tasks to complete. I needed to practice acting like I would if this was million-dollar production. “There’s always post-production,” I thought. “Maybe then I could fix all of these problems in the script.”

Jumping forward to post-production, we were able to fix a lot of these issues. After utilizing Dr. Coombs’ audience analysis class, we discovered that everything I was pointing out with the script was exactly on key with the audience’s reactions. I cannot count the number of times I wanted to say, “I told you so,” to my producers during the post-production process. Actually, I caught myself saying it a few times. It was just too hard to resist!
But at the end of the day, to our producers, this wasn’t about making an amazing movie. It was about students learning how to make an amazing movie. This is where we found ourselves on different pages throughout the process.
CHAPTER 6

SETTING UP A SHOT

The shortest part of the filming process is actually when the camera is recording. The time between action and cut typically does not run over a couple minutes and many times can be even less than sixty seconds. There is a lot of sitting around on set with various intervals of everyone running around. A scene is broken into multiple shots. This allows the audience to better see what is going on. You don’t notice it, but every couple seconds a cut is made and all of the sudden it’s a different camera angle. This keeps things interesting and allows for subtle clues and foreshadowing. The type of shot, lighting, angle, timing and movement creates a specific mood and feel. Add in music, background elements and other post-production techniques, and we are using all of these tools to control the audience’s thoughts and emotions during that specific moment.

Everything down to the tiniest prop, the extras in the background, the subtle sound effects you hear, is paid for, controlled, and put there for a reason. What we choose to show and not show in a shot changes the audience perspective completely. We have full control over everything, and, if done right, most of this goes unnoticed by the viewer. That is the point though, subconscious manipulation. No one really understands how much goes into one shot. On set, it all begins with the Director’s blocking diagrams.
Since we had such a short period of time for pre-production, and were behind due to delays with the script, having to fill department head roles, and focusing heavily on fundraising during the spring, Caroline and I had to complete many of our pre-production tasks during the summer. Each day we would film for about twelve hours. Having both day and night shoots, filming took place either very early in the morning to late in the evening or late at night until early in the morning.

After filming, Caroline and I would meet up and plan out the rest of the week. This would take anywhere from four to five hours at a time so we really were working seventeen hour days, five to six days a week. During this time we would create our blocking diagrams, establish a shot list, and organize everything in a specific order so that we could work as efficiently as possible the following day.

We would begin by visiting the location and mapping a diagram. Adding to that characters and camera angles, we would plan out all of the action. For the more difficult scenes, I would also draw storyboards to keep everything cohesive. Next, we would explain these lists and diagrams to our Director of Photography Matt Petrunak. Together, we then would work with the crew to establish the proper lighting and audio techniques needed for each shot. These blocking diagrams and shot lists were our guides throughout the entire filming process. It was very important that they were completed and given to the crew members in a timely manner before shooting.

On the day of, we would begin with a department head meeting to make sure that everyone was on the same page. The actors would come in and begin getting
their hair and makeup done, and we would all head over to set. On set, we begin with a run-through. We would go through the scene in its entirety, putting marks for our actors so the crew knew where to set up. The run-through was more for the crew than the actors, but it benefited everyone. After this, our actors would leave; we might rehearse lines with them while they were continuing to get their hair and makeup done. Then we would head back to set.

On set, it can take anywhere from two to four hours to get everything set up for the first shot. Lighting is the most time consuming process. It's tedious and the most important element in creating an effective tone for the scene. During this primary setup, we also prepare for the rest of the day's shots.

With such complicated lighting setups, you always want to film the shots facing one direction first before you switch around and shoot facing the other direction. After the lighting setup was complete and the actors were dressed and ready, we would do one rehearsal, tweak things, and begin filming until we got the perfect take.

Contrary to popular belief, the director isn't exactly running the show on set. We are at the top of the chain of command, but we need to focus on the look and outcome of each shot. We communicate primarily with the actors, our director of photography, and our assistant director.

Our assistant director's job is to keep everyone on task for us. She is the one keeping everything organized, and she needs to be the one running around making sure everyone stays on task. The assistant director yell's quiet on set, marker, and
keeps everyone working. But, the director is the only one with the power to say action and cut.

A director needs to always stay focused, sit back, and analyze the shot without any distractions. He tells the director of photography what he wants, but it is up to the director of photography to work with the lighting and grips to make it happen. Although the crew members are constantly moving around and lifting equipment, a director has to continuously be thinking ten steps ahead. We constantly have to be thinking about how each shot will come together and how this scene will fit in with the entire movie. We need to be thinking of questions that anyone might ask us and come up with those answers on the spot. Directors need to know what the next step is, who needs to do what, what the next step is after that and so on. The crew might have physical challenges to overcome, but our job is mentally taxing. It isn’t easy being in command. There is a lot of pressure. However, as exhausting as this job is, it really is a lot of fun.

Good directors are always on. We have to have high energy all of the time. If crew call is 6am, we are there at 5:30am. No matter how tired or upset we are, on set we are in the best mood and have too much energy to control. We set the tone for the rest of the crew. No matter what has gone wrong, we must stay positive, be quick on our feet and keep up the moral of our crew. Directors must motivate and inspire. We are the coach, the leader, the friend, the enemy, the boss, and the example to follow.
There were many days when I would come home, Caroline and I would complain to each other about how terrible the writing was for this next scene or how awful this last choice location was going to be for the crew. But the next day it was the most important scene of the movie. “It was the best scene ever. This set is fantastic. This movie is going to be great,” we would need to keep everyone’s optimism up in order to get their full commitment for the tiring work day.

Especially with our actors, we would need to have a thick curtain up. In front, we had everything under control, but behind the curtain, so many problems were arising. Like the directors, our actors had to always be in a specific mentality. They would sit around for hours, but then in one second, once I yelled action, they would have to instantly be on. “As an actor, you bring a unique talent to the world of production. You may also inadvertently bring along baggage” (Bridgewater 18). Since an actor’s mood greatly affects their acting, and it was important to always do our best to keep our actors in a comfortable state.

However, actors are catered to so much because of this reason. We baby them. It is no wonder that so many professional actors have inflated egos and entitlement problems. We enable it, but, in many cases, it’s necessary to get what we need out of them.

However, it isn’t an easy job being an actor. It is a totally different kind of work. Like directing, it’s mentally taxing. In the case with Hell at Heathridge, many of our actors had never been in a film before. We had to help them clear their nerves. “Actors are more relaxed if they know what your expectations are” (Foust 80). As
directors, Caroline and I had to be clear, patient, and protective of our actors. In a way, our relationship was like that of a parent to a child.

When a director is creating the vision for a film, he uses the script. Everything done on set is based on the director’s interpretation of the script. With a very particular writer on board with this production, my job became much more difficult than anticipated. We thought the trouble with Bryan had ended, but, in reality, it was just beginning.

Bryan decided to call off work during the entire summer so that he could be on set each day and “keep us directors in line.” He didn’t trust that we would follow his script in the way he wanted and began to overstep his ground. This began to cause many more problems with the production.
Typically, unless you’re working on a television show, the writer has no reason to be on set. In fact, they should never be on set because things can get confusing between what the writer intends and what the director interprets. It affects the whole crew and every part of the filmmaking process. There is a specific way that a script must be attacked. The director decides this plan. That is their job, and any interference with this task causes uncertainties, tension, and obstructions to the filmmaking process.

Although, Bryan’s job was completed, the script was finished, and he wasn’t planning to change anything with it, fear that he might pull the script led to our producers to allow him to “help out” on set each day. Everyday of production became more and more difficult for us. Suddenly, there was three directors instead of two.

We would start working one way, and Bryan would say, “No, I intended for things to go like this actually.” Arguments would arise, the crewmembers would get conflicted, and we would then get set behind. I understand Bryan’s intention to preserve his vision and tried to take his opinions into consideration during the planning process. However, you do not argue with a director on set. We come in with a plan, and, given the short amount of time we have, this plan needs to be
followed in order to ensure efficiency. At this point in time, it wasn’t about Bryan’s vision anymore. To meet our deadline, it had to be about our interpretation of the script. It was our vision now. Two directors with conflicting opinions were enough, but having to add a third voice caused major setbacks.

Eventually, it got to the point where Bryan would talk to our actors after we previously gave them direction. He would tell them to perform in a different way, contradicting our direction. This was not his place. It confused our actors and caused mistrust in our authority and the ability of this production. Once, I knew who I was as a director, how things really worked, and how to properly attack this, it finally became time to put an end to how things were going.

We reviewed the writer’s contract and discovered that there was some verbiage that allowed for a loophole. I met with our associate producers and we created a plan of action that would push Bryan out of the light in our executive producer’s eyes. Once they had realized that Bryan was out of line, we took one hour to all sit down and explain how things were now going to run on set. From that point on, I set firm boundaries with Bryan and kept him far away from our actors.

Once he realized that he was losing control, Bryan began exerting all efforts to keep the upper hand. It didn’t seem to be about the script anymore at this point. He began directly and indirectly attacking Caroline and me. Throughout this process, he would try to isolate us from our crew. He would stop at nothing. Saying little things here and there, Bryan would speak ill of us to people on and off set. This
began to stir up controversy, but ultimately the crew trusted their directors and put their faith in us.

Knowing now that I could get away with much more in regards to the script, I began holding my ground when Bryan would threaten the production. I now had full control of what was happening on set, and I used this to my advantage. I still wanted to fix some things with the script. If something needed to be cut because of time, I had that power. I still couldn’t touch the dialogue, but if an actor happened to slip up and say the wrong line, I could roll with it. If a scene needed to be changed due to scheduling or other circumstances, then we would make those necessary changes. No questions asked. I finally had the authority that I needed to do my job right, and I took full advantage of this. I was going to begin fixing this script.

There just so happened to be a scene that I felt was a cheesy montage scene, which attached to an already 20-minute-long rehearsal sequence, didn’t need to be in the film. Caroline never wanted to use this montage scene. I thought it was campy, but didn’t care too much either way. We were running behind schedule and had to choose scenes to cut that weren’t relevant to furthering the plot. We communicated with our producers and ended up cutting this montage from our production schedule along with a few other irrelevant scenes. Bryan was furious.

The morning before filming, he came into our office and began throwing a legitimate temper tantrum. This happened a lot, but, since directed only at us, Caroline and I were usually the only ones around to witness his manic anger.
Frantically trying to convince us to put this montage back into the movie, Bryan was loosing his composure. We responded with a simple but firm “no.”

Later in the day, we began getting ahead of schedule. Bryan spent this entire time slowly convincing our producer that this montage scene was necessary. It wasn't. But come lunchtime, they decided it should be put back in the film.

Since it was a last minute decision, I had this montage scene scheduled for the last shots of the day. Every six hours we are required to feed all of the people on set. Feeding a crew of our size, this usually cost about one hundred to three hundred dollars a day. After twelve hours, everyone needs to go home. This is a union standard. It was the last day we had in this location. We had just finished eating lunch and had a couple shots left until the montage scene.

My assistant director was fantastic. However, she did not have the respect from the crew that I did. There were many times when I ended up having to do both her job and my own in order to keep everyone on track.

At that time, we could have finished in an hour and moved on to the montage scene, but I let Emily handle things without my help. I sat back and watched as everyone began to move a little bit slower and have a little bit more fun than usual. Time went by and unfortunately for Bryan, we never ended up being able to film his montage scene.

Attempting to become a first-class comedian, Bryan tried to add a lot of humor in this horror flick, to the point where it was becoming distracting. I'm all for
some comedy, but there is a time and place. This was a horror film, and I felt the jokes weren’t even funny or even the least bit clever.

One of these attempted comedic moments was placed during the middle of our walkthrough scene, when the tension and fear was starting to build up. Bryan has our character Dale yelling, “boobs,” in the middle of the stairwell. I felt this was desperately out of context and quite ridiculous. I solved this dilemma by filming this shot separately from the previous ones so that the sequence would be able to flow without it. In addition, we shot this from the opposite angle, making it nearly impossible to cut it into the sequence without crossing the line.

Furthermore, little things here and there were adapted to the script on set. These changes were made in order to clarify important aspects of the film to the audience. This was necessary. These changes were minor, but it made all the difference. We were taking what was written and tweaking things so that the writing would translate more effectively on camera. This is our job as directors. We also made changes based on the technical limits that we had.

All of these adjustments to the script infuriated our writer, but it was for the benefit of the film. Bryan was not a trained filmmaker, and once I realized that I knew what I was talking about, I stopped worrying about what Bryan thought or believed. This movie wasn’t going to align perfectly with his script based on our small amount of time and resources.

Sacrifices had to be made, and I had to make adjustments that even I did not want to make. But that was the task. There were hard choices to be made, and only
the directors could be the ones to make these decisions. I felt that Bryan couldn't see
the bigger picture. He had difficulty understanding why we couldn't make this movie
exactly how it was written and how it was precisely pictured in his head.

For a movie, it's almost like the writer is speaking in Chinese. The director is
there to translate these words for an English listener. Sometimes, the direct
translation of a word means something completely different to an English speaking
community. Sometimes that word doesn't even exist in our language. A translator
must use their knowledge and skills to convey the intent in order for the listener
comprehend what is actually being said. The same goes with translating one
medium to another.

We take one sentence of dialogue and break that up into tone of voice, body
movement, facial expression, camera angle, shot size, shot composition, and
everything else. A picture says a thousand words. A motion picture says a billion.
Every element is important. When we read one sentence of dialogue, one paragraph
of action in a script, we need to see these billions of words and turn them into
moving pictures for the audience to understand.

Everyone sees things differently. As a director, it is that natural, but
practiced, gift we have that allows us to portray a thought in a way that where
audience comprehends the intent and reacts in the way we want them to. It was
more important that this idea of Hell at Heathridge was translated rather than every
specific detail that Bryan wanted. Through all of the struggles, I had gained the
confidence needed to realize that I knew exactly what I was doing. By the end of this project, the stars would align. I had finally become a director.
WORKS CITED


