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"Making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high."—Norman Mailer

"In the room the women come and go"—T. S. Eliot,
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Directing *Deathbed*

by John Walter

Ted Samore, filmmaker, is a senior at UNI majoring in Individual Studies with an emphasis in film and a minor in art. After nearly a two year germination, his 16mm synchronous sound film *Deathbed*, is ready for the screen. Though it is his most ambitious film yet, Samore's two previous 8mm productions have not gone unnoticed. Both have seen frequent local exhibition, and *Clouds* has been shown on television. At the University of Iowa's annual Refocus Film Festival, in 1970, *What I Did Last Summer by Billy S* won the Grand Prize, the Samuel Fuller Award and the John Ford Award, and in 1972, *Clouds* rated the Four Star Masterpiece.

Deathbed is not the usual kind of staged event done to film. One might observe that the camera has an existential function, that of positioning the viewer directly into the role of the main character. Throughout the entire film the camera maintains (indeed forces) a subjective point of view that probes the mind's depths of memory, loneliness and death. The audience is the dying man who in the spaces between darkness and a coma-induced flash watches his mother, wife and nurse pass through his ever-dimming light of vision.

Filmmaking is almost universally recognized as a collective effort of many talents and technical resources. Still, it is commonly the director who is seen as the artistic foundation of the filmmaking milieu. And even though it isn't necessary for a viewer to analyze and understand the filmmaker's (or director's) role, his use of people, machines and technique, a closer look at a film through his eyes should enhance appreciation of the film and lay bare some of the mysteries of film production.



The following is an abbreviation of an extensive discussion with Ted Samore about *Deathbed*.

JW: What are some of the things that went wrong when you first tried to shoot this film last year [Christmas break of 1971]?

TS: We were plagued with technical difficulties right away. The Magnasync recorder [sound unit separate from camera] didn't work at first. The set wasn't nearly as elaborate as it is in the film. For instance, the body of the man didn't even have arms on it and I don't know how we would have worked that. Several times when we'd get there we were picking up interference on our wireless mike from a radio station. On another day the microphone batteries didn't work for us. We didn't spend nearly enough time on rehearsal. We had a tough time getting a crew together . . . we had only three rehearsals before shooting one scene. That's not enough time at all but we went ahead and tried it. Thankfully, it didn't come off.

JW: Is it partly a matter of getting used to the 16mm equipment?

TS: Yes . . . We learned a lot of things to help us do it the second time. The equipment was over there (on the set) three weeks before we started shooting. I test ran the equipment three weeks ahead of time. Before we didn't run tests on the Magnasync recorder until the day before we started shooting.

Also, I learned a lot about direction. The most directing I had done before was in *Clouds* in which I was the main character . . . I read Stanislavski and other directors' comments and interviews. That helped quite a bit.

JW: What was happening with the script?

TS: Early this fall, in September, the incompletes were weighing heavily. Russ Wasendorf was out of school and couldn't devote time to supervising. Finally I decided to rewrite the script. Looking back on it . . . I should show you the original script. Incredibly dumb. [laughter] I'd hate to put that on film. The scene with the wife was insipid. It ended originally not with the wife pleading to her husband "don't leave me," but reading Psalms 23 from her Bible then halfway through starting to cry.

This fall, when I decided to rewrite the script, I took a long walk, a seven hour walk with just a notebook. I tried to establish exactly what I was thinking about at that moment in my life; what things bothered me. I thought and wrote about being irretrievably alone. A lot of things about love came to the film . . . people interrelating, about death, about my attitude toward death.

The scene with the wife was the worst part of the first script. I saw no point to the flashback and had to think of a new way to use it. I rearranged the story and came up with the opening shot, and how it was going to progress. Then the rest of the fall I spent revising the scenes with the nurse and the wife, and the final scene where the man dies. Whenever I got tired of revising the script I'd think, "hell I'll leave it as it is. At least I'm learning something. If nothing else it'll be an exercise." I always seemed to fall back on that kind of attitude when things were going poorly.

The research was insufficient before; there were things left out and things that were blatantly inappropriate and false.

JW: What kept you attracted to the film?

TS: Ah, well, the idea of the film did, the whole idea of a subjective view of death. I saw that as being potentially a good movie. Also I needed a 16mm film before I finished here. I just wanted to get a 16mm film done. It was a drive to make a movie.

JW: What influences—films, literature, drama, other directors—have you brought to *Deathbed*?

TS: Quite a few. The two big ones are Ingmar Bergman and Samuel Beckett. The script, you know, is not all mine. Russ conceived the idea, inspired by Beckett's *Film*. He wanted a film that attempts to forego normal filmic and dramatic methods that tend to once remove the audience from a personal identity with the action. The film is you; it's real. Originally we thought of not turning the house lights on at the end of the film, letting it go black and stay black. As well as trying to express ourselves there is a concern for audience involvement.

JW: So you began thinking more about the perceptual and mental activity of the viewer?

TS: Yes, much more so. *Clouds* was a big catharsis; I needed so much to make a movie that when I was making it I had little thought about the audience. But with *Deathbed* I think we got more to the essence of film.

Jerzy Kosinski influenced me. I was so impressed with *Steps* and *The Painted Bird*, the simplicity and lucidity of his language. I wanted the words themselves to be full of description and brief, very brief.

JW: The setup and direction of the first scene with the little boy was fairly complicated. [The shot begins on a flower, the camera dollies (moves) in a circular fashion and finally stops on a small boy who is looking at a



flower. Called by his mother, who is barely seen in the distance, he turns and runs toward her. As he runs, the shot dissolves to next scene.]

TS: I spent two weeks scouting locations to get a place where I could set up our dolly track. I needed the sun behind the camera, a telephoto shot over a great distance, a grass line no more than two feet high, electrical outlets, and a place as far from the sounds of the city as I could get. I wanted the camera to circle the flower and the only way to do that was with the camera staying at a perfect level, the lens height exactly 2 ft. 8 in. off the ground because that's the same height the boy's eyes are. We had a cameraman, two men pushing the dolly, myself, the boy and his mother involved in the shot. The building of the dolly track is a story in itself. When I explained it to David Ferguson, who built it, he said, "Oh, I can put it together in about 4 hours." It took us nearly four days.

In order to attract the boy's attention during the shot so I could get him to look at the flower, I had my head situated in direct line between him and the flower so that when he looked at me he had to look at the flower. And all that time I was making faces at him, talking to him, entertaining him. The timing was very important because you could lose his attention so quickly. One time he just walked off the set. Most of the time we spent bribing him with candy, but after three hours candy doesn't work anymore. A plane flew over us once and he said, pointing, "ooh look at the plane, look at the plane," and I'd say "ooh look at the flower, look at the flower." It was a mistake to use a two year-old child.

JW: What about preparation for the shooting on the set in Baker Hall?

TS: Rehearsals consisted of just the actress, Mary or Louise, a tape recorder or video tape recorder, and myself. By the end of the rehearsals with Mary, we were breaking the monologue into phrases on the video recorder, playing it over and over again. She could grow from that kind of detailed analysis. With Louise we'd take it according to groups of thought on the tape recorder.

Then there was the matter of lining up the crew, which consisted of a cameraman, the director, actresses, two "bouncers," [for quieting the building] the sound engineer and a catch-all man who does the production photography, the continuity work and the clapboard. So the night before I lined up the crew and prepared the equipment—loading the magazine, cleaning the room, making sure all the props were ready and cleaning the tape recorder . . . just a general practice run which took a couple hours.



JW: Could you describe some of what was involved in setting up a shooting day, taking for example the first scene with the nurse?

TS: Yes. First the practice the night before, mainly to test the equipment. I finished at about 4 a.m. Then home for a couple of hours of sleep. I was on the set first, about 6:30, making final preparations. In half an hour or so Russ came in and worked on the camera, then the sound engineer to set up his tapes. Later, the production photographer, and I oriented him as to how I wanted the pictures taken and when he could take them. Finally, the bouncers. They'd distribute their paraphernalia, lock the hall doors and see if anybody was in the place, and if so, ask them to please be quiet.

We shot the establishing scene of the room before the actress arrived. It's essential that the crew members and the actress are there for the least amount of time possible and that distribution of labor is fairly equal among the crew in order to achieve alertness. I did as much as I could to isolate the actress from the crew. In speaking with her prior to shooting I wouldn't let her stray from the subject at hand, that of acting the role, unless it was obvious to me she needed some minor relief from the tension. After the establishing shot the actress came in for a practice take and then left the room. We double checked the equipment and the set. The actress came back and we took light readings on her face. Then she left again and we'd take incident light readings. Within ten minutes she would come back. I'd call for silence and then the bouncers would quiet things if any noise was apparent.

JW: Let's run through the take.

TS: Ok. Clapboard man ready, door shut, bouncers ready and the actress is standing there. I say "sound," and the sound engineer yells "set." I say "camera" and the cameraman says "set." Then I say "roll sound." A four or five second delay until the recorder hits sound speed and then the sound engineer yells out "speed." Call for camera. Two or three seconds then cameraman says "speed." I give a nod to the clapboard man. He answers "scene 3 take 1," closes the board on camera then walks out of the picture. Then I say "action." From now on the take begins. I nod my head to the actress and she makes her entrance.

JW: How many takes of that scene did you do? What was the cost?

TS: There were eight takes altogether, four that day which we later found out to be underexposed. \$100 for



the one morning.

JW: How many shooting days were there on the set in Baker Hall?

TS: The first day was December 19th. Five days over a month's period. This time, the catharsis came not when we finished shooting, but when I broke the set. That was a joy and a relief: to look at that empty room and know that I'd never have to go back there again.

JW: Then the editing?

TS: It wasn't as creative as the editing for *Clouds*. Mainly I had to work out the technical troubles.

JW: How do you mean that?

TS: For instance I didn't have an interlock system between the projector and the Magnasync recorder. So I couldn't synchronize sound and picture. You wouldn't believe how many times I've projected the film, marking it with a grease pencil, counting frames, timing it with a stop-watch to the Magnasync.

JW: So you've had to improvise your own mechanical system for editing.

TS: Yes, that's what's taken the time. I was delayed by it, the mechanical complications.

JW: What was involved after editing?

TS: When I finally got the titles I sent them to the laboratory in Kansas City. They preceded my visit by two or three days. The lab then filmed the titles according to my stipulations. They also conformed the original film according to the edited workprint. I spent two days supervising the entire process.

JW: What were the laboratory costs in Kansas City for the two days?

TS: About \$1400.

JW: Total cost for the film?

TS: \$2400 for four prints.

JW: What do you see as the biggest problem in filmmaking?

TS: For me it's getting money, that's all.