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The History Lesson

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The History Lesson

by

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Report

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Abstract

The History Lesson

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This report documents the making of the thesis film *The History Lesson*. This short narrative film is the final requirement for a Master of Fine Arts degree in the Department of Radio-TV-Film at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Chapter One: Choosing a Project

Guidelines

In the Fall of 2009, when I was deciding what type of short film I wanted to make for my thesis, I compiled a list of guidelines and restrictions that, if closely adhered to, would allow me to tell an efficient and focused story. The short films that I have often revisited over the years share many of these same qualities. Although I was coming up with an original narrative idea for my thesis, I wanted to work within a clear framework.

First, I was aiming for a length of somewhere between five and fifteen minutes. Rather than taking place over the course of several days or longer, I wanted the majority of the story to unfold in real time or compressed time. I felt this approach – and the decision to set the film in no more than one or two distinct locations – would raise the level of immediacy of the story and challenge me to tell it as concisely as possible while still holding the viewer’s attention.

Second, I didn’t want to rely heavily on dialogue as a way to get information across. I wanted instead to focus on the behavior and actions of the characters as they’re put in conflict with each other. My pre-thesis film, *Mortals*, had dialogue from start to finish, and I wanted my thesis to go in a different direction, one that would allow me to grow as a filmmaker.

In addition, I was interested in working with child performers in the seven- to eleven-year-old range. I didn’t have much experience in this area and I felt this would be the best time to give it a try. I’m drawn to films that are told from the point-of-view of a child and that present them as intelligent individuals, rather than as props.

Story idea

Characters that have difficulties fitting in to their environment intrigue me. Specifically, characters that recognize this and attempt to change an aspect of themselves, but that are ultimately unable to.

I decided to incorporate this type of character into a story idea that I had been developing off-and-on throughout 2009. The story centers on Sam, an imaginative nine-year-old boy who gets poor grades because he spends all his time drawing and daydreaming about dinosaurs. One day he forgets to do a social studies assignment that requires each student to go to the front of the room and give an oral presentation about American history. This is a presentation that they were supposed to have prepared the night before. Sam keeps this secret to himself, fearing that he will fail or be disciplined. When the teacher finally calls on him, he decides to completely make up a bunch of “facts” about his assigned topic, hoping to not be discovered. However, as he begins to speak, he can’t help himself and ends up incorporating facts about dinosaurs, the things that truly fascinate him.

This idea, which satisfied all of the above guidelines, is what ultimately became *The History Lesson*.

Chapter Two: Screenwriting

I completed the first complete draft of the screenplay in December of 2009. It was approximately twenty pages and focused on all the students in the classroom, instead of just Sam. Looking back, it seemed to be more of a frivolous comedy about a kid who didn't do his homework. There wasn't much of an arc for Sam. He would just find himself in one random predicament after another. It had a "gotcha" moment for an ending and didn't feature the Krystal character. After getting feedback from friends and instructors, I decided to alter the ending; to make Krystal a stronger presence; and to simplify what happens to Sam in the classroom. However, the story was still lacking depth.

At the beginning of 2010, as I was working on the second draft of the screenplay for *The History Lesson*, I was greatly influenced by two lectures.

One was Michael Arndt's "Endings: The Good, the Bad & the Insanely Great." He believes that it is important for a story to present the philosophical stakes in addition to physical and emotional stakes. I realized that my script didn't have any philosophical stakes. Sam's fear of being sent to the remedial class or his sadness with being separated from his friend Krystal doesn't really resonate in the long run.

As I was debating what the philosophical stakes of *The History Lesson* should be, I was influenced by a lecture given by Ken Robinson. He argued that creativity should be as important as literacy in school education. I then realized that the earlier version of the screenplay presented Sam as someone who got bad grades simply because he was lazy. For the second draft I decided it would be more interesting if Sam had such a big

imagination that he would rather sketch and think about dinosaurs than pay attention in class. He has a great creative capacity. This conflict in philosophical values helped give my second draft the depth that was missing from the first.

Chapter Three: Cast and crew

I posted casting calls on several email lists in Austin, but I received the most responses from the parents of children who were involved with kidsActing, an acting camp. I selected fifty performers and held auditions in the UT Communication building in January of 2010.

Rather than having each child performer say lines from the script, I thought it would make more sense to set up a video camera and to chat with them one-on-one for about twenty minutes. We sketched and talked about whatever was on their minds. I wanted to make them feel as comfortable as possible so that they would loosen up and not feel like they were being interviewed.

I reviewed the video auditions over the next few weeks and selected about fifteen performers whom I thought would be right for the film. Among them was a young actor from the Dallas area named Dawson Holder. I cast him for the role of Sam.

For the role of the main teacher, I cast Amelia Turner, an actress whom I had seen at the open auditions at the Salvage Vanguard Theatre.

Joel Barton, a musician and middle school teacher in Austin, played the role of Mr. Marmaduke.

The crew was mostly made up of current students or recent graduates from the UT film department. This included David Blue Garcia as the cinematographer, Chad Leathers and Ruwan Perera as the assistant directors, Jaime Cano and Karlo Montano as the sound recordists, and Homer Leal as the gaffer, among others.

Chapter Four: Production

Barbara Porter, the principal of St. Francis School in central Austin, allowed me to film in some of their classrooms and hallways over the course of two weekends in late March and early April of 2010.

For the duration of the four-day shoot, the child performers and their parents or guardians would all be in one classroom that served as a waiting room. When it was time to film a particular scene, we would gather the necessary performers, rehearse very briefly (I asked the parents to not show the script to their children) and film several takes.

Although we filmed Amelia's scenes separately, I felt it would be important to have an offscreen crew member – Blake Buesnel – standing in for her character for the scenes involving the students. This gave them someone to react and respond to, and it helped us capture the true emotion that I believed would add to their performances.

For Sam's flashbacks where he remembers Krystal (played by Aria Whitney), I wanted to film in an exterior location that seemed secluded, but that could be found in a residential neighborhood. I settled on a creek under a bridge in Hyde Park in central Austin and filmed there for a half-day.

Although we made a lot of progress during the shoot, we did need an extra day of filming for the scene involving Mr. Marmaduke and his class. We returned to St. Francis School in October of 2010 with a smaller crew for a quick day of pickups.

Chapter Five: Post-production

I began editing picture in April of 2010. With over nine hours of footage, I was able to have an initial, twenty-minute rough cut by June. After meeting with my thesis committee, getting feedback from friends, and spending several more weeks editing, I decided to make two major changes to what would become the second rough cut.

First, I decided to alter the flashback scene. Originally, it was to take place in its entirety during the opening of the film. However, I felt that the act of Krystal signing Sam's cast would have more impact if it occurred later in the film, right before he decides to stay in the school and look for her. I took this idea further by separating the flashback into three sections and placing them in various spots throughout the film. This way, whenever Sam was reflecting deeply about something in class or in the hallway, I could cut to the flashbacks.

The second major change to the film was the removal of a subplot including a boy in Sam's class who has a fixation on the girl sitting in front of him. Although these scenes were fun to edit, I felt that they slowed the film down and took the emphasis away from Sam. From this point on, I decided that anything not related to Sam's predicament or his relationship with Krystal should be removed. In November, after several more weeks of editing, I finished editing picture. My locked cut was now down to ten minutes.

In November, I met with Eric Friend, a composer and re-recording sound mixer, to share ideas about the original score. After a few days he completed the four musical themes that appear in the film. We then sound mixed for three days in late November at the UT film department.

Chapter Six: Closing remarks

Since the inception of *The History Lesson* in the Fall of 2009, I wanted to make a short film that would be similar in theme, style and tone to a more ambitious project that I hoped I would be able to write and direct immediately after graduating from the MFA film program at the University of Texas.

The experience of making this thesis film was challenging and frustrating at times, but ultimately, extremely rewarding. It is an honor to be able to direct personal films, regardless of the size or scope, and I know that the years spent at the program will be of great value to me as I begin my filmmaking career.

Appendix: Shooting script

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Ten 4th graders quietly take a math quiz. There are eleven desks in the room but one of them is empty. MS. BREITROSE, the teacher, addresses the class from her desk.

MS. BREITROSE
Two minutes.

As we go around the room we see that one student doesn't do the quiz. It rests face down on his desk. This is SAM, a boy with a white plaster cast on his broken arm.

Sam puts the finishing touches on a flip book made up of rectangular pieces of paper. In it, a Tyrannosaurus rex flies an airplane over a tar pit. Sam's face lights up with excitement.

Sam then notices that one of the desks in the room is empty.
He whispers to DAVID.

SAM
Where's Krystal?

DAVID
Shut up, Sam.

Sam turns to MAYA and CLAUDIA.

SAM

Anybody seen Krystal?

MAYA

She's sick. She ate the
tapioca and
threw up on the encyclopedias.

CLAUDIA

I heard she failed another
test and
got moved to Mr. Marmaduke's
class.

SAM

The dumb class?

CLAUDIA

It's called "Guided
Achievement."

MAYA

I still think she puked her
guts out.

DAVID

You're both wrong. Her parents
couldn't pay her tuition so
she got
kicked out of school.

Sam looks anxious as he gazes back at
Krystal's empty desk.

CUT TO:

EXT. DRIED UP CREEK - DAY - FLASHBACK

Sam looks bored as he strolls alone

along a narrow creek. He
sees a girl silhouetted as she stands
under a bridge several
yards away. This is KRYSTAL. They both
have their backpacks.

SAM

They're getting on the bus.

She doesn't respond. As Sam walks over
to her he realizes she
is drawing on the concrete walls with
colored chalk. Sam
slows down and stops directly behind
her. He is transfixed by
her sketches of imaginary landscapes and
creatures.

SAM (CONT'D)

What's your name?

Krystal turns around and eyeballs him.
She notices the blank
white cast on his arm.

KRYSTAL

Nobody signed it?

Sam shakes his head nervously and looks
at the ground. Before
he can say or do anything else, Krystal
grabs his arm and
pulls him towards her. She gets a pen
and writes something on
the edge of his cast. When she finishes
they exchange smiles.
Right as Sam begins to read what she has
written, we hear --

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - END OF FLASHBACK

MS. BREITROSE
Fifteen seconds.

This time her warning gets through to Sam. Without thinking, he shoves his flip book into his back pocket and grabs his math quiz. He scribbles down as many answers as he can.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Three...two...one. Pass them up.

Maya grabs Sam's quiz and passes it up. Sam looks on with sadness as MAX delivers each row's stack of quizzes to the teacher.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Time for our orals. Get your cards ready. You can have a few minutes to look over them.

Ms. Breitrose begins grading the quizzes.

Sam opens his folder and notices a rip along the edge of the inner pocket. He sticks his hand in. The pocket is empty. He

looks around the room. Each of the other students takes out a stack of ten handwritten index cards from their folder.

Ms. Breitrose looks disappointed as she arrives at Sam's incomplete quiz. All the answers he wrote down are obviously wrong. She writes an F at the top and records it in her grade book. She examines Sam's grades from past assignments before moving on to the next student's quiz in the stack.

Sam searches his backpack for the cards but finds nothing. Now finished grading, Ms. Breitrose rises from her chair.

MS. BREITROSE

(CONT'D)

Everyone ready?

THE CLASS

Yes.

MS. BREITROSE

Who doesn't have their cards?

As Sam begins to raise his hand he looks back at Krystal's empty desk. He thinks for a moment, then lowers his hand and remains silent. Ms. Breitrose never sees his hand up.

MS. BREITROSE

(CONT'D)

Good. Let's get started. We

only
have time for a few of you.

She looks in her grade book. The first
name listed
alphabetically is "Eric Adams." We see
that Sam is fourth.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Eric, you're first. Come on
up.

ERIC doesn't respond. He is staring
longingly at the back of
the neck of GABY, the girl in front of
him.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Eric?... Eric?

Eric finally grabs his cards and goes to
the chalkboard.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
What's your topic?

ERIC
The Apaches.
(reads cards)
The Apaches migrated into
Texas
from Canada. They were
skillful
hunters because they used bows
and
arrows, spears and tomahawks.
In
1886 they became the last

Indian
tribe to be conquered when
their
leader Geronimo surrendered to
the
United States Army...

Sam whispers to Claudia as Eric
continues in the background.

SAM
I lost my Cherokee cards.

CLAUDIA
Too bad.

Sam glances at the cards on her desk.

CLAUDIA (CONT'D)
What?

SAM
Can I have yours?

CLAUDIA
No way.

SAM
You're not even going today.
You're
last name starts with a "W."

CLAUDIA
I said no.

SAM
Why not?

CLAUDIA
Your projects are too weird.
You

always talk about dinosaurs.

Sam stares blankly at her.

CLAUDIA (CONT'D)
Never mind.

ERIC
...They did not take enemy
scalps
like others did.
Instead they crushed their
enemies'
heads with large rocks. Also,
they
ate parts of the victims'
flesh
because they thought it would
give
them power and because it kept
the
enemy from entering heaven...

JILL, a girl in the front row, looks
grossed out.

JILL
Ewww.

Sam turns back to Claudia.

SAM
But she'll give me an F. Then
I'll
get sent to Mr. Marmaduke's.

CLAUDIA
Then stop making up strange
projects.

At that moment Eric finishes his

presentation. Everyone
applauds. Eric returns to his desk and
puts away his cards,
then continues to stare at Gaby's neck.

MS. BREITROSE
Jill, you're next.

Jill walks to the chalkboard with her
cards.

JILL
(reads cards)
The Wichitas were relatives of
the
Caddos but spoke a different
language. They lived on both
sides
of the Red River.

Sam fidgets in his seat.

JILL (CONT'D)
...One tribe, the Wacos, had a
village where the city of Waco
is
today. They migrated from the
Piney
Woods to the edge of the
Plains and
became part-time hunters for
buffalo and other big
animals...

Sam notices some movement in his
peripheral vision. He rocks
his head to the side just in time to see
Eric lean forward
and lick the back of Gaby's neck. She
jumps out of her chair.

GABY
He licked me!

Everyone in the room turns to look at
her.

MS. BREITROSE
He licked you?

GABY
Yes.

MS. BREITROSE
(to Eric)
You licked her?

Eric pretends nothing has happened.

ERIC
No.

GABY
He's lying!

ERIC
No I'm not.

Sam glances at the stack of cards on
Gaby's desk.

MS. BREITROSE
Who saw what happened?

No one speaks. Sam, the only witness,
remains silent.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)

Anyone?

Ms. Breitrose studies Gaby and Eric.

Both are convincing.

MS. BREITROSE

(CONT'D)

Both of you go to the office.

GABY

But -

MS. BREITROSE

Now.

Gaby storms out the room. Eric ambles
out behind her.

JILL

Their name meant "dog lovers."

They

had dogs which were used to
guard

camps, to hunt other animals,

...

Sam looks back at Gaby's cards and
checks his surroundings.
He slowly stands up but before he takes
two steps he gets
stuck and his desk gets pulled after
him, creating a ruckus.
Sam sees that one of his shoelaces has
been tied to the leg
of his desk. David grins mischievously
at him.

Ms. Breitrose glares at Sam. He sits
back down.

Jill finishes her presentation and the
class applauds.

MS. BREITROSE
Maya, are you ready?

Maya goes to the chalkboard with her
cards.

CLAUDIA
(to Sam)
You're next.

Sam tilts his head back and shuts his
eyes.

MAYA
(reads cards)
The Karankawas lived on the
Gulf
Coast and did a lot of hunting
and
fishing...

A large metal fan oscillates in the
corner of the room. A
tiny, white feather is pressed against
the back of it.

MAYA (CONT'D)
...They were hunters of
buffalo,
deer, bear and other game.
Their
sacred animal was the wolf,
which
they considered ancestors...

The feather gets sucked into the fan and
spins around with
the blades.

MAYA (CONT'D)
...They decorated themselves

with
tattoos all over their faces
and
bodies...

The feather shoots out the fan and
travels across the room.

MAYA (CONT'D)
...They used nose plugs, lip
plugs,
earrings, necklaces,
bracelets,
anklets, and feathers...

The feather flutters downward and lands
right in Sam's mouth.

He gags and jerks forward, sneezing
intensely. He is covered
in snot and spit. Everyone in the room
groans.

MS. BREITROSE
Sam, are you OK?

He nods his head.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Do you need to go to the
bathroom?

Sam's eyes light up. He thinks for a
moment, then nods again.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)

Hurry up.

Sam runs out the room, his hand still
over his nose.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Sam wipes his face on his sleeve and runs past the bathroom.

INT. STAIRWELL - MOMENTS LATER

He runs down the stairs.

INT. DOWNSTAIRS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

He runs down the hall towards the back exit but stops right as he opens the door. He freezes. Something is on his mind.

CUT TO:

EXT. DRIED UP CREEK - DAY - FLASHBACK

We return to the moment under the bridge when Krystal smiles at Sam.

CUT TO:

INT. DOWNSTAIRS HALLWAY - END OF FLASHBACK

Sam takes a deep breath as he stands
under the exit. He is
still deep in thought.

INT. STAIRWELL - MOMENTS LATER

Sam retraces his steps, walking up the
stairs he just came
down.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Sam walks down the hallway, peeking into
each classroom he
comes across before moving on to the
next one. He's looking
for something.

Now near the end of the hall, he hears a
voice singing from
behind the closed door of one of the
rooms. He walks to it.

Sam stands on his tiptoes and looks
through the door window.

He looks around the room and gasps.
Inside, five humiliated
kids sit in a circle and hold hands. One
of these students is
Krystal. Sitting in the middle is MR.
MARMADUKE. He plays
overly sentimental folk music on an
acoustic guitar.

MR. MARMADUKE
(singing)

Remember the brave, 'cause
they had
the brass,
Remember fallen warriors, face
down
in the grass,
Geronimo, Geronimo, you fought
with
your heart,
They made you surrender, and
it
broke our land apart...

Krystal and Sam lock eyes. She gives him
a desperate look
that says Help me. Suddenly we hear a
voice down the hall.

DAVID (O.S.)
There he is!

Sam turns around and sees David poking
his head out Ms.
Breitrose's classroom door a few yards
away. Sam freezes. He
hears Ms. Breitrose yelling from inside
her room.

MS. BREITROSE (O.S.)
We're waiting.

Sam looks frightened as he makes his way
back to class.

INT. CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Everyone stares at Sam as he stands at
the doorway.

MS. BREITROSE
Hurry up, Sam.

He walks to the chalkboard and stares at
the ground.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Sam?

SAM
I don't have my cards.

Ms. Breitrose notices something sticking
out of his pocket.

MS. BREITROSE
They're in your back pocket.

Sam looks confused. He sticks his hand
in and pulls out a
stack of small pieces of paper. It is
the dinosaur flip book.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
What's your topic?

Sam starts to sweat as he silently flips
through the cards.

MS. BREITROSE
(CONT'D)
Sam, what's your topic?

SAM
The Cherokees...

MS. BREITROSE
The Cherokees?

Sam looks her right in the eye.

SAM

Um, yes.

Ms. Breitrose studies him. Sam forces himself to not look away.

MS. BREITROSE

OK, fine. You can begin.

SAM

OK.

Sam looks at the class. They're all staring at him, waiting for him to speak.

MS. BREITROSE

Hurry up, we're almost out of time.

Suddenly, something on Sam's cast catches his eye. It is the message that Krystal wrote earlier. He reads it. It says, "make your own world... -K."

Sam looks back at his cards and flips them, watching the animation of the T-rex in the airplane one more time. His eyes light up and he drifts into a daze just as he did earlier. His anxiety dissipates.

SAM

(pretends to read cards)

The history of the

Cherokees...

A smile slowly forms on his face as he
tilts his head up and
gazes at his audience. He speaks
passionately.

SAM (CONT'D)

...begins 68 million years
ago...

during a deadly F-14
battle...over
the tar pits of Los Angeles.

We hold on his grin.

CUT TO BLACK:

THE END

References

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