Bret & Vince Get Framed for Murder

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**Introduction**

Every film demands something different from its director. While the vocabulary and basic hierarchy stay relatively consistent from project to project, the approach to the creation of a film is as unique and idiosyncratic as the content and characters that are to be burned to celluloid. The key criteria for assessing the necessary approach to a film are as follows: genre, tone, and directorial point-of-view. As one traverses the steps toward the creation of a final film (writing, directing, and editing), these criteria gradually solidify. This thesis will give context to and dissect the choice of approach used in crafting the short film, *Bret & Vince Get Framed for Murder*.

**Overview**

Before I dig into each stage of the process, I should give a brief overview of the film, what I hoped to accomplish with it, and my basic ideology of film and the role of the director.

In the movie, lovable dope Vince drags pessimistic Bret to an upscale hotel to attend a pickup artist seminar, led by the mystical Pickup Guru, E. Nigma. One thing leads to another, and by the end of the night, E. Nigma is found dead in his room. Now, if the guys do not piece together their wild night, they will be nabbed for a murder they did not commit.
In my time here at Ohio University, I have created several short films, ranging from fantastical to black comedy to drama. While the genres have varied, all of my films have had a grime and maliciousness to them that I have not been able to shake. Undoubtedly stemming from my personal outlook, it is an aspect of my films that are distinct to me as a director. In an effort to push myself in new directions, I wanted to see if I could deliver on a mainstream genre while maintaining the honesty of personal expression that had made itself apparent in my films.

By choosing to tackle a genre I had not played with in some time, to work with a longer form narrative than I had ever previously attempted, and to collaborate with a mixture of trained and untrained acting talent, I put myself in a situation demanding adaptation and initiative, which guaranteed this project to be a learning experience. Working with a straightforward comedic piece, with little room for my darker inclinations, I decided to try a fresh acting style for me - improv. Films in this vein are heavily structured and driven by a fairly simple plot, but allow screen time for their actors to play off of one another and make each other, and the audience, laugh. By utilizing these methods, in complement to the script, even the darker plot points end up being elevated and given a sense of levity.

That being said, even with improvisation, a film will quickly dissolve into aimless scenes and meandering plot lines without first having them concreted on the page. Luckily, I had Amy on my team. The screenwriter of the film, Amy Taylor is an alumna of the School of Film Graduate Program, currently working in Los Angeles.
From the first draft, the material took heavy influence from television shows like *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *The Office*. There is an emphasis on character tropes and stereotypes in Amy’s work, which makes her protagonists instantly recognizable, yet not cliché. By crafting these characters using molds that audiences know, they become larger than life, along with their tale. It is because of this, along with the planned visuals and an improvisational style, that this film has the style and pace that I have always sought in my films, while still telling a story that audiences have not seen before.

It has been my personal goal here to learn the vocabulary, relationship, and dynamic between the director and the various key positions throughout the process of filmmaking. Although my favorite filmmakers are considered to be auteurs, this is a highly debated term that can lead student and independent filmmakers astray. Auteurism is often misconstrued as short hand for a filmmaker that “does it all.” In an effort to create a film that is irrefutably their own, students often shoulder too much responsibility, which can be to the film’s detriment. Digging into the history of the auteur theory shows that this understanding is fairly outmoded and inaccurate.

Auteurism was first theorized in the pioneer French film criticism magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, in the 1954 article *Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français* by François Truffaut.

“*These are, however, French cineastes, and it happens — curious coincidence — that these are auteurs...[They] often write their dialogue and some of them invent, themselves, the stories that they direct.*” (Truffaut)
In this article and in subsequent manifestos and explorations, Truffaut and his fellow film scholars began to cultivate and articulate the idea of director as author. With the camera as his pen, the director weaves a story intricately and precisely on screen. The international film community initially embraced this theory, and underappreciated American directors like Howard Hawks, Robert Aldrich, and Preston Sturges were suddenly being recognized as artists. Like most of the articles in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Truffaut’s rhetoric on auteurism was brash and provocative, declaring the director as being a film’s singular voice. *Cahiers du Cinema*’s own Andre Bazin wrote an article in 1957 titled *On the Auteur Theory*, which expressed his trepidation with such a hyperbolic definition of film directing:

“...its exclusive practice would lead to another peril: the negation of the work to the benefit of the exaltation of its auteur... [The Auteur Theory] should be completed by other approaches to the cinematographic fact which would restore to the film its value as a work. This is not to deny the role of the auteur, but to restore to him the preposition [of] without which the noun auteur is only a lame concept. "Auteur," without doubt, but of what?” (Bazin)

This slow and steady backlash to the theory was finally brought to a head in the 1960’s, its American acknowledgement attributed to New York critic, Andrew Sarris. He reengaged in the debate of just how much control a director had over a project, and where credit was truly deserved. It was not long before Pauline Kael joined debate. Kael argued that the theory was all but obsolete, when the contributions of the cinematographer, writer, and countless other collaborators are taken into account (Kael). Sarris had the last word in saying that while the idea of the auteur as being a single voice is hyperbole, he suggests that Auteurism should be instead
defined as a “signature from the director.” One should lend “a distinguishable personality” and “interior meaning,” which is lent given the friction between the director and his material (Sarris, The Auteur Theory and the Perils of Pauline).

As it stands today, the theory’s validity and very definition is still heavily debated in the film community — seen by some as a badge of honor and by others as a four-letter word. I feel that Bazin nailed the biggest pitfall of Auteurism with his expressed apprehension of extremes. Filmmakers that are so transfixed on maintaining control over their films, in an effort to show off a personal style or persuasion, often strangle the life from an otherwise potentially fruitful film. I believe that the more creative minds involved in a movie’s culmination and fruition, the more fully realized the director’s vision will become. This idea is stated in the position’s title itself. As director, it is my job to utilize the talents at my disposal, letting them bring their own creative influence and force to the project, and steer (direct) them through the process to see my vision carried out. It is when one closes oneself off to these potential horizons that a film becomes narrow and provincial. The converse of that is an indecisive director that lets loose the reigns of his film, leading to a meandering sloppiness that lacks the unity of a single vision. Thus is the balancing act one must perform in every facet of production when directing a film.

Writing
During the summer months of 2011, I began thinking about what my thesis would eventually be. As I assessed what I had already done and what I still wanted to tackle during my time at Ohio University, a set of priorities for my next project started to take shape. Firstly, I wanted to work in a longer-form narrative than previously attempted. Up to that point in my career as a director, I had focused on utilizing the short-form medium for just that — short, quick concepts that played out in less than ten minutes. I felt the need to experiment with a longer-form narrative structure. The idea of directing something not so conceptual and truncated intrigued me, as it would finally allow me to work with actors over a longer span of time, honing in on a character with each, and then stitching the different scenes and scenarios together into one solid piece. In an effort to strive for this, while still keeping the production somewhat feasible, I wanted to craft something akin to a television pilot.

Approximately twenty-two minutes in length, this format utilizes ellipses and structural efficiency to tell a whole story without long running time of a feature. I hope one day to transition into feature length endeavors, and saw this as a necessary step in that direction. Secondly, I wanted to work with a screenwriter. It was my preconception that having a second mind with whom I could collaborate on ideas and structure would allow me a greater chance to approach the material in a more objective way, purely as a director.

Through an email exchange spanning several months, Amy Taylor pitched multiple script ideas, and I returned to her with ideas of my own. In August, Amy
pitched me the idea of two best friends that go to a pickup artist seminar. Through pure coincidence, a week prior to receiving this email, I had read the first few chapters of *The Game* by Neil Strauss, in which a New York Times journalist infiltrates the secret underground culture of pickup artists (Strauss). The potential for this peculiar cast of characters really interested me, and I was convinced it would make for a compelling comedy. I told Amy about the coincidence, and we set off.

Initially, Amy was apprehensive about writing something too ambitious, with a running time longer than the typical student short film. I pushed her to set aside budgetary and pragmatic reservations, and urged her to write first and foremost something that she would want to watch. We spoke at length about the television format, a structure with which Amy was already very comfortable. Within a few days, she delivered the first draft.

The material calls on several influences that came before it. In the early drafts of Bret and Vince, it borrowed heavily from FX cable network’s half-hour sitcom, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (McElhenney). The show, which has been on air since 2005, revolves around “four young friends with big egos and slightly arrogant attitudes [who] are the proprietors of an Irish bar in Philadelphia (Needham).” Specifically, Amy and I looked at the two lead characters — Charlie and Mac. These characters may not be the sharpest, but through perseverance and blind confidence, they drag themselves into one ill-advised situation after another. No matter where they end up, the dynamic of their friendship ensures they will be bickering and jabbing at
each other the whole way there. In Adam Kotsko’s sensationally named book *Why We Love Sociopaths*, he details several observations about the show that speak to my film as well (Kotsko). He suggests that, while shows like *Seinfeld* strived to keep a “toehold in reality,” *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Bret & Vince*, do not. They are simply schemes and comedic situations “all the way down.”

“...the main setting for Always Sunny...is a bar (hence public like [Seinfeld’s] diner) that they all own together (hence private like [Seinfeld’s] apartment. Yet the characters show no aptitude whatsoever for running a bar...Hence the characters’ “job”... is not a connection to the world of adult competence at all, but is instead a previous scheme that is now persisting out of sheer inertia.” (Kotsko)

Although Kotsko’s section on *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is focused on a comparison to *Seinfeld*, he touches on a vein common to the FX show and my own movie. Comedy must have roots in our reality, in identifiable aspects of daily life like jobs, relationships, settings, etc. However, a suspension of disbelief is implicit in the viewing of a comedy. Once a connection has been established, an audience immediately draws parallels to their own lives, then engage where the content veers from the norm. For example, in *Bret and Vice Get Framed for Murder*, Vince strides into a bar, a setting for which we can imagine a set of social norms. As soon as he slides up to a girl with his suave grin, we are prepared to relish in the absurdity of whatever comes next. Given the fact that this character has been pumped full of misinformation, we can only expect the worst. Now we will continue watching to see to what lengths this character will go.
An additional influence that is necessary to point out for the scripting phase was NBC’s *The Office* (Carell), a “mockumentary on a group of typical office workers, where the workday consists of ego clashes, inappropriate behavior, and tedium (Needham).” While the style of delivery, pacing, and broadness of characters are radically different between NBC’s show and my film, there are parallels to the comedic structure in conjunction with power dynamics and relationships. *The Office* is quick to tell us who to root for, who to trust, and who we get to mock. What I feel is the masterstroke of the series is the budding romance between Jim and Pam. Jim Halpert (John Krasinski) is an apathetic worker of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company. He acknowledges his place in the world, and seems content in just getting through his day at a job he does not care for. Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer) is the receptionist of the paper company, and while she prides herself in her work more than Jim, she sees the triviality of her profession. The company for which these employees slave away is managed by Michael Scott (Steve Carell). Michael is hopelessly incompetent, and cannot go a day in the office without a social faux pas or managerial blunder. The series lets us know in the pilot that while the setting is in the real world, the comedy will come from the outrageousness of its characters. This works because we are given Jim and Pam through which to view these shenanigans. Once it is established that Jim sees Michael’s antics as pure buffoonery and nonsense, the world immediately becomes believable. If Jim and Pam were not there to comment on the antics of their boss, it would be straining credibility of the world every moment that Michael did not
make the entire company crash and burn. It is a delicate balance when working in heightened comedy. At what point does the world become so absurd that its ties to the who, what, and where of reality become irrelevant? How grounded can a world be in a show or film, while still subverting expectation and keeping the audience engaged? In my film, Bret knows E. Nigma is a con. This gives us a buoy with which to wade out deeper and deeper into the heightened antics of those around Bret, and eventually, of Bret himself.

The second manipulation of the audience stemming from Jim and Pam’s relationship in The Office can almost be defined as a distraction. The chemistry between the two characters is so imbued with romance, the hints at a previous life and possible futures so palpable, that the viewer is drawn to this subplot. While the audience is there, the writers are able to transport us to a higher level of absurdism. If not for this concrete focus on character, we would surely take a step back and dismiss it as unfeasible when Dwight (Rainn Wilson), veteran troublemaker, accidentally burns down the office, but keeps his job (Ssn. 5, Ep. 14, 2009). Or when Michael and Andy (Ed Helms), hapless follower, go off to Mexico spontaneously because there are no hors d'oeuvres at a party (Ssn. 7, Ep. 7, 2010). Just writing these scenarios out of context seems baffling, but in the moment, it works. This is due partially to the world’s fundamental truth and consistency in the show’s family of characters. In Bret & Vince, Amy and I fostered that sort of tracking dynamic between characters with our two titular leads. Are they going to leave this situation with their friendship intact? From
the beginning, we understand a history brotherly love that is now in jeopardy. We watch as the outside world does its best to pull the two characters apart, and our two leads fight to stay together.

This was how Amy and I framed discussions using popular television shows and films. I would cite other works, such as *The Office* or *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and how I thought they functioned. She would experiment with her own twist on the devices I wanted to employ, and then send the new scenes and pages back to me. Because our workflow was so cognisant of material that was already out there, we were able to craft a script that was aware of the underpinnings of its genre. With this understanding, we knew we could exploit, subvert, or build upon the audience’s expectations.

*Directing Section I: Talent*

With a finished script, it was time to find actors that would fit this family of misfit characters. I sent the script out to a few select actors in the School of Theater immediately. These were people Amy and I had in mind from the outset to play some of the minor roles. But what of the two leads, Bret and Vince? I was struggling to figure out where to look when an old friend invited me to a performance by the student improvisational comedy group, OU Improv.

My preconception of amateur improv was that I’d see a group of kids struggling to be clever in bits that ran too long. However, OU Improv blew me away.
These guys could walk out blind, immediately assume a relationship with the other performers without a spoken word, and deliver on the circumstances they generated spontaneously. Then, forty-five minutes later, they could recall those same characters and circumstances without missing a beat. I was enthralled. I immediately approached Luke Null and Sam Stefanak about collaborating; these men would later become Bret and Vince. They welcomed the idea, and even let me into closed OU Improv rehearsals where I could begin to see how they crafted performances that seemed so spontaneous and random.

There are many moments in film history attributed to actors reacting in the moment, unprompted. In *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick), Jack Nicholson bursts through a door with his axe. Shelly Duvall is pressed to the bathroom wall, shrieking in terror. Jack pushes his face up to the hole made by his weapon and maniacally screams, “Here’s Johnny.” In *Midnight Cowboy* (dir. John Schlesinger), Dustin Hoffman escorts Jon Voight across the street. Just as they enter the crosswalk, a cabbie blows right through the light. Voight is taken aback, but Hoffman slams on the hood and screams, “Hey, I’m walkin’ here,” before continuing on down the street. In *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese), Robert De Niro looks into the mirror with contempt and mutters, “You talkin’ to me?” Although wildly different, these scenes and lines have one thing in common: they were all unscripted improvisations by the actors in the moment.
While mostly confined to spare scenes and lines for a majority of mainstream films, several directors have utilized improvisation to a larger extent. An extreme example would be the work of Mike Leigh. Leigh starts with nothing but a cast. There is absolutely no prewritten script when Leigh assembles his cast of talented actors. They simply gather in a room, and being to feel out character choices, ideas, and select concepts they all find intriguing, eventually amounting to a loose structure. Once the groundwork is laid, they finally get to rehearsals. Leigh facilitates improvised scenes that could possibly lend to character exposition or plot advancement, but forces nothing. This process can take months before reaching this point (Movshovitz). After the cast and Leigh have “discovered” the film, he goes away for a bit to write, or at least his version of writing:

“[For Secrets and Lies.] Leigh’s shooting script [was] a list of seventy or so scenes marked up on a double-sided, five-by-four-inch piece of foam board that fit snugly in the filmmaker’s shirt pocket.” (Pride)

While admittedly extreme, this process speaks to the director’s ability to trust and utilize actors to their fullest creative potential. The greatest lesson taught by directing Bret & Vice Get Framed for Murder is that one does not need to have all of the answers. By creating a working environment that supported improvisation and experimentation, I needed only to know each given circumstance. They were able to deliver performances, through dialogue delivery, reactions and gestures, which were honest and genuine far beyond the scripted page. In the aforementioned example of Hoffman slamming on the hood of the cab in Midnight Cowboy, the moment only
happened because a cabbie blew through the roadblocks the production had set up. However, due to Hoffman’s surety of character, he could react to the rogue vehicle headed his way, then return to the scripted material, all without breaking his stride. Those are moments that are truly magical when burned to film, and the kind I sought to capture on my set.

An obvious connection to my work on *Bret & Vince* can be found in the films of the current director, Judd Apatow. After a brief television career producing the cult-classic series *Freaks and Geeks* (Feig) as well as the series *Undeclared* (Apatow), he moved fully into film work. He has since established his own brand of film, with directorial efforts including *40 Year Old Virgin* (Carell) and *Knocked Up* (Rogen), as well as earning Producer credits on *Superbad* (Cera), *Anchorman* (Ferrell), and *Step Brothers* (Ferrell, Step Brothers). His work, both what he produces and directs, bares such a telling texture and feel that an audience immediately knows when they are watching one of his films. With a fairly straightforward visual storytelling style, their true identity resides in the style of delivery. The plots of Apatow’s films often seem to follow Buster Keaton’s famous ideal: “A good comedy story can be written on a penny postcard (McPherson).” That being said, the plots are still extremely tight and structured, allowing his actors to experiment with a looser improvisational style of acting. It is this freeness of an Apatow film that I sought to duplicate in my work on *Bret & Vince*. The roller coaster has a set track; it is the people on the ride that get the adrenaline rush.
In John Abbott’s book *Improvisation: In Rehearsal* (Abbott), he stresses that trust is the fundamental element to successful improv. The actors must trust each other. They must know that they are safe to take leaps and to threaten veering off track, because they have that other person as a safety net. It is this reinforcement that takes an improv actor out of their own head, away from their own insecurities or limitations and into the reality of the performance. It is the same interaction between the actor and the director. “Let the actors do their work, I say. Trust them. They can work it out. (Abbott 7).” I made it my number one priority to gain the trust and respect of my principle actors, instilling in them confidence that I had a thorough vision into which they could buy. I reinforced that they should “dare to be dull,” trusting that if they went astray, I would lead them back to the path. Our courtship to achieve mutual trust began that night I saw them perform. This courting continued into rehearsal, and eventually onto the set. By the time we were in front of the camera, we were all on the same boat, rowing in the same direction.

Knowing that I would be working with improv actors for the principal roles, I put the script under a new lens. How could I use the tight script that Amy and I labored over as a skeletal structure in which to let these actors play? Luckily, it was mostly a matter of repurposing the fundamentals of writing. In Robert McKee’s seminal screenwriting book, *Story* (McKee), he outlines the principle purpose of a scene. Characters must enter the scene in one condition, and exit the scene under different circumstances (McKee 259). If this is not so, the scene is unnecessary and should be
excised. So, starting large, scene-to-scene, I had a framework in which to work. In
Scene One of Bret & Vince, Bret frantically convinces Vince of the gravity of the
situation. Vince consoles him. By the end, Vince is bitterly giving Bret the silent
treatment, and Bret is in disbelief of the juvenility secreting from his sidekick. That, in
and of itself, would have been enough to facilitate a scene between two improvisers.
From there, I could work my way inwards, from scenes, to the beats within the scenes,
to tactics within the beats, and finally to the very subtext of each line and gesture.
Once I had all of this homework done, I would be able to lead improv performances,
controlling just how much of the actors I wanted to come through given the
circumstance. At times, I would be able to get exactly the rhythm I wanted, but let
them paraphrase a line or two. Other times, I would give them the beats I needed them
to hit and the reason why, and then let them roll off of each other.

I was fortunate enough to have Professor Jeanette Buck as my tutor during the
quarter I spent preparing for the film. Through our tutorial, I was able to bring in the
actors, experiment with different approaches, then bounce the results off of Jeanette
and discuss. There were successes and failures, but ultimately it was an important
growth experience for me.

Prior to Bret & Vince, my primary director/actor relationships had been with
student actors from the Ohio University School of Theater. These actors are trained in
the Meisner technique, a style that draws heavily from daydreaming and emotional
recall (Longwell). Because my actors were not formally trained, we were concerned a
lack of inner life would immediately read on screen and drain the performances of any
and all credibility. In an attempt to prevent this from happening, I worked with each
actor to develop a back-story for his/her character. I then staged several rehearsals
with the actors in which they acted out pivotal moments in their past. In one instance,
we acted out the day Vince came home from getting dumped by Sheila. Although this
is only alluded to in the actual film, we never get to see the true fallout of the character
and how Bret and Vince hold each other up. Playing this out helped the actors begin to
grasp who their characters were, as well as where their boundaries lay and how their
dynamic played out in a “real situation.” Additionally, on set, if and when Vince
needed a reminder of the gravity of this relationship and how it affects his decisions
later on, we were then able to cite the scene from rehearsal as motivation.

Another improv rehearsal session that really affected the spin of the material
was fairly unexpected. I met with Joel Stigliano and Marissa Wolf, two actors from the
School of Theater that were the first to get the script. The detective roles were written
with them in mind, and I had a good working relationship with them previously. We
met up, with the intention to simply discuss the characters. As we started thinking
about various back-story elements and how those elements shaped who the characters
were and how they interacted with each other, we decided to get a scene up on its feet.
Using my Assistant Director as a stand in, we tried the first power dynamic suggested
by the material. Once we played that out, we toyed with an alternate take on the text.
After each variation, we would discuss how it felt and where we could go next. One
could see that the actors really came alive, becoming vocal about how they were feeling and taking ownership of their choices. Before long, we started to build a dynamic between them that had potential to morph and evolve as the film progressed, something the film desperately needed in order to elevate the interrogation room scenes to something more than expositional filler. Marissa went from steely point-person to team player, and Joel went from background pencil pusher to peer. By rehearsing and utilizing improv, we had stumbled into a way to elevate the text and give the audience another interesting character dynamic with which to engage.

Section II: Cinematography

As a filmmaker, I place a high priority on the importance of evocative visual storytelling. With previous works, I started by storyboarding the entire film, then used those storyboards as a blueprint from which to direct. With this film, I had been so entrenched in the script work that I had not even thought of how to tell the story visually. I actually fell upon a visual strategy for the film just before a rehearsal with my actors. I was preparing to rehearse a scene in which Bret has a show down with E. Nigma in the bar. Bret sits at the end of the bar, drinking alone, while E. Nigma and Vince scan the crowd for a woman to pickup. I was thinking about how we would get into the scene, and decided to use Bret as our introduction. Bret had just been betrayed by his best friend. Vince was at the other end of the bar, falling in line with this babbling cult leader. The camera would start square on Bret, seeing him blankly
staring ahead, doing his best to ignore the rambling. Then, we would dolly past him and shoot off his back and down the bar, revealing Bret’s supposed sidekick, arm-in-arm with the enemy. It informed me so much about the characters, the dynamic, and where their relationship was at that point in the film, I started storyboarding as fast as I could.

Based on this shot, I was able to then develop the rest of the film’s visual approach. E. Nigma was a huge character. I chose to compose him in shots where we would see as much of him as possible. To reinforce the conflict between Bret and E. Nigma, I would frame E. Nigma off of Bret’s shoulder, and blocked it so that Bret always kept his distance from E. Nigma. This let Nate Dicken (E. Nigma) have the freedom to add an absurd physicality to the character, uninhibited by the frame. This simultaneously always planted the audience in Bret’s view of E. Nigma, as a ridiculous, otherworldly clown that is too big for even a stage or a ballroom. This distancing strategy is similar to the one used in The King’s Speech, directed by Tom Hooper (Firth). Utilizing extreme angles and reality-distorting wide angle lenses, one feels the protagonist’s anxiety and discomfort in everything from public speaking to one-on-one conversations.

Meeting with Juan Guerrero, the cinematographer, for the first time, we discussed preferred methods, priorities, and how to help each other get the best out of the project. One thing we agreed on is something I do for every film, whether I am shooting or directing. I find it an absolute necessity to define a very clear and concise
visual style for each film I make. This usually ends up being a list of five or more bullet points that dictate rules for camera movement, placement, lighting palette, and texture. This process is used by many of my favorite directors, most recently by Terrence Malick. For Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (Pitt), he and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki devised a similarly strict set of rules. This list included tenets such as shooting in available, natural light, seeking depth of focus and composition, and sticking to wide-angle lenses (B). On a production of that scope, an adherence to a visual style helps to narrow the vast possibility of choices and solidify just what the film will look and feel like. For my productions, it is done so that, no matter the instance (be it one of unplanned beauty that must be captured or one where time is of the essence and a quick decision is to be made on the spot), one can say with absolute certainty that the shot in question will fit in with the aesthetic one is building.

As this visual system evolved and matured, we started to look at the use of the frame. How could we use mise-en-scene and composition to speak to where the characters were in their ever-changing relationship? We decided that the two-shot would be the composition we would seek to implement most selectively. When they were together, either both being put in the hot seat, judged, or in the rare case they were actually seeing eye-to-eye, we would hit the two shot. If they were being directly torn apart by a character, we would frame that character between them. Otherwise, we would incrementally move from singles to over-the-shoulders, depending on the status of their relationship. While this inevitably makes the film cutty, a benefit to this type
of coverage is it allows for ultimate control of tempo, as well as displays a visual style that serves a greater purpose to the narrative.

Section III: Costume/Production Design

As my cinematographer and I dug deeper into the movie’s aesthetic, color palette and other design elements started coming into question. Before long, it became clear we needed additional collaborators to bring these images to life. The cinematographer is just a guy with lights and a camera. In many ways, a cinematographer is nothing without a capable art director. Jeremy Zerechak, a professional art director, was now an MFA student in the School of Film. Based on our first meeting, I knew the collaboration with Jeremy would enrich the project immensely. After a discussion with him about the script and the film, Jeremy had some clear and inventive ideas for production design. His main priority was to take the film out of Athens, Ohio and place it in a more upscale setting.

Rebecca Whittington is a graduate student in the School of Theater Costuming program here at Ohio University. I had seen her work on several other student films throughout the years and thought she really put herself into the projects for which she signed on. Once she read the line of the script that says, “It’s a Reservoir Dogs moment, except instead of cool suits they look more like futuristic male prostitutes...” she was on board. With access to the School of Theater stock of costumes and her talents, the possibilities grew exponentially when she signed on to the film.
My creative team was set. I had talented collaborators working as cinematographer, production designer, and costume designer. We all met up late one night in Lindley Hall, and started parsing out how we would tackle the film. Similarly to how I had broken down the script scene by scene, then beat by beat, we deconstructed the film. We first broke it down into “four worlds,” each with a distinct look. There would be the look of E. Nigma’s room (the opening bit), the interrogation room, the hotel/bar, and then the previous life (flashbacks). From there, we dug into the characters as they would be seen within these worlds. We decided that the palette of Bret and Vince would mimic their outlooks, with Vince being the brighter, cheerier of the two. This led to Vince wearing a bright yellow custard shirt (the name of which deriving from an earlier improv session). Bret, on the other hand, was made to wear a darker blue, with a collar that gets progressively more stretched and uncomfortable throughout. We decided that E. Nigma would live in a world of primary colors. He would usually be clad in deep reds and violets, then lit with harsh blues. As Vince falls in line with E. Nigma at the bar, he takes on a bit of Nigma’s palette, donning a deep red smoking jacket and black leather cowboy hat. Everyone had a voice that night pertaining to his or her department. I had specifics that I would not budge on, such as the mood and directionality/tone of light in E. Nigma’s room or the orientation of the stage in the seminar, but would listen to any and all suggestions to stir the pot. This exemplifies the ideal that a director is nothing more than the unifying factor of all collaborative voices.
Section IV: Production

One of the unexpected and truly touching things that came out of such a close collaboration with the actors was that suddenly, they were taking it upon themselves to get the film made. I was mounting a fundraising campaign via IndieGoGo, a great website that helps independent artists of every ilk appeal to the outside world to raise money for their creative projects. Luke and Sam had the idea to do a music video for the site. In true improv fashion, they showed up that day with a guitar and ukelele, and then began writing the song. Within thirty minutes, they had a song up on its feet and were rehearsing. We shot the music video, sent the link out to family and friends, and then promoted the film at their improv event in front of a packed house. I include all of this for two reasons. Firstly, while I am of the opinion that a director must embrace collaboration and welcome contributions from all sides, he must also assume full responsibility for the film. This absolutely includes fundraising, producing, and anything else that arises during the mounting of a production. If people are not fed, it is my fault. If a light is dropped by a grip, it is my fault. While this perspective may change as the scope of projects on which I work hopefully grows, the principle remains the same. If the director is not willing to die for the film in its entirety, then why should anyone else (cast, crew, or audience) even care? Andre Tarkovsky writes in his book Sculpting in Time (Tarkovsky), pertaining to the notion of director as guardian, a quote that has stuck with me since I read it years ago:

“Between the first and last stages of making a film, the director comes up against a vast number of people and such divergent problems, that it seems as if
circumstances have been deliberately calculated to make him forget why it was that he started working on the picture... The film’s progress from its conception to its eventual printing is fraught with every kind of hazard.” (Tarkovsky 125)

I mention the contribution of the actors to fundraising secondly because it touched me so. It was one of my first glimpses into giving so much of a film to an actor that it seemingly becomes their own. Luke and Sam were campaigning for their film, working for their film. I was not a part of the equation. It breathed a life into the project that I had never experienced before.

A film of this scope comes with a heap of logistical terrors. Rowena Pedrena, Producer, and Cody Vandenberg, Assistant Director, spearheaded the team that took on everything from the securing of a hotel’s entrance and lobby for an entire morning to scheduling a twenty-two page script into five days of shooting. While I had a direct hand in many location procurements and logistics, neither I, nor the film, would have survived the shoot if not for their hard work and dedication.

Finally, there was the shoot. I believe that the success of a film is largely dependent on the quality of its pre-production. If a film is properly pre-produced, and logistical issues have been addressed, the set becomes a place where real creativity can take place. With the amount of rehearsals I had with the actors, conversations with the heads of each department, and procurement of nearly every logistical necessity, it was time to let the filmmaking truly begin.
Basing our approach off of the work of Apatow and various fast-paced television shows, we utilized a multiple camera approach as frequently as possible. Says Apatow:

“I’m a fan of shooting multicam. It helps to make our scenes funnier ... a lot of times great things happen. It definitely helps to use more than one camera. I endorse it.” (Jacobson 292)

Shooting on High Definition Digital Single-Lens Reflex (HDSLR) cameras, we were able to use the tools already at our disposal, while still maintaining a fairly filmic look. The multi-cam approach helped to ensure that, should magic spark and the actors begin kicking back and forth off of one another, I would capture all of it from multiple angles. Juan and I were very direct with one another about when the approach was appropriate or when it would be to the visuals’ detriment. The wedding of style and content is something I tried to pound into my head as production progressed. While a fan of Apatow’s dialogue and narrative flow, I find his films visually flat. The mainstream scripted comedies tend to have a more developed visual language, but still feel a bit dry and scripted. Only by melding the two extremes could I find something unique and interesting. Again, because of the trust and understanding I had with my cinematographer, A.D., and talent, we could decide how far in one direction we could lean and be confident in our choice.
Post Production

Stanley Kubrick is my greatest influence, and to me epitomized a filmmaker that made choices with a precision of intent unseen in today’s cinema. He worked his cast and crew rigorously, often to the point of breaking them, in an effort to capture that elusive “magic” on screen. One would think then, based on this reputation, that production would be his priority in the process. In talking to Rolling Stone in 1987, Kubrick refutes this notion, then delves into the magic of editing:

“There are three equal things: the writing, slogging through the actual shooting and the editing ... Everything else comes from something else. Writing, of course, is writing, acting comes from the theater, and cinematography comes from photography. Editing is unique to film. You can see something from different points of view almost simultaneously, and it creates a new experience.” (Cahill)

A large influence on Kubrick’s initial understanding of film, V.I. Pudovkin, talks at length of editing and its tenets in his book Film Technique and Film Acting (Pudovkin). Although the text is fairly simplistic due to age (it was originally written in the ’30’s), it is interesting to read about film at such a rudimentary and fundamental level. As he describes the necessity of editing, he refers to all elements of mise-en-scene as “dead objects.” It is only through editing that an object is “brought upon the screen so that it shall have not photographic, but cinematographic essence (Pudovkin 18).”

Editing is often regarded as the most important step of the filmmaking process. Everything before it — all of the toils of writing, all of the casting choices and courting of talent, all of the dogged preparation for production — it is all only to
accumulate raw material to be cut together into a final, digestible form. After all this work, it is in the editing room that a film comes to life.

As outlined in books such as Walter Murch’s *In the Blink of an Eye* (Murch), there are countless techniques one can employ in order to sew shut the seams of a film cut. To discuss some of these techniques, I will cite a cut that takes place early in the film. Bret is screaming about how much trouble he is in. He grabs Vince and yells, “I’m so good at harmonica, they’re going to be so jealous of me in there!” We punch in to a close shot of the two, where Vince cuts him off. “You gotta calm down.” This cut should not work for two reasons. One, the change of angle is not more than 30*, a widely accepted convention of filmmaking that was established to avoid a “jump cut” (i.e. a cut that the audience notices). Secondly, in the raw footage, Bret continues to ramble about his harmonica skills with seemingly no breath between the lines.

However, utilizing four rules of cutting, I was able to massage the edit to a point where the untrained eye would not be disoriented by the splicing of the two shots.

First, the cut on the sharp hit of Bret’s line “…there.” Since the sharpness of this sound jars the viewers’ senses for a split second, the cut can slip by easier.

Secondly, the two words at the cut, Bret’s “…there,” and Vince’s “you,” are overlapped using what Murch refers to as “fricative consonants” (Ondaatje).” As Bret enunciates the “r” in “…there,” I cut to Vince enunciating the “y” in “you.” These fricatives meld together, blending the cut. Third, just before the cut from the wide to close shot, Vince shudders at Bret’s screams. When he does this, his head angles slightly toward Bret. I
utilize this subtle mannerism to fake a matching action cut. It seems as though Vince
begins his turn to Bret, then we cut in on the shot, and the action continues smoothly.
And finally, this cut works due to the viewers focal point staying relatively in the same
position on the screen from shot A to shot B, a theory known as Eye Trace. In the wide
shot, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the center of the frame. This is primarily due to the
action, but also because the eye is drawn to bright colors, and Vince’s shirt is the
hottest part of the frame. Then, across the cut, Vince’s face (the focal point of the new
shot) has replaced the previous one. All four of these properties coalesce in a cut that
is just smooth enough to not jar the audience, and progress the narrative.

This is one cut in a film comprised of hundreds. As Murch outlines, the six
priorities of a cut are, in order: Emotion, Story, Rhythm, Eye Trace, Two Dimensional
Place continuity, and Three Dimensional Space continuity (Murch). In an effort to
retain as many of these tenets as possible, each cut must be pampered and massaged
until it fully utilizes and delivers on all of the work put into the two shots one is
cutting together.

Beyond the work of the editor to operate below the radar and unseen by the
viewer, there are opportunities for the cutter’s hand to become apparent and guide the
experience. As I ventured into the finer cutting of the film, I took inspiration from the
more authorial cutting style seen in the sketch comedy show Portlandia on IFC
(Armisen). Edited primarily by Dan Longino and Doug Lussenhop, the show is a
mixed bag of gags which are able only to happen in post-production. The same music
sting will be used several times, in direct succession, as if to make a mockery of the given scenario. A specific example of this technique can be found in Season 1, Episode 4. In it, three characters stand in a hallway, discussing the fact that the mayor is missing. The receptionist tells the other two that he is gone, and unexpectedly an ominous tone blasts in the score of the show. They look at each other, pause, then ask the receptionist where he went. She says she does not know. The same exact music cue blares as the two characters ponder that. They then turn back to the receptionist, they share a blank stare, then the music cue blares again for no reason. While out of context, this example is surely hard to imagine, an example of a similar technique can be seen in my film in several places. When Agent Ryan loses her cool and screams at Bret and Vince, a music sting smashes the silence. Then, approximately fifteen seconds later, she reminds them they need to speed up the story. The same music cue hits again. In the “dramatic” scenes of the film, like the breakup scene between Vince and Sheila, the acting is intentionally melodramatic. In editing, I added a score that is befitting of a noire death scene. It call attention to itself, allowing the viewer to laugh with us or at us. Either way, I want the audience laughing.

These gags, along with transitional jump cuts popularized by Darren Aronofsky in Requiem for a Dream (Burstyn), work toward a notion of the editor as a tour guide. At times, the cutter stops and lets us enjoy the sights in “real time,” then at others, the vehicle speeds up to show us more in a shorter time span, or in a skewed perspective.
Conclusion

The script is the foundation upon which a film is built. No matter one’s approach, from adaptations ala the majority of Kubrick’s filmography (Nelson), to Mike Leigh’s “index card” methodology, the structure provided by some form of script is absolutely requisite for a film to work. Beyond that, a script gives you molds with which to shape characters and scenes in which to work. A solid screenplay is not only a jumping off point, but a guide to which one can always refer.

Directing composes the entirety of that which is built on the foundation provided by the script. Contrary to the secluded ideas of early auteurism, it is the duty of the director to become the fulcrum upon which all decisions and forces are weighed and judged. Should someone be lucky enough to direct a film, they get to set a goal from the outset, an ideal for which to strive. After the goal is set, they are then allowed to go out and find talented collaborators. A director comes to the table with every convention and preconception of film and what has been done with the medium to date, and then is challenged to apply their own signature.

A director gets to indulge in the most minute of details, from the color of the curtains on a pickup artist’s stage to which anthropomorphized ice cream cone should be the logo for a fictional custard stand. And once the director has surmounted every obstacle leading to production, he is reconnected with the origin of his passion for the project. Each shot, each little bit of magic that is incidentally caught by the camera is a
small affirmation of the process that started all of those months, or in some cases
years, ago.

And finally, once all of those raw materials have been collected, the editor and
post team get the final say on what stays and what goes. They stitch together elements
in unexpected ways, cultivating emotions and story within the material that may have
been long since forgotten in toil of production. And as it is being polished, they even
find ways to add a little bit of themselves to the film.

The author of a film is not one person. It is an amalgamation of countless
passions, disappointments, successes, and discoveries. When someone sits down to
view *Bret & Vince Get Framed for Murder*, I do not want them to think about the
cutting, the directing, or the writing. I want them to forget where they are, to escape,
and to be entertained by the experience of the film. I hope that my signature does not
suffocate the material, but instead enhances it through what Sarris calls “the friction
between the director and his material.”
Works Cited


**In addition to the written thesis, I have included the lined script, storyboards, and shotlists for Bret & Vince Get Framed for Murder, as well as a DVD copy of the final film.**