WE SHOULD BE TOGETHER:
AN EXPLORATION OF ACTING IN AND DIRECTING THE SAME FILM

A Thesis

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When I first announced I planned to act in and direct my own thesis film, I was met with a general, “Oh, wow. You are really going to do that?” Acting and directing by themselves are challenging, and very few filmmakers take on both roles in the same production. Those who do, and do it well, have made some of the greatest films in the history of cinema. I was curious about the actor-director approach and wanted to experience first-hand how it differed from traditional filmmaking. I was making my first comedy, and for reasons I did not understand at the time, both acting in and directing it made the most sense. I found inspiration in three comedic, actor-director titans: Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis, and Woody Allen. These critically acclaimed filmmakers, each with their own philosophies, mastered comedy, producing some of the most memorable characters, gags, stories, and cinematic universes of the silver screen. I delved deep into their styles, characters, and processes as I prepared to take the actor-director journey myself. Through my thesis film, I set out to prove that the actor-director approach shapes a better filmmaker, or a total filmmaker; a filmmaker who, according to Lewis, “gives himself through emulsion, which in turn acts as a mirror. What he gives he gets back” (Lewis 3).

The Foundation:

In the beginning, I found myself asking what a first time actor-director needs to be successful. Obviously, he or she needs the ability to direct. Before I took on the demanding task of directing myself, I needed to know I possessed the ability to lead other actors. In the previous three years, I had directed a handful of short, narrative
films, crewed on other student’s projects, and taken classes in both directing and acting. Through these experiences, I gained a feel for directing, an understanding of the filmic universe, and the vocabulary needed to direct actors efficiently. I found value in observing other directors work. I have crewed on, in some capacity or another, close to forty short films as a student. On each set, I had a front row seat to observe a variety of directors, all with unique approaches, and work with many different types of actors. I saw what worked and what did not. I witnessed each director’s frustrations and triumphs. Many of the directors I worked with ran loose sets and were open to feedback. In a way, I was able to occasionally direct scenes and exercise my own approach. Buster Keaton had similar experiences at the beginning of his film career. After his first short films with actor-director Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Keaton was promoted to assistant director. He was not an assistant director as they function today, logistically running the set and keeping the filmmaker on schedule. He was more of a co-director, directing the scenes Arbuckle was in (Brownlow 549-50). These experiences help a director warm up and develop his or her own directing approach.

Crewing on films also gave me insight into the other jobs that bring a project to life. I worked as everything from a grip and line producer, to a director of photography and art director. Many other filmmakers find their preferred department and stick in it, but I wanted to learn it all. I found myself hovering near the camera in between takes, asking about the lenses and lighting, or observing how the sound recordist manipulates the boom microphone to adapt to actor movements. I
remembered Jerry Lewis speaking of a similar need. During his first three years as an actor, directors would have trouble finding him when it came time to shoot. He was crawling up on the catwalk talking to grips and electricians or in the art department learning how miniature submarines are filmed to look life size on screen (Lewis 9-10). Lewis understood the humanity of film, and that fine films were made out of love and the labor of love. The director may have the creative control, but he or she is still working with a team of other film professionals. When a director shows respect to these professionals and an understanding of the difficulties they encounter, these workers are more likely to have their hearts in the production, contributing their best work to the film. This idea applies to the actors, as well. Through reflection of my experiences, my confidence as a director was reaffirmed. I knew I had the skill sets and understanding of directing other actors and leading a production team to successfully take on directing myself.

Even though I was confident, I still had doubts about my ability to create a comedic universe. I wanted my comedy to be rooted in realism and about honest people with honest relationships. I had crewed on comedic films, but they were built around absurd behavior, wacky characters, and unrealistic events. Comedy cannot truly exist in these fantasy worlds, because comedy is rooted in what we can identify with. The purest forms of comedy exist in reality. This troubled me, until I found comfort in the works of Woody Allen. When Allen was a young boy, his parents did not have books for him to read or a TV to watch. He spent most of his time in local theaters, watching films, sometimes two at a time, five to six times a week (Colombani
10). His reality was cinema, and therefore, his films feel real. In even his most over the top comedies, his characters have human elements. As I grew up, I also found comfort in films. My friends and I would get together and watch two or three features in a night. I looked back over the films that stuck with me and found that an understanding of this comedic world is ingrained somewhere deep inside me. In doing so, I rediscovered my love for Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), all comedic films about serious relationships, splashed with instances of drama. I knew the tone I wanted to give my filmic universe, and I now knew how to approach it as a director.

Surprisingly, the idea of acting in my own film was less nerve-wracking than the idea of directing it. I knew from the start that an actor-director needs a background as a well-versed performer. It is the most important aspect of the actor-director foundation, and Keaton, Lewis, and Allen had it. Keaton was born to parents touring with a vaudeville-style show, joining the act himself at only three years old. He grew up performing alongside musicians, acrobats, escape artists, and comedians, which later influenced the slapstick stunts and gags he built into his films (Brownlow, Gill, 1987). I was not born into the theater, but I landed my first major role as Jack, the lead in Brandon Thomas’ farce, *Charley’s Aunt*, at fifteen years old. Written in the late 19th century, the play is full of madcap moments from the days of Keaton. I grew to appreciate the physical aspects of comedy. A person getting slapped or falling will always be funny. As a teenager, I was also actively involved in musical theater, vocal performances, and my high school’s radio program. I wanted to be a versatile
performer like Lewis; a master of vaudeville, radio, stand-up comedy, singing routines, T.V. comedies specials, and, of course, film (Pomerance 3). Lewis was a very versatile performer, and it showed in the quality of his work. I remember watching episodes of The Colgate Comedy Hour with my Grandparents and being in complete awe of his ability to transform into such amazing characters and make the straightest lines of dialogue hilarious. I even dabbled in joke writing for our local newspaper, not unlike Allen, who wrote jokes for the New York Post before he transitioned to stand-up comedy (Colombani 14). He was a master of words, and his wit sharpened as he performed. This type of background is important, not only because it conditions a person as an actor, but also because it provides insight into audience expectations. Understanding the audience leads to an understanding of pacing, timing, and delivery. In a film, these elements are key for sculpting funny moments, as both an actor and a director.

With acting, I was most worried about my ability to act naturally. I did not want people to think about me as an actor while they watched my film. I wanted them to forget I was even acting and view me a person they were observing in reality. The few films I had acted in were great experiences, because they presented me with a chance to see myself on screen. I watched how I talked and moved, and learned when I needed to pull back to appear real. I discovered honesty in quiet moments. In my preparation, I was taken back to a documentary film I made two years ago. In it, I follow my Grandfather as he spends a day cutting wood to heat his home. There is no dialogue and the pacing is slow. Each shot allows the viewer time to observe the
character through his process, learning about him through the way he holds himself and interacts with his surroundings. The experience reminded me of Keaton, who saw the height of his career in silent films. Audiences at the time were not interested in funny dialogue, because the technology did not allow it. They only had the action to laugh at, and Keaton was a master at giving it to them. Even in his first film as an actor, *The Butcher Boy (1917)*, Keaton turns the simple task of shopping for molasses into a hilarious bit. It is not just the parts with sticky, slapstick gags that are funny, though. Even when Keaton picks up a broom to examine it, there is comedy in his behavior. His rigid posture, quick movements, and expressionless face add the laughs. Even after sound was introduced, Lewis found success in the silent character. In one of my favorite scenes from his film *The Bellboy (1960)*, Lewis’s character Stanley enters a giant, empty ballroom to set up chairs for the evening’s film. The way he half walks, half runs across the length of the large room to the chair closet is so simple, yet so funny. He brings one chair out and sets in the center of the room, adjusting it multiple times. The super wide cinematography adds to the comedy, but at the core, the scene works because it is a quiet character taking a quirky approach to a normal process. The acting is not over powering, and the character’s physicality has the opportunity to shine. I knew I wanted to take this approach with my character, and I felt I was ready to do so. All I needed was a story.

**The Idea:**

It was during the idea-generating phase that the actor and director in me first butted heads. As a director, I wanted to make a dramatic-comedy. I wanted my last
film at Ohio University to be funny, but also have substance and deal with more serious subject matter. The actor in me wanted to make a comedic-action film. I wanted to play a fun character in a film with stunts and chase sequences. I had just watched Keaton’s film, *The General (1926)*, a Civil War story of a love-struck young man, venturing deep into enemy territory to try and recover a stolen train belonging to his beloved. It sounds like a drama, but Keaton applies his naive, yet determined character to the film, and the result is a comedic epic, full of dangerous obstacles the young hero must overcome. The film has train stunts, cannon fire, bad guys, and of course, the girl he wins over in the end. I wanted to do something dangerous and flashy. I wanted to get the girl and be the hero. Logistically, though, this seemed unachievable, especially with my budget, and the director in me was quick to remind the action star that he wanted to make a film with a more realistic storyline.

I had nothing, though, except a handful of ideas scribbled on the pages of a notepad. I was reading through an interview with Woody Allen and discovered that he would write random ideas and jokes on scraps of paper and keep them in the drawer next to his bed. Every so often, he dumped the drawer and looked through the scraps for inspiration (Lax 21). I did the same with my notepad, and in the last few pages, I stumbled across something that caught my eye. I had written on the page, “Funeral, try and win back ex. New boyfriend. Punch him.” I became very excited. I had just found one of the scenes for my thesis film.

During my junior year, I attended the funeral of my ex-girlfriend’s grandfather. We had dated for almost five years before she ended things, and it had been months
since we had really talked. I was still very much in love with her and holding on to the idea that someday we might end up back together. I went to the funeral, and we had a very sad, but nice interaction. I could still feel the chemistry between us. She then informed me that she had a boyfriend and he would be arriving soon. She was apologizing, in a way. I stayed for the service, sitting alone in the back, trying not to look at them. I could not help it, though. Seeing her resting her head on his shoulder while he gently comforted her made me want to punch him. I did not end up punching him, but immediately thought it would be great for a film. I had the first seed for my thesis story, and although I had previously wanted to make the idea into a drama, I saw the possibilities for comedy in the intimate setting of a funeral and the physicality of a fight. A funeral is the perfect place for a character to awkwardly try and win over an ex. The actor in me was disappointed, but happy at the thought of a fight and possibly winning back the girl. The director was excited, too, because the idea had room for depth and honest moments. Those feelings were soon overshadowed by fear. As an actor, I was scared I would not be able to play such an intimate role. I wanted the director in me to reassure myself he could take me there, but he was also having his own doubts. What is great about just being an actor or a director in a film is it is easier to hide insecurities and look to each other for encouragement. I was on my own, and it would be challenging, but I wanted to prove I could be an actor-director, and this challenge pushed me farther as a filmmaker.

I was also scared of writing a film about such a personal moment for not only me, but other people I really care about. I did not want my ex-girlfriend or her family
to think I was using them. I knew I needed to write from experience, though, as it was
the only way I could create an honest, comedic film. Keaton created his ideas around
personal experiences. In his early shorts, much of his work was inspired by his
childhood experiences on the vaudeville circuit. He also created My Wife’s Relations
(1922) from the experiences of having his wife’s entire family move in with him
(Brownlow, Gill, 1987). If Keaton was brave enough to write characters based on his
in-laws, surely I could be brave enough to write a story about an ex-girlfriend. Allen
was also known for injecting his own life into his stories. His film, Annie Hall (1977),
is partially based off of his relationship with Diane Keaton. Allen dated Diane, whose
real last name is Hall, just like her character in the film. Allen’s character, Alvy
Singer, and Hall are a couple that meet and fall in and then out of love in a very
similar fashion to what happened between Allen and Diane Keaton seven years earlier.
In the film, Hall leaves Singer for a man who can help her live her dream in
California. In real life, Diane Keaton left Allen and moved to Hollywood, where she
saw success as an actress. Allen based the character off himself, as Singer, like Allen,
also had two ex-wives and fifteen years of psychoanalysis. He modeled his best friend
in the film after Mickey Rose, his childhood friend and collaborator on his first few
films (Colombani 41). I saw how a film written from experience, about real people
and real relationships, could have intoxicating charm and believable characters. I
found many similarities between my story and Annie Hall. I was first struck by the
fact that we both based our supporting best friend characters after friends we had
grown up with. I was also, like Allen, writing bits of myself into a story about a couple
that were falling out of love. Although my two characters had been separated for some time, the funeral scene is when their love as a couple truly dissipates. Like Singer, my lead would see that being friends in the end is what is ultimately best, although my character would not be one to show it.

What I needed to do next was design the character I would be playing. Most actors do not get to design their own roles, so it proved to be an interesting process. I knew the character was rooted in myself, but I needed to give him something more for the director in me to play with. Woody Allen usually played himself. He did not think of himself as an actor, so he wrote his roles within his limited range. He saw himself only believable as the urban, studios-looking twerp he is (Lax 8) Allen pulled that off because of his quirky, neurotic personality. He was already a unique character. I, on the other hand, am very average. I do not find myself very interesting, and I knew if I did not, the audience would not either. Unlike Allen, though, I do think of myself as an actor, so all I needed was a unique character I could play that still had small amounts of myself in it. I turned to the characters of Jerry Lewis. Most, if not all of his characters are built around misfits with strange appearances and behavior. He often referred to his screen persona as “The Idiot.” This character was less than intelligent and lacked physical and emotional control (Pomerance 123-124). I knew I did not want to take it as far as Lewis, but I saw the value in playing a character slightly less intelligent than myself. Marc, the name I gave the character, would not be stupid, but exist in between the mentally deficient Lewis characters and the intellectual Allen ones. I designed Marc as a hardworking, blue-collared young man ready to settle down
in his early twenties. He chews tobacco and works for a construction company in his hometown. When it came to his character’s transformation, he is not unlike Professor Julius Kelp in The Nutty Professor (1963), one of Lewis’ greatest hits. Kelp, the nerdy professor, thinks that in order to win over the girl he loves, he must transform himself into a suave, more attractive male. In the end, when the transformative potion wears off, Kelp discovers he has always been exactly who he needed to be, and that the girl he transformed for ultimately loves him the way he is. Marc, too, tries to transform himself for a girl. In the beginning of the story, he is soaked in alcohol, unshaven, and droopy in appearance. When he realizes he has to get his ex-girlfriend back, he stops drinking, cleans up, and buys a nice suit he plans to return. Like in The Nutty Professor, Marc struggles with masculinity. His best friend, Tyler, is constantly telling him to “quit being a pussy. Be a man.” By being more masculine, Marc feels he has a better chance at winning over the girl. In the end, the end of the story, I wanted to have Marc loosen his tie and put in a wad of chewing tobacco, relaxing back into himself, realizing he never needed to change.

I also saw a bit of Buster Keaton in my character. Keaton, at a very young age, learned through his vaudeville experiences that keeping a serious face produced serious laughs. In an act about raising children, his father would chuck him into the orchestra pit. After crashing down through the instruments, Keaton would pop up, unfazed, waiting a beat before letting out a groan. Audiences ate it up (Brownlow, Gill, 1987). I wanted Marc to possess a sense of the “stone face.” In the beginning of the film, he lifelessly exists at Tyler’s upbeat engagement party. When Tyler sprays
him with champagne, he does not react, simply taking the abuse. This informed the cinematic universe I was creating, and as I made progress, it felt more like a universe of Keaton. Keaton’s films were built around optimism in the face of adversity. It was a universe where a character went on a journey and the world threw as many obstacles as it could in the way. Yet, the character always made it through. Marc goes on a journey, with alcohol, girls, fighting, and rejection trying to slow him down. He makes it through, though, but unlike Keaton, he does not get the girl. Keaton always got the girl, and Lewis often did, too. As a director, I settled on a more modern approach to relationships, taking inspiration from Allen, because he rarely won back his love. In the end of Annie Hall, after Singer realizes he will never win her back, he addresses the camera and talks about how great of a person she is and how fun it was spending time with her, ending by saying:

... I thought of that old joke, you know, this guy comes to a psychiatrist and says, “Doc, my brother’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.” And the doctor says, “Well, why don’t you turn him in? And the guy says, “I would, but I need the eggs.” Well I guess that’s pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they’re totally irrational and crazy and absurd but I guess we keep going through them because most of us need the eggs.

There were not many happy endings in Allen’s films, because life is not full of them. My cinematic universe would similarly be filled with the irrational, and the crazy, because that is how real relationships exist. We continue to put ourselves through them because we just need to. We need what they give us. My world would be a world
in which these ideas existed, and the comedy would come from the honest moments
the audience can identify with.

Writing It:

I have always felt my strengths reside in the acting and directing parts of
filmmaking, with my greatest weakness being writing. I struggle with taking the
material that fills my head and translating it into the short, effective chunks that
compose a screenplay. A great screenplay tells a story, with as few words as possible,
just as fluently as it will appear on screen. Most screenwriters compose their
screenplays knowing someone else will interpret and direct them and others will bring
their characters to life. This type of screenwriter must make sure every detail of his or
her idea is evident on the page, so that the director and actor do not wander too far
from the original material. Actors and directors, on the other hand, have the challenge
of translating and manipulating the writer’s ideas so that they play successfully on the
big screen. With the actor-director, many of these challenges disappear. With myself
in both roles, there would be no discrepancies when it came to interpretation or butting
of heads in story revision and direction. A sole creative vision is the most powerful,
and with this idea in mind, the writer, director, and actor in myself felt very
comfortable approaching the screenplay.

I soon fell into a trap many first-time writer-actor-directors find themselves in.
Heading each role, I was unconsciously leaving too much detail out of the screenplay.
The director in me knew exactly what the writer meant by what was on the page, no
matter how loose or sloppy it was, so I continued to move forward because I believed I
had it under control. As an actor, I knew exactly how I wanted to deliver my lines and the tonal qualities of my monologues, so I again left much of the detail out of the screenplay for the sake of progress. I ended up with a sort of bare-bones story that lacked real substance. This type of script can still function, especially in comedic film. Jerry Lewis often worked with this sort of blueprint material. The screenplays would be mostly visual and really funny, but did not tell too much story-wise (Lewis 49). These worked for him because many of his films were absurdly comedic, and like Keaton’s work, built around similar screenplays, often rode on gags and visual bits. I knew my project would not be as slapstick in style as a Keaton or Lewis film, but I still wanted a sense of visual comedy, so I believed this type of script could still work for me. I was also pulling from Keaton in that, like him, I was having trouble with the middle of my story. Keaton, as a writer, had trouble shaping the mid-section in the screenwriting phase. He often left this part of the film to be figured out on set. In speaking of his approach, Keaton remarked, “We simply figure out enough story to build sets around, then we pull our gags and 'quick stuff' in the set as we happen on the ideas” (Oettinger). I found comfort in this approach and briefly believed it was the best for my situation. The writer in me felt a weight lift off his shoulders, and the actor and director felt less anxious. As an actor, I would have the ability to play with the character and would not have to deal with the pressure to get it right the first time, every time. As a director, I had the same freedom to experiment and cover my bases if I felt a scene or performance was not landing like it should. This approach seemed that it would be the most fun, and that is what blindly drew me so strongly to it.
An early table reading snapped me out of this risky mindset. With the trouble I was having writing, the actor and director in me wanted to have a rough table reading to see if a little creative exercising would help. I sat down with a good friend and fellow performer, and we read through the script multiple times. I quickly realized that my piece was not as visually comedic as I had previously thought, and that dialogue drove a good portion of the story. This dialogue, however, was falling flat and was not as funny as it needed to be. Through readings, I also found that much of the meat of the story I thought was clearly expressed on the page was actually only in my head. Details of character interactions and behavior that were critical in the comedy and story were missing from the words the other actors would be studying and performing. It hit me that my film, as it developed, was falling more into the contemporary style of Allen and moving farther away from the physicality of Keaton and Lewis. I realized that my type of comedy could not successfully grow from a blueprint-type script, because the comedy in my film would be more plot driven. Allen thinks non-plotty comedy can work, but it requires the writer, actor, and director to be hilarious, then more hilarious, and finally, even more hilarious at the end of the film with no real payoff. In plot driven comedy, the story and the comedy builds, and the payoff in the end comes through all the moments that have been set up through the length of the film (Lax 70). I took this in and found I had planted comedic seeds in the story that had the potential to really payoff if I shifted more focus onto plot and narrative than physical comedy. I sat back down and worked over a more detailed screenplay. I wrote a story that a separate director could pick up, direct, and end with a final product
full of comedic gems and journeys somewhat similar to those I would create on my own.

**Preparing For It:**

I had a script I was, for the most part, happy with. It was time, as a director, to segue into the critical job of casting the film. Casting the lead actor is a very important task, and the benefit of being an actor-director is that part is already taken care of. Through the process, however, no matter how confident and set a director is on playing the lead role, he or she must be absolutely certain they are the right person for the character. The success of the film is riding on it. As I began to consider countless actors for the other roles in my film, I inevitably came across a handful of those that could have done very well in the role of Marc. An actor-director needs to convince the director in him or herself that they, themselves, will ultimately bring more to the film than every extremely talented actor also available. I started convincing myself by reiterating the exceptional actor to director relationship I already had crafted. Directors dream of having finely tuned, intimate relationships with their actors, and as an actor-director, the director and actor in me possessed the most intimate relationship that could exist. Next, I had to know that I was an exceptional actor. Unlike Keaton, Lewis, and Allen, I did not have quite the abundance of performance experience to reaffirm my confidence in my abilities. I was lucky enough to study for a semester in the acting studio at Ohio University and polish my skills. This intensive program not only gave me opportunities to gain acting experience every day of the week, but also exposed me to acting techniques and, more importantly, the idea of bringing
improvised performance to written material. Combining this class with my past experiences in acting in student films, I no longer felt there was any reason to doubt my decision in casting.

My next major decision was whether or not I would cast actors who had been classically trained for the stage. A majority of the University’s School of Film productions draw from a pool of School of Theater actors. Lewis believed that most classically trained actors he worked with used their methods as a crutch, because they never learned that good is good, so they relied on technique and did not truly relate to other actors (Lewis 61). I find this to be true, more often than not, especially in college-aged actors in the middle of their training. These types of actors also, because they are conditioned for the stage, often give performances that are too large or over-the-top for the camera, especially in comedy, because the theater actor is used to performing so the audience members in the back of the venue can comprehend the range of emotional movements. For my film, I knew this style of acting would not mesh well with the quiet, subtle comedy I planned to create. I had worked with non-theater actors before and enjoyed the genuine qualities of their performances. As I leaned away from the theater as a casting source, I found inspiration in stand-up and improvisational comedy groups. I had been a fan of the OU Improv group’s work for three years, but, through my research, was only starting to see how funny, yet emotionally deep, believable, and reaction driven portions of their sets were. I immediately approached the troupe, asking if anyone would be interested in auditioning for my film. I wanted to cast completely from the group because I saw
how seamlessly they worked together. An essential part of a director’s job is to make sure the actors have great working relationships with each other and also with him or herself. As an actor-director, a filmmaker can essentially accomplish both tasks at once, since he or she is among the actor’s ranks as a performer. With already having such a tight-nit group of actors, my relationship forming duties would be much less stressful.

Although I favored a few of the actors, I did not want to make up my mind until I had gone through the proper casting sessions. I was weary of judging each actor’s fit to the characters through the improvisation they had performed, because it is a live performance and I was casting for a film. I did not know who, if anyone besides the actors themselves, were directing the performances and how they were doing so. Lewis never looked at the past films or screen tests of actors to cast them unless he knew who directed the piece and what time it was shot (Lewis 53). Without this information, it is difficult to fully evaluate an actor on past performances alone. I also did not let a lack of acting talent shy me away from a prospective actor either. Keaton rarely used established names and was not overly particular about casting. The characters simply needed to look the part and have basic acting abilities (Brownlow 555). Keaton was a strong actor-director, and he was able to guide, through both positions, less experienced and talented actors to exceptional performances. I felt with the intimate nature of the actor-director’s relationship with the cast that I could do the same.
During my first casting sessions, I simply sat and talked with each actor. I informally interviewed them, allowing time to discover personal traits that linked them to the characters I had written. As an actor, I also observed how the others actors interacted with myself. I was able to find the beginnings of our relationship dynamics. I could do this as an actor-director, and it allowed me to stay one step ahead of a regular director. Lewis preferred this method himself. He never asked an actor to read lines from a side or script when he first met with them, instead, he would hold an interview of at least ten minutes with the hopeful candidate. He simply needed to know how he felt when he was interacting with the person. He only moved on to screen tests and line readings after these interviews, almost always choosing the actor he already felt most comfortable with. (Lewis 54). Like Lewis, I found myself more attracted to the actors I felt comfortable around. As an actor-director, there is less danger in trusting gut feelings, because the filmmaker is directing and acting with the chosen actor, and fewer obstacles, such as other direction and other actors can get in the way.

After meeting and talking with the actors I was considering, I felt I was right on the edge of being ready to select my cast. I still wanted to do line readings with the actors I was leaning towards before I made them a final offer, though. Allen thought line readings were awful. He rarely did them, citing the fact that when actors start to read in front of a director and his casting team in the audition space, they usually shift into third gear and don’t act like normal people. Allen said, “I could never get a job as an actor if I had to read” (Lax 139). I agree with him. The combination of the sterile, uninviting environment of most audition spaces combined with the desperate want of
each actor to sweep a casting team off their feet, lends an artificial tonality to these types of audition performances. Especially in comedy, the best performances take time and a fluid, fun environment. I still wanted to have the reading, though, because I did not have the same amount of experience as Allen and wanted to see the actors in action with my work. I also wanted to do a reading so that I could hear the dialogue I had written out loud. As a writer, it helps tremendously to hear your work, especially for me, because I get so caught up in the writing process that I become accustomed to the characters speaking the way I envisioned them. So, I heeded Allen’s advice and set up line readings in places that were not as intimidating as an audition room. I did not use a camera to record the interactions, because cameras cause actors, especially those with less experience, to tighten up and feel they have to give a performance. I knew I could deal with the camera later in rehearsals. We read through the script in coffee shops and at my apartment, sitting around as if we were good friends enjoying a conversation. I used a technique I had learned through my acting training to get the most out of these sessions. We crossed out or paid little attention to the blocking and scene detail in the script and just read through the dialogue. Playing with it out loud showed me where I needed to make changes for comedic timing. The beats I had written out on the page were too constrained to action, especially for Tyler and the actor I had playing him. I needed his dialogue to drive large portions of the comedy. I allowed Caleb, the actor I had chosen to play Tyler, to improvise and mess around with the lines. What I received were conversations that were far funnier than those I
had written, and being the actor-director, I had the power to mold these newly discovered moments into the script.

With my improved screenplay, it came time for rehearsals. As an actor-director, rehearsals are a different beast than that of what a normal director experiences. I would not only be observing and directing, but also performing. A director should not be nervous going in to a rehearsal session, and I never am, but the pressure to perform was creeping to the front of my mind and I could not help but feel unsure. For the first time, I had to really embody both roles. I knew that to justify my decision to take on the actor-director position, I would have to create a film that others found exceptional, and what worried me is that I knew people would look most at the acting. I thought that this idea was maybe a small part of why Lewis and Allen did not care to rehearse. It is rumored that Keaton never rehearsed, but so much of his films were built around intricate gags and stunt sequences that it makes sense to just try and get it the first time. Allen disliked rehearsals because he got bored, and because he was a comic performer and did not like to do it until he had to (Lax 260). Lewis operated similarly in that if he ever did a rehearsal, he never let the actors go full tilt. The comic would never step in until the take (Lewis 90). I felt similarly, in that I did not want the funniest material to come to life in rehearsal. In my experience, if an actor does something really well, especially an improvised, comedic moment, when asked to do it for a second, third, or more times, he or she rarely pulls it off as well. So, I went into
rehearsals with the mentality of doing the scenes at 3/4s speed. Many people would see this as a waste of time and money, but I had an advantage over the other three directors. I had the ability to shoot on video.

I staged rehearsals in an open classroom in the School of Film building. With all the chairs pushed to the sides, we had a space that allowed for basic blocking and camera movement. With shooting on a video camera, we had the ability to shoot for hours without putting any sort of dent in my budget, unlike Keaton, Lewis, and Allen, who would have had to spend a considerable amount of money on film. As an actor-director, I could ease into the actual work I would be doing with the actors and have the convenience of later reviewing and studying the material. I kept the rehearsals simple. We ran through the lines a few times before I implemented basic blocking and the camera. I even allowed the actors to have the script in hand so the whole process would feel less like a performance and more like a run through. Without going full-tilt, I allowed the actors to improvise lines. This allowed me to loosen up as an actor and a director, as I was letting the other actors drive part of the show. I let Jordan, my director of photography, float around with the camera, giving him experience with the type of shooting style we were going to use. On my script, I wrote down the simple directions I was giving to reference later when I would sit and review the footage. In the end, though our rehearsals were relaxed, we shot them, and since I was an actor-director, I, in a way, experienced shooting the film before really doing it.

These sessions served more as rehearsal for the actor in me. It was later, when I imported all of the footage onto my computer and began reviewing it that the director
got his rehearsal. I looked at the footage objectively as a director, and by reviewing my notes, I could see what aspects of the direction I gave yielded the strongest results. I could also see the moments when I failed to communicate with the actors, because their performances reflected their misunderstanding. I could see my weaknesses as an actor, and since I too was the director, I was immediately able to work on correcting my performance. Technology benefited me once again, as I was able to sit in front of my computer and record myself saying lines with the computer’s camera. No other actors or crew were present, so I was able to have a rigorous, intimate rehearsal with myself. I studied and manipulated each facial expression, finding my own “deadpan” look that would hopefully bring as much comedic response as Keaton’s. I could take all the material and edit it together with editing software on my computer. I found how improvised lines the other actors had played with in rehearsals strengthened my scenes, and how my own reactions I had played with and captured in the quietness of my bedroom reshaped the script into the story I truly wanted it to be. In a few days, I translated those discoveries through editing into a final, locked down screenplay I was completely confident in. I was able to do this so seamlessly and comfortably because I was in control. I was the actor-director.

Next to casting, the most important decisions an actor-director makes come when hiring a crew. He or she must completely trust those working on the film. An actor-director is taking a risk, and he or she knows that a danger exists in being stretched too thin. An actor-director relies on those he or she has surrounded him or herself with to pick up the slack when it comes time for shooting. Lewis stated, “I
create a film by myself; yet I know I have this hundred-member-crew family with me, functioning because they believe I know what I’m doing” (Lewis 99). Not only would I have to trust my crew, they would have to trust and believe in me. I knew I needed to surround myself with a group of people who knew as much, if not more, about filmmaking than I did. Working in the School of Film environment allowed me to do just this, and it allowed me to have the ability to choose people I had very strong personal and working relationships with. I knew these people would do anything for the project and me, even long after the shooting had completed. Keaton felt similarly, and in describing the few benefits of the studio system, remarked that having a friendly crew on salary with you fifty-two weeks a year helped tremendously when operating as an actor-director (Brownlow 557). Although I was not paying my crew, we were all part of the School of Film, our studio, and we all wanted the best final projects for each other. Because I was an actor-director, I also needed to have complete faith in my director of photography. He or she is the director’s eyes behind the camera when the director is acting in the film. I had chosen my best friend and colleague, Jordan, as my director of photography and knew from the beginning he was the strongest choice. Aside from being great at what he does, he has the ability to judge my performance objectively and is not afraid to suggest changes. He also shares a similar sense of humor, which is important in comedy, because he can function as a second set of eyes on the improvised material. He is a great leader, and I was completely confident in having him beside me leading the crew.
The other pre-production chores on a film can make the life of an actor-director very stressful. In most cases, an actor-director is also the executive producer and can find him or herself bogged down by the responsibilities of gathering crew, equipment, securing locations, creating character wardrobes, planning the catering, scheduling, etc. I was doing all of these things while rehearsing, and it took a toll on me. It helped that I had two great producers, but I was still supervising and making all of the final decisions. Looking back, I had people I trusted, but I was still wary of giving away too much responsibility. This was going to be my movie and I needed to prove I could manage everything. An added level of difficulty is that we operated with a budget significantly lower than those Keaton, Lewis, and Allen used to make their films, and we did not have a studio to use for any of the sets. We would be shooting on location, in places that were not accustomed to hosting a film crew. We did not have the luxury of completely controlling a space for how many hours we needed, and matching location scheduling with actor and crew availability, as many of the cast and crew had classes and jobs, did make shooting on location a bit of a headache. I am still happy with the idea of location shooting, though, because, as Lewis felt, on location sets provided better atmosphere, photography, and working conditions (Lewis 86). I wanted an authentic tone in the film, and although I knew I did not have the money to rent out or work in the nicest spaces available in town, I knew the steps I was fighting through would benefit the final film. For example, it was just logistically too expensive to work in an actual funeral home, as I am sure Keaton, Lewis, and Allen would have been able to pull off. Despite all the headaches, functioning as the actor-
director gave me a new level of involvement in the film, which would provide me with a better all-around awareness when it came time to shoot. What followed were many meetings with my team, where I made certain they understood my creative vision and would be able to work efficiently through the hectic stage of production that was coming next.

**Shooting It:**

The first day on set is the most important and should be the easiest. As a director, it is important to ease the cast and crew into the production stage, as it allows them to acquire a feel for the material, style, pacing, and work environment. I try to keep the first day relaxed, making sure, as a team, we can end on a high note and on time. As Lewis learned, a crew that likes the director takes on his or her tonality, attitude, and energy (Lewis 107). It is important to have fun on set, especially in comedy. While blocking the actors for a theater scene in *Another Woman* (1988), Allen turned to the sixty-five crew members in the theater seats and told them, “There are more people in here than will see the movie” (Lax 242). As an actor-director, it is important to involve the crew and let them feel like a part of the comedy. This involvement also shows them that the actor-director is self-critical and will allow the crew to feel more comfortable when they are doing their jobs. For a crew, it should be easy to tell the director that something is not working, and a relaxing environment allows just this. A fine line exists, though, and the first day is also when the director puts his foot down and shows his or her cast and crew the appropriate level of professionalism to maintain. There was never a rush on Keaton sets, and it was a
common occurrence for Keaton to gather the crew for a game of baseball between shots (Brownlow, Gill 1987). Although I was not as playful as Keaton, I still showed my crew that having fun between capturing each take exactly as it needed to be was the way we would be working on the remainder of the shoot. This allowed each member to find his or her groove and develop a routine that would make our shooting efficient.

Even with all the work that goes into pre-production, an actor-director begins the heavy preparation the night after the first day of shooting. In the months leading up to a shoot, everything from scheduling and camera placement to a director’s notes and approach look great on paper. It is after the first day in the trenches, when the actor-director learns the rhythm of the cast and crew, that he or she can create a plan for the remaining days. With technology like the digital camera, I had an advantage over Keaton, Lewis, and Allen. As a director, I could sit down with the director of photography immediately after the shoot day had ended and review every inch of the footage. There is no need to wait for film to be developed in the lab. I valued the time I could sit with Jordan and not only tell, but show him the moments in the cinematography that excited me. I could then focus on the acting, finding what worked best in each performance and shaping my next day’s directorial notes accordingly. An advantage the actor-director has is that the lead actor can always be present with the director. If, at any moment, the director has a performance epiphany or critique, the actor is able to understand it immediately and completely. An actor who is also the director is always the most prepared. Lewis hardly ever planned the camera
positions/movements or blocking beyond the next days work. He was, however, able to recite every detail of the screenplay and had extensive directorial notes. He valued the night before as his time to prepare for the next day on set (Lewis 110). It is late at night when the director sends emails to the cast and crew, preparing them for the next day, and it is that first night that the director begins the real journey of shooting the film.

Our strategy on set was very basic. Lewis thought the best approach was to get the actors into position, run the scene through and give actors marks, while letting the crew see the action. It is after this that the camera is placed and rehearsed. Lewis would then begin shooting the scene with the wide master shot and move in for closer coverage with the camera as needed (Lewis 120). We followed this basic approach, and since the film was shot almost entirely handheld, there was never much down time for the set up and rehearsal of dolly or other intricate shots. Jordan had the camera on his shoulder, and he, along with the crew, were able to walk through each shot as I rehearsed with the actors. The cinematographic look for the film is natural with minimal lighting, so the camera department was able to work quickly and remain flexible. On *Husbands and Wives (1992)*, Allen talks about the flexibility he and his director of photography had when filming scenes. If they saw the light was coming through a window a certain way and liked it, they framed the shot in that direction and got it (Lax 250). In a way, I let the camera improvise as much as I did the actors. We would capture a shot the way I had envisioned it, and then I would allow Jordan to move freely and let the shot play out how he felt it needed to move in the moment. We
shot a lot of material, and we were able to because the digital medium allowed us to shoot an endless amount of footage at no extra cost. I wanted to cover all my bases. I felt like Keaton, who pulled his gags and ‘quick stuff’ on sets as he happened on ideas, shooting enough film to “make six pictures” (Oetinger). The only way I successfully pulled it off was by having a DP with great instincts and knowledge of the story as deep as my own.

When asked whether acting or directing made him more nervous, Woody Allen noted that directing did, because the director is the one in charge of the project (Lax 250). Directing is stressful, to say the least, and the stress level rises when the director is also performing. I have found that the best way an actor-director can operate is to be more of a ‘monitor’ to the cast and crew. I had surrounded myself with talented filmmakers and I needed to trust that they could execute my creative vision as well as I could. I learned to tell Eleanor, my art director, what I needed for a scene and let her bring it to life without commanding her every move. In the funeral scene, I was able to tell Truman, my assistant director, how I wanted the extras behaving and walk away while he got the job done. This trust gave me more time with the actors and ultimately benefited the film, and I do not think I would have handed so much responsibility over if I had not been an actor-director.

When it comes to directing the other actors, the actor-director has an advantage. As an actor as well as a director, he or she knows how an actor wants to be treated. An actor-director knows how to pull the best performance out of an actor without pushing too far. He or she is acting along side these other performers, and
because of that, the other actors tend to trust the director more. The actor-director knows how to gently manipulate. It is never the actor’s fault if the shot does not work out. If something is off in a scene, I like to start with telling the actor everything he or she did well. I discuss an aspect I loved and then follow it with a slight twist in the direction to fix the parts I did not. In the shot, if an actor is apologizing to another actor, and it feels too harsh or on the nose, I may ask them to play it as if they are apologizing to a younger sibling to try and win back their trust. I will experiment with this direction most of the time, but sometimes, an actor just needs to be told to slow down, and that simple instruction makes all the difference in the performance. I will usually do a handful of takes, if time permits, and then, after getting what I want, I’ll let the actor explore the role for a take or two. Actors need to feel that they are bringing life into the project, and the best way to do that is to let them play with their own ideas, even if, as a director, I know I will not use these takes in the edit. When Lewis would go into each film, he would let the actors know that he was about to give birth and wanted them to join him (Lewis 72). It is an invitation to join an adventure, and when the actors can trust the director and understand they play an important role in the creation of the project, they will help shape it into a better film.

A great tool I utilized while working with the actors on set is video playback. Since we were shooting on video, we had the ability to watch a shot on our monitor as many times as we needed immediately after it was captured. This sort of technology originated, in a way, with Jerry Lewis. Lewis, who was often in front of the camera while he directed, wanted a way to see the footage without having to wait for it to be
developed in the lab. He set a video camera along side the film camera to capture the scene the way the film camera would see it. In doing so, Lewis created an early form of the video assist in 1960 (Fugiwara). Although his system relied on video cameras that in no way compare to the technology we have today, the set up still benefited him as an actor-director.

Having the ability to play footage back immediately on set brings up the question of whether a director should let the other actors see themselves on camera while working. Many directors do not let actors watch back footage, but I see it as a very valuable and almost necessary experience for them. I always let the actors view the shot. I use it as a visual companion to the direction I am giving. It not only makes an actor more technically aware while filming, but also simply lets them see the character they are creating. The other actors also have the opportunity to view my own acting on the monitor and listen to me critique myself. This makes actors more comfortable. From my experience, an actor who views the material also feels more involved in the process. Even if the actors do not fully understand the direction I am giving before a take, when they view it back the over all goal of the shot becomes much more clear. Lewis felt it necessary to invite actors to watch dailies, the viewing of the developed film by the director, director of photography, producers and other production team members shot the previous day. He wanted to keep the actor’s characters strong through the shoot. He explained, “Any man who works in the creation of a film should be given the right to see what he does” (Lewis 80). In a way,
watching back our footage on set served the same purpose, and strengthened our performances.

When it came to directing myself, having the video playback option was a huge advantage, especially in the beginning. As a performer, I tried my hardest to forget about directing as I was acting in a scene. Although the director was always present in the back of my mind, having the ability to watch back the footage helped me push him aside. When I viewed the monitor after a shot, I could approach it as if I was directing someone else. I could see the minute details of my performance I would not have been aware of while filming. What I found, though, is that it really was not difficult to direct myself. I always feared directing myself on set would be a problem. Woody Allen feels there is nothing to directing himself. As an actor directing yourself, you can just feel it. When working with other actors, you know if you are being authentic or not and it is as simple as that. Allen would also say that this does not mean he can be a perfect actor. Every actor still has his or her limits, but as an actor-director, it is easy to know if you are doing your best (Lax 249). As the production unfolded, I began to realize this. As an actor-director, I had a total understanding of the direction and could easily feel if I was meeting the production goals. With the lead actor having such ease with his or her role, it becomes clear why the actor-director has an edge over other filmmakers. Jerry Lewis assured everyone that he had less trouble directing Jerry Lewis than any other stranger would. For him, the distrust he tended to have towards other directors disappeared. He felt that directing himself was really just more fun (Lewis 80-81). Although directing myself was more organic than I originally
imagined, I was not quite as comfortable as Lewis and Allen, so I tended to lean on video playback, and through it, I relied on support from my director of photography as well.

As an actor-director, I was taking a huge risk. I was doing comedy, a genre of film I did not have a whole lot of experience in. I was able to pull it off, because I had Jordan, a fellow filmmaker I trust as much as myself, behind the camera. As I found my rhythm as a director, I learned to rely on Jordan as a second set of eyes. If I was in a take and it felt good for me personally, I could save the time of reviewing the footage by asking Jordan if he thought we got what we needed. He has a great sense of comedy and drama, so I really valued his feedback. Even though our senses of humor differ slightly, I knew we shared the same, strong vision for the final product. Even in the moments we disagreed, his quick “are you sure we need this” comments made me reexamine my reasoning and kept me from wandering too far from the story. In a way, I had a co-director to ground me when my head was spinning. Keaton, at times, operated similarly. For his film, *The Navigator* (1924), he wanted the dramatic scenes to be authentic, and was afraid that he might direct them in a fashion that produced a burlesque-styled tone. To prevent this, he brought on director Donald Crisp, whom he admired for his work on dramatic films, to direct the dramatic scenes. Although Keaton would eventually reshoot and direct what Crisp had worked on, Crisp had given him a foundation for the dramatic qualities he wanted to shape (Brownlow 563). Jordan served a similar role, and with knowing that I had the extra set of eyes backing
me up, I was able to fully submerge myself in the actor-director role and take risks without ever being worried that I was heading in an extreme or harmful direction.

Acting in the film was by far the easiest component of production. A very talented cast surrounded me, and I was at a level of complete understanding with the direction. As Allen pointed out, it is as easy as just doing it. One of the only obstacles was the amount of improvisation we did on set. Allen is notorious for adlibbing while shooting and it is evident in the authenticity of his characters and their interactions. During production of his film, Another Woman (1988), He was shooting an elaborate scene in an art gallery and found it simply dreadful as he reviewed the film. He took the actors back to the gallery, had the crew set up the lights, and proceeded to have the actors simply talk about the art on display. In the middle of the conversation, Allen found inspiration in what the actors were adlibbing and rewrote the scene quickly on the back of an envelope. The end result is a little scene he is very proud of (Lax 247). Many of the scenes in my film were shaped in a similar way. The rest of the cast was composed of seasoned improvisers, and with guidance from myself as a director, they took the scenes in more authentic directions than I was able to articulate in the script. When we were shooting the lunch break/construction scene, Caleb would flick his cigarette at me and say, “You look like shit.” Small things like that bring a scene to life. I was worried that I would not be able to hang in these moments, and that my responses would be mechanical and dull. I simply had to shut off the director in my brain, the guy that was always thinking about how the line would fit or what way I needed to respond to bridge the character to the next scene, and just react. Actors need
to be impulsive and honest and react from the heart rather than the head. When I could turn that voice off and fully be present in the scene, I was extremely happy with the results. I knew the other actors were funny, and I had to trust that my character’s honest reactions would be funny too. Even if my character played it straight, I knew I could find comedy in the juxtaposition of attitudes. The actor-director needs to fully understand that the actor is a separate person, and when he or she embraces that, wonderful material pops off the pages of the screenplay, coming to life in a way that can only happen on set.

A technique an actor-director must master is learning how to quickly switch between the two roles. Jerry Lewis thought of directing himself as a contradiction. He saw great importance in referring to the actor as another being, because he truly is a different person. For Lewis, that other being was The Idiot, The Kid, or one of his many other characters (Lewis 80). This allowed Lewis to always retain his actor-director objectivity. Objectivity is a crucial characteristic of the actor-director. He or she has to be able to look at him or herself in the video and say, “That sucked. Let’s do it again.” He or she, despite feeling that the performance while filming was perfect, must be able to view the shot back and know if he or she can do better. It is a fine line, because the actor-director needs to be hard on him or herself, yet confident enough to believe in his or her performance.

In pre-production, it is easy to switch between the roles. Time is available, and if I needed to clear my mind of the director mentality and switch to thinking like an actor, I could go for a walk or take a shower. Time on set is much different, and the
switch has to take place at the snap of a finger. When Lewis was directing himself, he always gave the actor more time to play. He would let the comedian run a little bit because he knew him. He would also give his character time to rest. When he showed up on set, he, as a director, would arrive at six-thirty, but Lewis the actor would not be called to set until eleven (Lewis 68). At first, it was hard to manage my time with each position while shooting. It got easier with experience, and by the end, my decisions to switch between each mindset happened subconsciously. While acting, I held the director in the back of my mind. To a small extant, the director needs to be on the edge of the scene keeping one eye on everything, but I found my performance excelled when it was my sole focus. I still struggled at times the keep the director at bay. In the emotional moments of the funeral scene, Jesse, the actor playing Marc’s love interest, would be delivering her lines to me, a tear forming in her eye, and I could not help but think, “Wow, I hope the light catches that and Jordan slightly zooms on her face at the end of her line.” More often than not, though, I was in the moment.

After the shot cut, the director would come to the front of my mind and quickly reflect on what had played out. The performances were fresh in my memory and I could immediately pick out parts that were uncomfortable. As Jordan prepared for playback on the monitor, I would take a deep breath and enter full-fledged director mode. It got to be as easy as that. When we viewed back the shot, I exercised full objectivity and delivered my adjustments to the cast and crew. The next shot would be set up, and I would step in front of the camera and switch back. I used a technique I
had learned through the acting studio to clear my mind. I imagined a light veil covering my body, and as I emptied my thoughts, I would metaphorically lift the veil by the top and let it slide over my head. Jordan would say that the camera was set, and I would take a beat, find my character, and motion for action. From there, I would do it all over again, until by the end of the shoot, I was doing it without thinking.

**Finishing It:**

In an interview discussing editing, Woody Allen said:

In the editing of the film, for me, you know, you start off with very great ambitions. You want to make *Citizen Kane*. And then you shoot the film, and when you get into the editing room, you realize that you screwed up so irredeemably that you just will edit the film in any configuration that avoids embarrassment (Allan)

Editing is the end of the road, and it has its ups and downs. When shooting concludes, I like to take a week to unwind. Luckily, digital video takes a while to import and transcode into an editing system, so I can use that as my excuse. Most filmmakers, if shooting on film, will have it developed and loaded into an editing system as the shooting progresses. Some even have dedicated editors working on cuts before all the material is even shot. I wanted to edit my own film, though, because I was already so invested in it, and because I wanted to be a total filmmaker. I needed the break to clear my head and to regain complete objectivity. Lewis saw the editing room as the true test of objectivity, and he found it an even tougher task when he was editing himself. On occasion, he became super critical, and noted that Jerry Lewis is very sad when he
is not funny. When he found himself in that kind of self-imposed trap, he would turn to his assistant editor, who suggested he take a week off from the material and start at it fresh (Lewis 139). I planned to use Jordan as my second set of eyes once again. He is a very talented editor, and I knew with his knowledge and investment in the project, he could help steer me in the right direction when I was trapped. With the footage loaded into the system, I entered the small, dark editing room and got to work.

The first few days of editing involve labeling each shot, watching them over and over again. An editor needs to know every detail of every little moment in every angle of every scene. Editing, in a way, is like writing the story over again. It is more like a puzzle this time, as all the scenes are present and the task is finding the best way to assemble each piece together. Often, when I am editing a film, it comes together in a different order than written in the script. For my thesis film, I had originally written the opening image to be the lead character sulking in the bathtub. When I jumped into the edit, it felt better for the story to have the film open on the engagement party, moving from happy people and couples to the depressed character secluding himself in the bathroom. It just felt right and got the most laughs. Even though I am no seasoned editor, my experiences as an actor-director helped me make these decisions in the edit. Keaton was a brilliantly instinctive editor and claimed he learned from experience, but in 1920, the early days of cinema, there is little chance he could have had great amounts of it. His wife thought that perhaps his knowledge of comedic timing when it came to acting and directing gave him the ability to properly pace and
edit his films (Brownlow 556). These instincts are what drive an actor-director to make his first cut, and they are what help make that cut exceptional.

This “rough cut” should be a little loose and playful, but it should be close to the director’s final vision of the film. For Lewis, his rough cut needed to be gold. No one else could get into his head, so the first cut needed to great, and if he succeeded, his first cut would be close to what a talented film editor would create with total freedom (Lewis 137). The advantage of an actor-director who edits his or her own film is that it is the product of one mind. Many other hands help mold the film, but they are shaping it into one man or woman’s creative vision. A tighter project can be made.

Editing the rough cut is when the actor-director can have the heaviest hands and bring the project to light in exactly his or her way. This does not mean the project is suddenly set in stone and ready for screening, because the toughest work still lies ahead. After viewing rough cuts of his films, Woody Allen was almost always disappointed. He could create scenes that worked nicely here and there, but the movie as a whole and the arc of the story often did not live up to his vision (Lax 277). I, too, was happy with some scenes and hated others. I was being super critical of my performances, and that lead to me building up and doctoring unnecessary moments in the film. Basically, the rough cut is too long, and the funny beats that drive the story are often buried in crap the director, for some reason, thinks he or she needs.

After the rough cut, I like to take another small break from the footage to clear my mind. I find it valuable to look over the footage a few times before returning to the cutting board. I see shots I forgot about that could help my scenes, and I become more
comfortable with my own performance. Watching one’s self is a unique and difficult part of the actor-director’s job. It tires me out more to watch myself over and over again for hours in the editing room than it does watching other actors. I am always fighting the urge to be too critical. It is when I let the actor in me watch the footage that I usually get down on myself. The actor always feels he or she could have done something a little better, or wishes he or she would have done it just a little differently. It is not always a problem, but when a scene just is not cutting together correctly or is not funny because of my character, I take it out on myself. I have to remind myself to view the footage as a director. When I am the director editing, I can remain objective, even if my performance is not living up to my expectations. A director cannot dwell on the performances. He or she has to be creative and find the way the footage comes together to make the story work. Allen saw editing himself as very easy. He simply looks at the footage and says, “I’m dreadful there,” “I stink there,” or “There, I think I’m quite good, it’s completely believable to me, and I think I’m being amusing and not overreacting or mugging too much.” Allen edited as a director, and as a director he could be objective when he viewed himself, even if it seems a little cruel at times.

Allen still valued other opinions. If he was watching a cut and a friend had a suggestion, he may not always agree, but he tried it out and used it if it was good (Lax 285). I was at a point with my cut where I could use some friendly advice, so I turned to Jordan to help smooth out the bumps in my edit.

It is hard to watch a cut with another person. I want them to love it and find all the moments I crafted to be hilarious. I hold on to a hope that my rough cut is not as
bad as I think it is. The screenings never goes as well as I hope, and when the viewer
does not laugh, I feel like a comedian up on stage playing to a silent crowd. As tough
as it is, the viewing helps to push the cut into the next stage. An extra set of eyes can
immediately begin fixing some of the rough spots. I get so locked into what I have
already edited and the way I have constructed each scene that it is a breath of fresh air
when Jordan suggests, “Cut this shot,” or “move this scene before the previous one.”
In scenes where I have padded my performance because I did not think it worked, he
shows me that my simple reaction does play and to just hold on that moment instead
of cutting crazily to other characters. In the funeral scene, I kept cutting between
reactions of the characters. Screening it with others showed me that simply staying on
my own character made the scene much more emotional and drove the story forward
to the character’s final realization. Showing my film to other filmmakers and movie
lovers reassured me that my performance was good and that less is more.

Like all directors, I had to begin cutting out the excess fat. When a filmmaker
moves towards a fine cut, he or she must give up material they love. I had a scene in
the bathroom with Marc and Tyler, where Marc is getting ready and Tyler is in the
shower washing dishes and clearing out beer bottles from the night before. They
exchange a quick dialogue about plucking eyebrows. I loved the scene, but after
watching a cut with other filmmakers, I realized that it slowed the pace of the film and
was unnecessary. I had to let it go. The actor-director bleeds over the editing system,
because he or she is so invested in the project, and also because her or she is in the
material getting cut. “I think I have dumped more of Jerry Lewis than any other actor,”
Lewis said as he discussed the trials of being an actor-director in the editing room (Lewis 139). Like Lewis, I find it difficult to cut my own performances out of a film. This battle an actor-director goes through makes a better film, though, because he or she is brutal and objective, yet he or she is also in the movie, so the actor-director exerts and extra level of care and perfectionism.

As the film gets tighter and closer to the final cut, it is time to start adding the score. I usually have an idea of the songs I want to use and already have some of them placed temporarily throughout the edit. In the end, the director has to set in stone when music comes in, where it swells, and where it simply exists in the background of the scene. Allen is very particular about music, and for him, it enhances the film emotionally and can sometimes save a scene. He often uses his music literally as an emotional cue for the audience (Lax 306-307). The lyrics of the chosen song reflect the story itself. I knew my lead character was heart-broken and obsessed with the idea of a classic-American marriage, so I wanted to use big band, torch songs to drive the film. I have a fondness for Dean Martin, so I knew before I even started shooting that he was the musical artist I would use. For the upbeat beginning, I chose *Memories Are Made of This* to accompany Marc as he sulks in the bathtub, and I used *The Door is Still Open to my Heart* as he meticulously grooms himself to meet Melanie. These songs play wonderfully against the sad character and help to push the montages forward. At the end, as Marc leaves the funeral home, *Until* builds beautiful through the end of the film. The lyrics, “Until you find the one you want to want you,” swell while Marc watches Melanie embraces her new boyfriend. It gives a sense of closure,
while still holding on to the idea that he does want her to want him. Marc will never truly stop loving her, even if he can move on. The music gives a classic hopeless tone to the piece that compliments the comedy. With the music in place, there comes a time when the editing has to stop. Lewis saw it as a “lovely, maddening last act” (Lewis 139). I could re-edit a film endlessly, but the time comes, usually after watching the cut hundreds of times, adjusting the silliest things here and there, that an actor-director has to walk out of the editing room with a final film he knows will touch the audiences waiting to see it.

Through the countless awards Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis, and Woody Allen have received, it is easy to say that they embody the image of the total filmmaker. Their success speaks to the power of the actor-director. With the position often comes complete creative control, and because of this, the chance of artistic inconsistency diminishes. The films are not collaborations between the separate minds of a writer, director, actor, editor, and producer. At the core is one person, who fuels the project, every step of the way. The strength of the actor-director begins with a need to be well rounded. He or she not only strives to be a diverse performer, but also possesses a thirst for knowledge of all aspects of filmmaking. An actor-director understands the challenges each hand that shapes a film faces, and by acknowledging this, he or she gains the utmost trust of the cast and crew. In the pre-production phase, the actor-director has the advantage of having both roles present at any time. The actor and director help shape the story from ideas to screenplay. If a disagreement arises, it has to be solved, because unlike a project with separate individuals in the roles, an actor-
director can’t walk out and leave anyone in the room. This intimate relationship flows through the rest of the production. An actor-director gets the most out of the cast, because he or she is struggling right there with them. Instead of commanding and controlling from the safety of the far side of the camera, the actor-director is part of the chaos and lets the other actors know that the film can only be accomplished through working together. In a way, with one mind driving all aspects of the production, the cast and crew work better as a team. When it comes to finishing the film, no one is as overly critical, yet truly passionate about shaping the final product. Having molded each step and detail of the film, the actor-director is always one step ahead. He or she is the living, breathing heart of the project, wanting nothing more than to make a masterpiece. A committee of writers and producers does not approve the actor-director’s work. It is manufactured through an inner government, a group of the same mind that puts everything on the line. This committee cannot fail and will not accept anything just good enough. The writer, director, actor, and producer are not working for a paycheck, but rather a vision. It is pure dedication. When an actor-director successfully makes a film, it is better than others because it embodies everything one filmmaker knows and believes.
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