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by

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Who Is Singing There

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Report

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Abstract

Who Is Singing There

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My Master of Fine Arts thesis film is a 60-minute film that blends documentary and feature film elements entitled *Who Is Singing There*. It's a story about Totem, a rock band formed seven years ago. Right before it was to release its second album, lead singer Suming and drummer A-shing were determined to leave the group. Band members held a meeting to work out a solution. Before they knew it, however, they were reminiscing about the time they took part in music competitions in from 2003 to 2005. They realized that the root to why they were coming apart could be traced back to that time and if they wanted the band go any further, they needed not only to rekindle their passion for music but something more. This is an account of the filmmaking process from the initial idea to the finished film.

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Introduction

My Master of Fine Arts thesis film is a 60-minute film that blends documentary and feature film elements entitled *Who Is Singing There*. This film is composed primarily of footage of Totem over several years, using feature film as connectors. I opted for a mixed style film, rather than simple and traditional documentary skills, to apply the feature film making skills I have learned these past few years. I wish to emphasize that the story was created after I started going to UT Austin, the documentary footage was shot from 2003 to 2005 though.

The making of this film reconfirmed principles I learned in school. The most obvious are explained here. First, I realized that a good film needs appeal, logic, and a complete story line. As such, in the pre-production phase, I spent a great deal of time focused on script writing. Second, choosing the right actors and assigning them a suitable performance style are also crucial to a good movie. Thus, a good director needs to know his actors and help them perform to their potential. Third, I learned that even in the post-production phase, a film can still be improved. Every reediting, for example, represents the opportunity to make a new story, but you might have to abandon materials that you like very much.

Many challenges that I encountered and solutions that I came up with are recorded here. In this report, I describe the process of making the film, reflect on what I learned from the experience, and suggest ways that I would do things differently in future films.

Chapter 1: Initial Idea

Early in 2003, I began to shoot a documentary about the rock band Totem. At first, the plan was just to record the Ho-Hi-Yan music festival for business purposes¹ and Totem was just one of ten bands that I chose to record. I chose Totem because band members, like me, are indigenous people from Taiwan—which was quite unusual at that time (2003) in Taiwan.

The shooting of Totem in 2003 was over very quickly, because they lost in the second round² of the competition, but the more I got to know the members of Totem during the two-month shoot the more I liked them. Totem has a very unique music style based on their aboriginal culture and members are quite humorous. My intuition as a film maker told me that Totem would be worth recording, so I followed the band for three years (2003-2005) and shot about 300-hours of footage before I was admitted into the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) in the summer of 2005. That same year was also a magical time for Totem—they won first place in the Ho-Hi-Yan festival after failing twice³.

Studying in the US did not cause me to forget Totem. The voices of the band

¹ The Ho-Hi-Yan music festival has been held by the Taipei county government every summer since 2000. The three-day festival is the top music event for rock bands in Taiwan, because it includes an intense competition, consisting of hundreds of rock bands. I was hired to record the 2003 festival, including the competition portion.

² The Ho-Hi-Yan music festival competition consists of three rounds. No matter how many bands take part in the competition, the rules state that only thirty bands can pass the first round and go to the second and only ten bands are chosen to compete in the final round for the championship.

³ In 2003 and 2004, Totem did not even make it to the final round of the Ho-Hi-Yan music festival, but the band won first place in 2005. While I began a documentary about the competitions, there was no way I could have predicted the results, so the happy ending to Totem's story in my film could only be said to be a result of my intuition and confidence in Totem and luck.

members calling out “Suming” on the big stage in the finals at the 2005 Ho-Hi-Yan music festival continued to resound in my mind. I believed that the materials covering the lives of Totem members would make a good story and it should begin with them calling out, “Suming! Suming!”

Though the idea of telling Totem’s story never left me while at UT Austin, I did not want to tell it using a traditional documentary style. I realized that it would be easy to simply connect footage using simple documentary techniques, like interviews, but I came to UT Austin to learn how to make feature films. I wanted to challenge myself and use the skills that I have learned, so weaving the documentary-style footage I had into a feature film was my first task. I took every opportunity to realize this idea. Classes on production, script writing, and editing, were all platforms for revising my plans⁴. As a result, the pre-production stage of my film was very long.

During these long days, of course, I sometimes doubted whether putting all of that energy into Totem’s film was a good idea or even worth it, but in the end, I felt that the completed film would not only be my graduation project for UT Austin, but it would also serve as a rite of passage of sorts for me from when I worked for the Ho-Hi-Yan music festival⁵. I had to leave past honors and memories behind and head on to the next stage in my art. Therefore, I was sure that the Totem film was the only story I wanted to use for my graduation project.

⁴ I sincerely appreciate the help and feedback given me by each of my professors.

⁵ When I finished the business project I mentioned in 2003, I used the materials to make a pure documentary work entitled *Ocean Fever* (103mins/Color/2004/Taiwan). It received many awards, including The Audience Award at the Taipei Film Festival and has given me a good reputation in Taiwan. Since then, I have wanted to make a film that would top *Ocean Fever*, so that I might be known as “Director Lungnan,” rather than the “Director of *Ocean Fever*.”

Chapter 2: Pre-Production

Most work on the project took place in the pre-production phase as I focused on script writing, because I understood that a logical and appealing story is crucial to a good movie. I performed literature reviews to decide the theme of the story. Then I considered casting and what performance style would be best for the actors I selected. This was to be a story about a Taiwanese band, but as the director, I would be in the US, budget control would be extremely difficult. Moreover, these factors did not exist independently of each other; rather, they affected each other. When one factor changed, another might change. For example, the script affecting the casting, the casting impacting the budget, and the budget affecting the script. Consequently, pre-production turned into a huge task and took almost three years. Pre-production can be divided into three phases as follows.

I. Phase One – Footage Review

Starting in May 2003, I started tracking Totem, especially Suming. I attended each of their performances and special events and became a part of their daily life. By the summer of 2005, I had amassed some 300 hours of DV footage. Due to the massive quantity of footage, the review work took a great deal of time—almost six months.

II. Phase Two – Script Writing and Literature Review

I understood that a good film needs appeal, logic, and a complete story, so in the pre-production stage, I spent a great deal of time focused on script writing. I decided on two principles in the beginning. First, in order to tell a good story, not every member of Totem would be as important in the film. I decided that Suming, the lead singer and band leader, should be the main character. Second, I did not want to tell Totem's story from only 2003 to 2005, ending with their success in 2005, so the challenge was how to make a new story using existent footage.

I tried many things. The first idea I had was that the theme of the story could be Suming's identity, that is his identity in the two bands that he formed⁶ and his identity in the two cultures he lives in. With this in mind, the script went through three major rewrites.

[Version One]

The first version was based on the real lives of Totem members in 2003-2005 as I tried to make them reappear on screen. The story described different difficulties faced by each member. For example, A-Wei (the bass player) was experiencing problems with an overly-ardent fan, A-Shen (the drummer) had money issues, and Suming couldn't decide which band to play for. In this version, the proportion of feature film and documentary would be equal. It was written in my script writing class

⁶ In real life, Suming formed a second band ECHO GS with Gelresai. This produced a great deal of friction between Suming and other members of Totem, because they felt that Suming's lack of focus would hold Totem back. This problem existed for a long time and could not be resolved. I found this plot very interesting, so I kept it as part of each version.

in 2007, but I felt that at two hours it might be too long.

[Version Two]

The second version was totally different from the first. I created a new story in which Suming loses his memory and meets a Mexican-American girl named Maria in Texas, but he doesn't know how he got there. Suming struggles to get his memory back (he remembers having a big fight with some people about choosing bands) and Maria has identity problems with being both American and Mexican. They both have issues about choosing and identity. In the end, they help each other to find solutions. This version was completed in my second script writing class in early 2008. It would be a short 30-minute film, mainly feature film but part documentary, and would have four main characters: Suming, Maria, Maria's mother, and Maria's father. The film discusses identity, i.e., can people have more than one identity at the same time?

This version was almost complete, but when I began to cast for the roles of the Mexican characters, Suming told me that he could not come to the US during the period we had planned. The whole plan now had to be changed.

[Version Three]

After the two changes mentioned above, I wrote the final version which was completed at the end of 2008. I tried to use the formula I learned in my script writing class:

- 1) Let the audience know what the story is about within five minutes;
- 2) Set up three phases in the film – opening, crisis, and crisis resolution;
- 3) Every crisis should be larger than the previous one.

In this version, the story is simplified as “a band’s story” with no more national or cultural identity issues. It only describes Totem’s formation, break up (Suming’s swinging between two bands), and reunion. I also inverted the proportion of feature film and documentary—now the documentary portion would be the core and the feature portion the connector. The feature portion was set to happen in 2009 and so the whole story spans 2003 to 2009. The story states that lead singer Suming and drummer A-shing are determined to leave the group right before Totem was to release its second album. Band members held a meeting to work out a solution, but before they knew it, they were reminiscing about the past including the three competitions. After which they realized that Totem couldn’t be replaced. They were best friends and they should try to bring Totem as far as they could. This made for a happy and clear ending.

The script was almost complete, but there were still some problems. The biggest being that I did not write exactly what was to be done and said in each scene (I will explain why in the paragraph “Casting and Performance Style” below). That resulted in a crisis for my script, because I feared the actors might change what I wanted them to do and say. This actually did happen and resulted in a change to my original ending. I will describe this later in Chapter 3—Production.

III. Phase Three – Casting, Performance Style and Budget Control

[Casting and Performance Style]

Casting was adjusted for the different scripts. For example, in the first version, I needed a Taiwanese girl to be A-Wei's girlfriend. The second version needed several Mexican-American and Mexican actors. In the final version, however, I only needed Totem's five members and Gelresai from the band ECHO GS⁷ to play themselves, because the feature film portion of the film was to connect the documentary portions, so I wanted the same faces to be seen throughout the film.

I decided that having Totem's members play Totem in the film, but I had to decide performance style, too. Two films featured Totem, but the results were uninteresting⁸. Totem's charisma comes from their quick wit and natural humor and writing lines for them does not serve to draw out their best, so I decided to use a natural performance style.

[Budget Control]

Another important factor affecting the script is budget. In the final version, for example, I first wrote that members of Totem held a meeting at the 2005 festival

⁷ ECHO GS was a duo, consisting of Suming and Gelresai. They both sing and play instruments.

⁸ Two films feature Totem:

- "Circling, Totem" (60mins/Color/2006/Taiwan)
http://www.ettoday.com/etv_drama/events/totem/index.htm ,
- "Hopscotch" (27mins/Color/2008/Taiwan)
<http://twfilmgroup.lolforum.net/forum-f30/topic-t1150.htm> .

which would mean that I would have to recreate the 2005 concert. To keep the budget down, however, I decided to let them discuss it in a studio—a much simpler set. For the same reason, I flew back to Taiwan alone to produce the film as it would be much more economical than having all members of Totem come to the US. As such, production started in Taiwan and was based on the final script.

Chapter 3: Production

I went back to Taiwan in February, 2009 and production started in April. Since we were using a natural performance style, I set up two rehearsals for Totem's five members and Gelresai, so they could familiarize themselves with the style.

[Rehearsals]

In the first rehearsal, I spent most of the time explaining what natural performance style is. The actors had no experiences with mockumentaries or natural performance style. They had no idea how to "act like themselves" or make up their own lines, so at first, the rehearsal was just a discussion about how they felt about Totem over the years, especially after winning in 2005. They gradually relaxed and talked more. During the second rehearsal, they began to reveal emotions that ran the gambit from happiness to complaining and anger. They seemed to understand what I wanted from them. Their conversations in the rehearsals became material for editing the script.

[Shooting]

It was a one-day shoot. When the shooting formally began, however, problems that I did not expect occurred. The first was with the actors. The bass player was very late, shortening our time in the studio. We needed to finish the shoot in a hurry, so I

had to cut some scenes. What's more, the second singer had a terrible hangover and was not as funny as he usually is, ruining the role I had written for him.

A more serious crisis also happened. My fear that the actors might go beyond the script became a reality, because there were no exact lines for the actors and I asked them to just do what "they would in this situation". During production, the conversation among the six actors was too real—it seemed as though the pretext of acting finally gave them a chance to vent what had been on their minds. As a result, the actors stirred each other up and in the end, there was real anger and tears. The plot changed. In the original script, the story ended with Totem's happy reunion, but now the members were confused as to whether Totem should keep going with so much grumbling and difficulties. I had to deal with the situation.

I gave up the original ending plot very quickly because I realized that Totem had really faced problems in recent years and they weren't going to just go away. I did not ask the actors to act happy. I just gave them time to cool down. Neither did I have any expectations to guide them in their arguments, because I knew they were not good at apologizing or analyzing problems. What I did do, however, was ask the two individuals with the biggest differences to come back into the studio and make peace⁹.

Production did not proceed very smoothly, but in the end, the changes weren't bad for the film.

⁹ In fact, at the time, I did not know exactly how to end to story. I then finally completed the plot of ending in the editing phase, which was after the production for a long time.

Chapter 4: Post-Production

Post-production took much longer time than I had imagined. The major task during this portion was editing, but color correction, sound mixing, and subtitle translating also took a lot of time. In this phase, I reviewed and employed many skills I had learned in school. It was very interesting to apply theories to real work. I will describe three areas of post-production.

[Editing]

I had totally finished editing four versions. In fact, before shooting the feature portion, I had completed the rough editing for the documentary portion. When I finished production, I merged the two portions, the feature and the documentary, into one to complete the first version. It was a 120-minute film.

In the first version, however, the various parts of the story did not weave together very well. Something more was needed to connect the various parts. I had no alternative but to add Suming's personal interview which made the story flow much more smoothly¹⁰. The second version was 102 minutes long and I began to hold test screenings. As a result of audience response, I shortened the film again to 90 minutes. This was the third version. What I am submitting as my graduation project is a 60-minute version, which is the fourth version.

¹⁰ Instead of using the footage of interview, however, I had only used Suming's conversation, the voice, as the connector.

The biggest problem in the editing phase was the script, because it had been changed by the actors during production. The original happy ending was gone. I had to make up a new one and this took me very long time. Eventually, I kept any reunions by Totem up in the air. The new plot was changed as follows.

“...Band members held a meeting to work out a solution... They realized that the roots to why they were coming apart now could be traced back to that time and if they wanted the band to go further, they would need not only to rekindle their passion for music but something more.”¹¹

After succeeding in making up a new ending, the new question was how to grab the audience’s attention from the very first minute. Later, with Nancy’s feedback, I decided to incorporate a concert into the beginning. I also concentrated the feature and documentary parts individually which helped keep audiences interested.

In this process, I learned that different editing can turn one material into different work, and new editing idea often come out through the test screenings, or review the work after some time.

[Color Correction]

The feature and documentary portions were shot using different materials, the

¹¹ See the original plot at Chapter Two, Phase Two – Script Writing and Literature Review, Version Three (page 7).

feature portion in HD and documentary in DV. Although it was already easy enough to distinguish them, I still decided to do color correction to define them. To unite the color of the documentary (DV) footage, I reduced saturation. On the one hand, that made it more consistent with the documentary portion¹², on the other hand, it increased the tone of the feeling of recalling. For the feature portion (HD), I increased the color contrast to simplify the background.

The difficulty in this phase was choosing the reduced saturation tone of the documentary (DV). At first, I just wanted to deal with such problems as color contrast and temperature rather than reduce saturation. Through trial and error, I realized that reduced saturation would be best for the documentary portion, but there is not much latitude in DV tolerance, so I spent lots time adjusting the reduced saturation tone ratio to prevent too much noise.

From this part, I learned that color correction can increase the feeling of quality in a film to a great degree and color distinction is a good way to tell a story visually.

[Sound Mix]

I took one month doing sound mixing. The sound work for the feature film portion was relatively straightforward and easy. The original set sound, rather than the ADR, was used. However, because some people spoke too quietly, the sound mixer

¹² The Documentary DV footage was made over three years by four cameramen, including me. All materials were similar but not identical, so I was concerned with lack of consistency as I combined them into the work.

spent a great deal of time dealing with the sound quality, level balance, and consistency of ambient sound. I did not use additional incidental music, because Totem's music was enriched. With the exception of the ambulance siren following the guitarist's traffic accident, I did not add any sound effects.

In this phase, the main problem I had to deal with was the sound quality of the DV materials. They were not good, because I had only used the camera microphone for recording. At first, I wanted to use music or sound effects to cover the defects, but something I learned from this project was that the idea that "more is better" might not be the right answer for this project. On the contrary, due to the sound mixer's excellent skills and help, the sound was natural and the whole work became more consistent and more successful as a documentary-style narrative.

Chapter 5: Reflections on the Film

This project was finished in early October 2009. Before making the final version, I held several test screenings—first for the actors. This is a story based on Totem's experiences and I believed that as such, it should be screened with Totem's full understanding and permission for each scene. Fortunately, Totem members and Gelresai all loved the film. They watched it accompanied by a lot of laughter and tears. Though the studio scene was a feature, they all agreed that the conversation was genuine. They said the feature part was even truer than the documentary, because many real thoughts that they could not say normally came out during the taped conversations. Even when playing their own characters, they could not distinguish true from false. The Totems said the whole process of production was like mental therapy and after this experience, they now considered the idea of going further more seriously. I was glad to hear that. To me, getting the nod from Totem was the most important thing for this project.

Secondly, I screened it for some friends. Some of them love the open ending very much. It may not have been a clear, happy ending, but it gives the audience more room and interest to imagine what will happen in the future with Totem. I also found that young people and rock lovers usually give it high marks, because they see themselves in the movie. Some elements, such as courage, passion, tolerance, friendship, joy, and difficulties touched them. Moreover, after I showed the rough, but near final cut, to the thesis committee members, the professors had no problem understanding this story about a Taiwanese rock band. It made me feel that I had been

successful at telling a universal story.

On the other hand, some movie producer friends pointed out some defects. Their feedback was that the story's construction might still be a little loose and the subject would only appeal to young music lovers, meaning that it might not have the commercial value that I had hoped for. I was a little upset about this, but soon accepted it and pared it down to 88 minutes. I believe it is better.

I submitted it to Taiwan's top movie festival—the Golden Horse Film Festival. It was selected for the “Film culture/Rock n' Roll Apocalypse” category¹³. I will have two screenings, one on November 10 and one on 15, 2009.¹⁴ The response for this piece has been very positive.

At this point, the project is going as well as I had expected. My plan is to use the two upcoming screenings in Vie Show cinema as tests to collect more responses. after which, I would like to screen it in a Taiwan cinema chain in the summer of 2010 as my first commercial film work. I will also submit it with international festivals. I hope more audiences see it and love it.

¹³ Please see http://www.goldenhorse.org.tw/gh_tc/ff/ff-e-1-cont.aspx?id=f-09-097&sec=s-09-05-02

¹⁴ As I submit this thesis, the screening in the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival has not taken place. I hope for a good response from this screening chance, too.

Conclusion

I began this film hoping to complete Totem's story—a story which has lingered in my mind for years, while applying what I learned at UT Austin, especially skills related to the making of feature films. Moreover, it would be wonderful if this project could serve as a bridge between my student and my career life.

Though this project was not perfect, each challenge taught me something new. The script writing took me a long time, but it was not a waste. Writing so many versions taught me how to make a good and practical script. For example, the first version gave me the opportunity to think about making a long feature film. I tried to inject popular commercial elements, like love and money issues, in that version. Creating a film from an angle like that was a first for me.

Writing the second version was a harder but fresher experience. I remembered that when I thought that I had finished the story, I found out that it was not as easy as I had thought it would be. With feedback from my professors, I realized that a good film consists of not only plots but many details. For example, when I was telling the story about Maria, the Mexican girl, my direction had to include things like what she wore, how she was to act, and what her relationship with her parents was like. Simply writing “she is a beautiful Mexican girl” was not enough. I even needed to understand what kind of food would show up on Maria's kitchen table. Now that I understand Mexican culture more, I could produce a better movie about Mexico. This is a universal principle. The second version of script also made me think deeper about race, culture, and identity issues. Although I did not shoot the second version this time,

I might do so someday.

I also learned how to direct actors and resolve crisis in production. As a director, I believe that I should be concerned not only about the process of production, but also about relationships that I want to have as a filmmaker with the actors and other people with whom I am working. I believe that getting affirmation from them is the most important thing for me as a film maker, especially documentary maker. I think being a director with these principles would win me more respect.

In addition, post-production brought all the theories and techniques in our textbooks to life. I was surprised how different editing could make a film look. A problem that directors might commonly have is they are unwilling to give up any scene they have shot, but this might result in loose or slow film construction. But I learned from the editing that oftentimes in films, you have to throw away things to gain others. Those other skills I employed in post-production were very useful in the completion of this film.

My thesis film may still have defects and I still need to learn a lot more, but the whole project was a very interesting experience for me as a student as I join the ranks of professional film makers. I sincerely appreciate all the help, advice, and feedback from my professors and friends. With this experience, I believe that I have the confidence and skills needed for my future work.

Vita

Lungnan Isak Fangas was born in Taitong, Taiwan on May 2nd, 1974. He is a member of the Amis tribe, an indigenous people of Taiwan, so he is very concerned with identity, culture, and social welfare issues. He received a bachelor of arts degree in sociology from National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan in 1999.

In the following years, he worked as an independent documentary film maker, making several documentaries, each of which received awards in Taiwan. In 2005, he was granted a scholarship from the Taiwan government to study in graduate school at the University of Texas.

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