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Producing a Short Film

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PRODUCING A SHORT FILM

A Project

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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University of Northern Iowa

May 2007

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SUMMARY REFLECTION

This reflection provides the opportunity for me to write about several aspects of my Senior Presidential Thesis. The first aspect of the project is the explanation for my topic, "Producing a Short Film," and the reason for choosing this topic. My thesis topic, "Producing a Short Film," is a look at the processes of short film production with the end product of a short film called "Selah." I chose to do a short film for my senior thesis because of two predominate reasons.

One reason is that the project provides a creative outlet for all of the different skills and knowledge learned through my Electronic Media and Film Studies courses. Such learned skills include the process of adapting a previously written short story into a screenplay, directing actors and a production crew through the various stages of producing a short film, and researching various modes of film distribution. A large portion of my Film Studies minor incorporates theory on the aesthetics of filmmaking, i.e. how storytelling in film is different from poetry or novels. My project will elucidate some of those aesthetics, such as storytelling and thematic elements.

Secondly, the project is a method for me to investigate the film industry. The project will provide insight into a prospective career path. The processes and methods used throughout the production of the short film should allow me to delineate a possible future career. Along with insight, the short film will be an addition to my demo reel shown to prospective employers.

Completing this project was definitely a semester-long process. At the beginning of the semester, I started writing my script and finished it during Spring Break. A few weeks before Spring Break, I started to look at locations, casting, and other aspects of

production. Production itself came into full swing after Spring Break with the majority of the production and shooting occurring during Friday and Saturday of Easter Weekend. After shooting was completed, I entered the post-production phase of my project, which included logging the shot video, completing rough edits, working on special effects and other fine-tuning, and finally a DVD of the final short video.

The final video, which is entitled "Selah," is a roughly 7 ½ minute video that looks at the childhood of a girl from her memories and journal. The video uses the journal and a visual focus on the hands of the characters to try and force the viewer to pay attention to certain aspects of the video. As the character Selah has been literally trapped inside an abusive home for the duration of her childhood, I wanted a viewer to feel trapped and experience they could not escape from the visuals. As such, I did not place a lot of objects or unnecessary information in the film; there are only a few things to focus on, and those are the objects the viewer needs and should focus on.

I think this project is very important to my education here at UNI. In the last four years, I have learned a lot of information, whether it is theory about camera angles or theory about adaptation of written works, that sometimes feels inapplicable outside the classroom. This project allows me the opportunity to actually *create* a product that I can use as a physical representation of what I have learned at UNI. I think a lot of the importance of my project lies in the fact that it is a very tangible and public form of displaying my education.

Overall, I would definitely say my senior thesis has been an incredibly valuable part of my education. The project forced me to realize that real products need real effort placed into them. No longer could I sit back and write the paper the night before it was

due. Instead, just like the real production world, this project elucidated the fact that I needed to “hurry up and wait” as the industry saying goes. In other words, I needed to place a lot of time and effort into pre-production to make sure that the many aspects of production go smoothly. In the end, I wish that I would have spent more time on pre-production. I feel that my project could be something very special if I had placed more time and emphasis on pre-production and other planning aspects. All in all, this was an incredible learning experience and something that will stay with memories of my UNI education for a long time.

Selah – Outline

- I. BEDROOM. PRESENT.
 - Journal sits alone on nightstand; maybe taped together, very worn-out and old – represents the journal in the present-time, foreshadows something to happen to the journal/journal’s owner
- II. BEDROOM. PAST.
 - Selah (child) reads THE SECRET GARDEN on her bed
 - Places book on nightstand; show both book and journal on nightstand
- III. BEDROOM. PRESENT.
 - Selah (adult) picks up old journal from nightstand, opens the journal to the first page
 - A picture with “skool” written in child’s handwriting headlines the page with a drawing underneath
- IV. SCHOOL. PAST.
 - Selah (child) is waiting to leave for school, Mom helps place backpack on Selah, hands caress Selah’s head/hair
 - Dad takes Selah’s hand, gripping it tight and takes her to his car and drives her to school – focus on fastening Selah’s seatbelt and Dad locking the car doors
 - All the while, Selah holds THE SECRET GARDEN and her journal close to her chest while she sits in the back seat – she looks at her Dad’s hands then outside the car
- V. AT SCHOOL.
 - Selah (child) reads her book, sneaks reads during classtime/naptime/snacktime?
 - Writes in journal during class, or doodles/draws instead of doing homework
 - During recess, sits on the edge of playground drawing pictures in her journal
 - Doesn’t hear whistle ending recess, teacher places hand on Selah’s shoulder
 - Selah reacts adversely to hand – turns away from teacher and starts to retreat into fetal position, but not totally
- VI. HOME. OUTSIDE.
 - Selah goes home by Dad’s car (same visuals as leaving on bus)
 - Dad opens door for Selah – holds hand tightly as before, takes her into the house
 - Selah continues clutching TSG and journal
- VII. HOME. INSIDE.
 - Selah goes to room and sits against the wall with a pillow/stuffed animal, reads TSG
 - Mom comes in and says dinner is ready
- VIII. HOME. DINNER.
 - Mom focuses on Dad’s hands during dinner – Selah follows Mom’s lead and does the same

- After dinner, Selah does homework at dinner table while Mom and Dad clean up dishes
 - Mom breaks a dish, scaring Selah – she stops doing her homework and looks up at parents
 - Dad slaps Mom, starts yelling at her
 - Selah sits and watches from dinner table
 - Mom tells Selah to go to bedroom
- IX. BEDROOM.
- Selah writes in her journal, draws pictures that show angry Dad standing up, Mom's head tilted down in apparent shame, and Selah sitting at dinner table
 - A loud knocking/pounding starts on Selah's door; Selah is startled
 - Selah grabs her journal tightly against her chest
 - Father comes into the bedroom, moves quickly towards her bed
 - Mom enters behind father, pulls on Dad from behind and stands between him and Selah – see everything from Selah's perspective on the bed
- X. KITCHEN. NEXT MORNING.
- Dad is yelling at mom early in the morning during breakfast
 - Selah comes in and stands between them, tugs on Dad's shirt
 - Dad pushes away hand while Mom tries to stop Dad from doing anything more to Selah
 - Dad pushes Mom, she falls onto table – Selah looks on helplessly
 - Selah reaches up towards Dad again
 - Dad grips hand/arm strongly – points towards bedroom, out of kitchen, tells Selah this is between Dad and Mom
 - Selah leaves, but lingers around the corner, watching/hearing Dad's actions.
 - See Mom laying on ground
- XI. BEDROOM. PRESENT.
- Selah (adult) sits on the floor against the wall, her hands clasped tightly around her legs close to her chest. Crying, heaving. No sound other than her.
 - The journal lays next to her on the floor
 - Pounding sounds on the door.
- XII. KITCHEN. PAST
- Dad furiously waves the journal above Selah (child). She frantically reaches for her journal. Dad rips off the cover of the journal. Selah drops on her knees and grabs Dad's feet.
 - Dad picks Selah up and throws her against a bottom cupboard
 - Mom comes in, tries to stop Dad. Dad is out of control.
 - Dad drops journal on floor as he slaps Mom's face. Focus on Selah and the journal.
 - See the violence in the background, hear it, but it's blurred out because of DOF.

- Journal is open to the last-written page – a drawing of Mom and Selah holding hands outside of the house – yellow sun, blue house, green grass, bright picture.
- Selah turns the page and starts drawing a new picture – darker than the previous, dark room door, hand on the door, walls, etc.

XIII. HALLWAY. PRESENT

- Selah (adult) is walking down a hallway with the journal in her hand. She walks slow, tentatively, not sure if she wants to continue.
- TV plays in the background, Selah stops walking.
- Selah leans against the hallway wall, brings the journal to her chest and holds it. Pauses.

XIV. KITCHEN. PAST. CONTINUED.

- Selah (child) is on the floor drawing
- Violence in background is continuing
- violence comes to a climax, then stops
- Selah stops drawing after she notices silence. Hears heavy footsteps on the kitchen floor.

XV. HALLWAY. PRESENT. CONTINUED.

- Selah (adult) resumes walking down the hall
- She walks through the kitchen, sets the journal on the table.
- Selah walks out the door.

Selah

by John Wiedenheft

INT. BEDROOM. PRESENT. NIGHT.

An old and well-worn journal, its cover taped and repaired many times, rests underneath a lamp on a nightstand. The tape holds together some of the pieces of the journal's cover, which is covered in drawings, stickers, and other child memorabilia.

A young woman, SELAH, reaches from her bed and picks up the journal from the nightstand. The sheets covering the bed are the same as when she was a child, but now more drab and less bright.

Selah opens the journal to the first page and starts to remember her childhood. The first page is titled "skool," written in a child's handwriting with crayon. Underneath, a picture of a crayon brown building and a flag dominate. In the drawing are two stick figures, a short girl with long brown hair, and a taller man; the girl is drawn with a smile, while the man doesn't emote anything in the drawing. The girl is labeled "ME" and the man is "DAD".

INT. BEDROOM. PAST. EARLY EVENING.

Selah, now a child, walks into her bedroom with her journal in her hands. She sits down against the wall, next to a large stuffed elephant. Selah places her arm around the elephant, opens her journal, and starts to write/draw. Mom knocks on the closed door.

MOM

Honey, dinner is ready.

Selah places the elephant next to her on the floor, closes her journal and tries to hide it under the elephant.

INT. KITCHEN. EARLY EVENING.

Mom and Dad sit silently at the table. Mom places a plate of food in front of Selah. Frozen turkey roast, a little gravy, some potatoes, and carrots. The plate is joined by a small glass of milk.

The same meal sits in front of Selah's parents, though Dad has a beer. Mom and Dad start eating their dinners, while Selah surely, but slowly makes her way through the food, deftly avoiding the carrots.

DAD

Make sure to eat those carrots.

Selah cleans her plate. Except for the carrots, piled to one side of the plate.

DAD (continued)

Selah, I told you to eat your carrots.

Selah continues to push her carrots around, one by one, into a new pile on the other side of her plate.

MOM

Selah, honey, please eat at least some of your carrots.

Selah grudgingly picks at the carrots on her plate, pushing some aside, and eating others, seemingly at random. After a few moments to make sure Selah is eating, Mom clears her own dishes, moving them over to the sink. Both Selah and Dad sit at the table. Mom nears Dad to clear his dishes. As she takes his plate off the table, Mom accidentally knocks the beer into Dad's lap. All that can be heard is the fizz of bubbles and liquid falling on the floor.

Mom sets down the dishes on the table and gets a towel from the counter. She tries to blot the beer with the towel. Dad pushes Mom's hand away while scoffing at her apparent carelessness.

DAD

Damn it, woman!

Mom kneels to clean up the pool of beer on the floor.

DAD (continued)

You never were very good with your hands.

Dad slaps Mom, causing her to lose her balance for a moment. She gingerly touches her face as she regains her balance placing her other hand on the floor. Selah sits at the table, her plate of carrots in front of her. Selah hesitates, glances down at the remaining carrots on her plate.

Selah tugs on Dad's shirt. Dad pushes away Selah's hand. Mom places her hand on Dad's shoulder, and he reacts by immediately pushing her away. Mom falls onto the kitchen table. Throughout the whole event, Selah stands helpless behind her father.

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

Selah sits down with her stuffed elephant. She hears the beginning of an argument from the kitchen and pulls her journal from underneath the elephant. Selah moves the stuffed elephant to her lap and starts to pet its head. With every raised voice, Selah grips the elephant a little tighter. The noise quiets down. Selah grabs her journal.

INT. BEDROOM. PRESENT. DAY

Selah, now a young woman, sits against the wall where she did as a child. Her hands are clasped tightly around her legs, which are brought up against her chest. Her silent, heaving crying can be seen through her throbbing shoulders. The room is silent, save for Selah's rapid breathing. Next to Selah lays her journal, torn up and beaten. A pounding sounds on the door and the doorknob rattles.

INT. KITCHEN. PAST. EVENING

Selah stares at the journal on the kitchen floor. The violence between her father and mother continues in the background, though Selah almost seems oblivious to the actions. She pulls a decrepit box of crayons out of her pocket and opens the journal to the last-written page. On the page is a drawing of Mom and Selah holding hands outside of the house. A yellow sun, nice blue house, green grass, the colors primary and bright.

INT. HALLWAY - PRESENT - DAY

An adult Selah quietly walks out of her bedroom and into the hallway, her journal the sole possession in her hands.

She walks slowly and tentatively, yet meticulously. A television set plays in the background. Selah pauses and leans her back against the wall, seeming to hesitate if she wants to walk any further or return to her bedroom. She brings her journal to her chest and holds it. In one smooth move, she slides against the wall, moving to the floor. She sits there with the journal protected in her tight grasp.

INT. KITCHEN. PAST. EVENING.

Selah stands against the hallway wall with journal in hand, listening to the harsh sounds coming from the kitchen. Selah peaks around the corner. She sees her mother first, laying on the ground, slowly moving. Dad is standing over the sink, washing his hands.

Selah turns the page in her journal and begins to draw a new picture. Selah pulls out the darker colors from the box, brown, black, gray. Lines begin to shape and form Selah's bedroom, the door a black hole against the paper. A hand is drawn coming out of the door. Selah draws herself huddled against the wall.

INT. HALLWAY. PRESENT. DAY

Selah is still seated against the hallway wall. She opens her journal.

INT. KITCHEN. PAST. EVENING

Selah stops drawing as she hears heavy footsteps on the kitchen floor. Selah looks up and sees Dad's feet in front of her. Behind him lays Mom, unconscious on the floor.

INT. HALLWAY. PRESENT. DAY

The open page shows her mother laying on the ground and a shadowy figure taking up the larger portion of the page. Selah fingers the corner of the next page, as if to turn it, but she closes the journal and holds her finger to mark the next page. She stands up, continuing to hug the wall. After a short moment, she continues to walk down the hall.

INT. KITCHEN. PAST. EVENING.

Selah is frantically reaching for her journal, though grasping nothing but air. Her dad waves the journal above

Selah. Dad rips off the cover of the journal and throws both the cover and the journal to the floor. Selah falls down in desperation, pleading, almost crying. Dad picks Selah up by her forearm, gripping Selah so tightly that she loses feeling in her hands.

She is picked up by Dad and carried like a heavy bag of sand against his side. He makes his way out of the kitchen into the hallway walking towards Selah's bedroom.

INT. KITCHEN - PRESENT - DAY

Selah enters the kitchen, now walking with more confidence than before. The journal firmly is in her hand. Selah moves towards the kitchen table, looks at the floor next to the table, and places her journal on the tabletop. She opens the journal to the page previously marked by her finger. The page shows a young girl walking out of a door, hand-in-hand with a young woman. Selah walks away from the table and exits through the kitchen door. A breeze from the open door causes the pages to turn in the journal and they come to rest on blank pages.

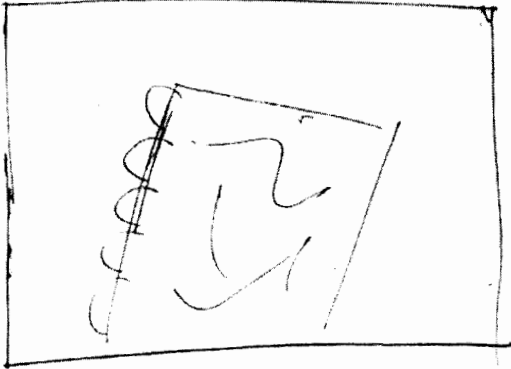
THE END

PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Date	Item	Hours Worked	Description
3/13/07	Script	Approx. 20	Finished script
3/19/07 through 4/5/07	Storyboard	Approx. 3	Work on storyboard, camera angles
4/1/07	Locations	Approx. 3	Scout locations
4/1/07 through 4/5/07	Shooting Script	Approx. 5	Finalize locations Develop shooting script from storyboard
3/19/07 through 3/26/07	Casting	Approx. 5	Put out casting call
4/5/07 through 4/6/07	Shooting	Approx. 15	Shooting of film
4/7/07 through 4/14/07	Rough Cut	Approx. 2 Approx. 10	Logging of footage Rough Cut based on Script - no SFX
4/14/07	Presentation	Approx. 4	Thesis Presentation
4/16/07 through 4/23/07	Debut?	Approx. 50	Final Cut - SFX, Titles, DVD
4/27/07	Final Product	Approx. 10	Turned into Advisor

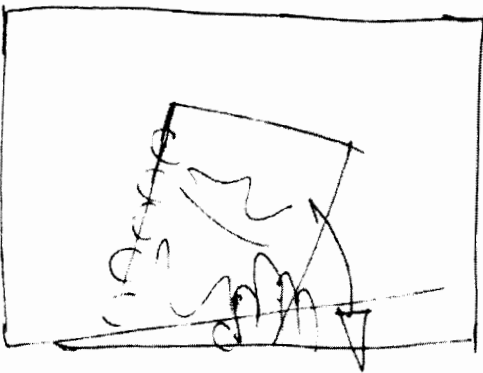
Note: There would be more specific date and times, but I did not keep track of when I logged, or just worked on the script in my free time. I feel these are accurate representations of the time spent on each aspect of the project according to the above schedule.

1a



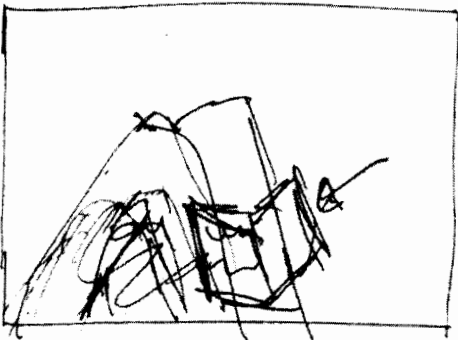
CU of journal on nightstand

2a



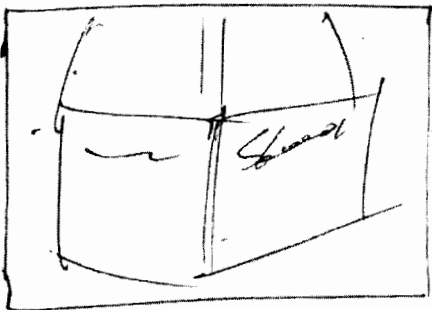
Hand reaches in and takes journal off nightstand

3a

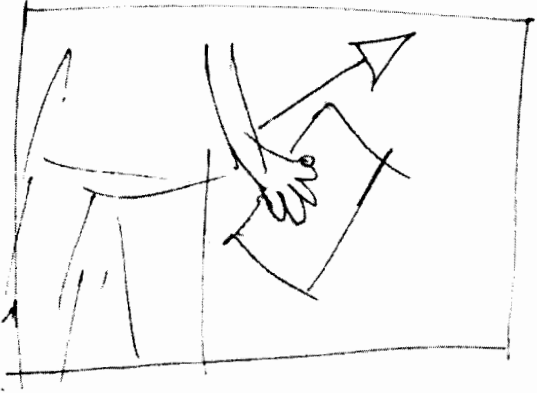


Bring in journal and lay in lap against brought-up legs/knees

5b

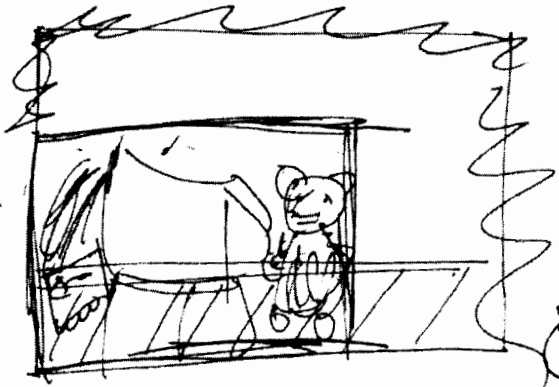


~~CU of journal against legs - starts w/ closed journal - then opens + turns to first page~~



Child Selah walks into bedroom - journal swinging in hand.

L → R walk



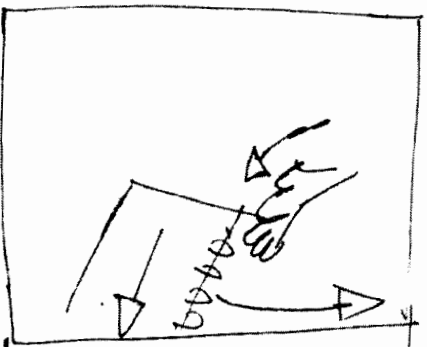
MS of Bear solo against wall - Child Selah walks to frame and sits next to bear.

- ① set down journal
- ② pull out crayons
- ③ bring over teddy bear

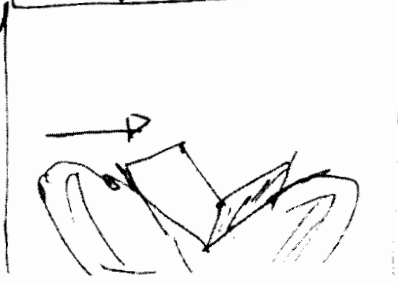


CU of hand on teddy bear

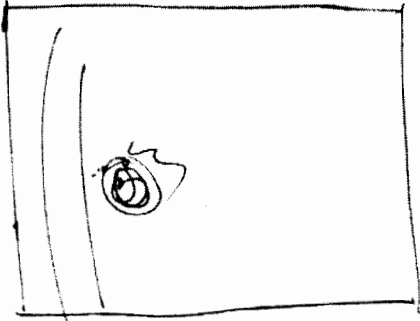
MS-CU of hand grabbing journal



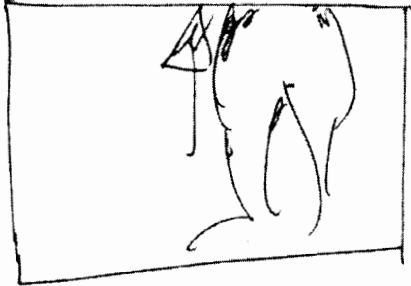
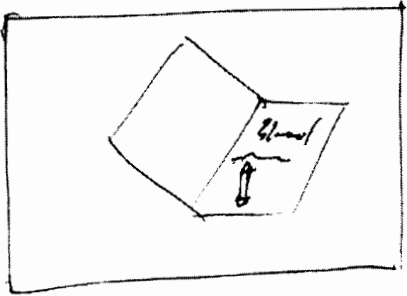
MS-CU of journal coming into lap - start drawing w/ crayons



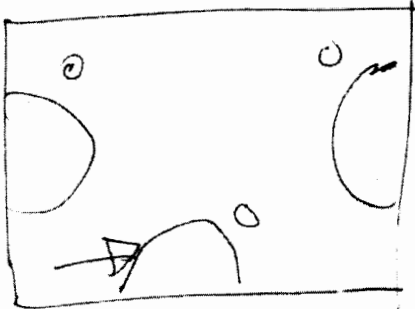
MS of doorlands rattling



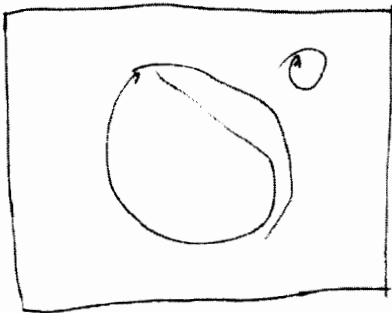
MS-CU - Child Selah stops
drawing - over the shoulder?
- closes journal



CU - Teddy bear picked up and
journal slid underneath



MS-WS - overhead of the dinner
table



MS - food gradually disappears
as it's eaten