

APPENDIX A

THE DVD FILM SCHOOL

I believe you do not need to attend film school to make a movie.

When preparing to make *And I Lived*, my biggest fear was failing. I did not want to shoot half of a movie and meet defeat at the hands of a situation I didn't know how to handle, or a technical aspect which I had not studied. I wanted to cram as much filmmaking information into my brain as possible to obtain success. As the director of the film, I wanted to have the answers to problems before they happened. In order to get the filmmaking information and all the solutions to potential roadblocks that one would need when making a feature film, would I pay thousands of dollars and attend a traditional film school? Let me be honest, I did think about it early on.

How could I not? Every film and movie magazine on the shelf has pages of glossy Film School advertisements. These ads promise you “intensive and comprehensive programs” where students can “discover and develop their careers.” There are one-week residential camp intensive programs, one-year professional certificate programs, and four-year professional conservatory programs.¹ So many programs are offered, that you start to believe you *need* one to make a movie.

Then I stepped back and looked at the situation. If I was going to make a movie, I wanted to make it right. Spending the money to get into a class to listen to a random instructor explain “this is how you make a movie” and the techniques involved, just didn't feel right.

Who would be doing the speaking?

How much experience would they have as a director of feature films?

Would they be professional filmmakers giving me professional answers?

Logically, I wouldn't get the answers until after the tuition was paid and I was sitting in class. And even then, I most likely wouldn't be impressed with the answers.

If you want to be a doctor, you go to medical school and get taught by other doctors. What medical school would stay open if they employed instructors who have never performed a major operation? Not one. In the medical world, to become a doctor you are instructed by other senior doctors. That is how it is done.

So why can't this rationale be carried over to film school?

Answer: Because it is impossible.

Show me the school that has Steven Spielberg teaching introduction to filmmaking, James Cameron instructing camera operation; John Frankenheimer showing you what lenses he chose while on the set of *Ronin* for his cinematography course; and at the end of the hall, to your left, the class on advanced techniques in directing actors is being taught by Peter Jackson, fresh off his production of *The Lord of the Rings*. It sounds funny because it is so unrealistic. But why? Why are we ushered to attend a film school where the instructor has a few 20-minute short films under his belt that no one has ever heard of? (If you are still hesitant, re-read the names of the filmmakers that were mentioned in this paragraph—none of them went to film school.)

If the world of cinema looked at filmmaking as a profession, like the medical field views doctors, we would be attending a school like the one described above. Learning from the best and most experienced of directors, actors, and crewmembers.

In the years leading up to the production of *And I Lived* (and even during the production), the question at hand was: Where can I find the most professional and detailed instruction on filmmaking for as little money as possible?

The answer is the DVD. With its invention, movies are now issued with more than just the literal movie. Varying from disc to disc, the extra features that come along with each DVD edition of a movie allow you inside the making of that particular film. Some of the extras you might find are the theatrical trailers (used to promote the film), production notes and photographs taken from the set, and, in some cases, the actual shooting script.

By far, the greatest gift available to us is the “Filmmaker’s Commentary” audio track. Mostly the commentary track is passed over and never listened to by the average moviegoer, but for the filmmaker in training, it is invaluable. The commentary track allows you to watch the entire film with the filmmakers (and even actors in some cases) talking you through the many aspects of the movie’s creation. It’s like watching the movie with the filmmaker sitting right next to you.

The information that can be learned is priceless. But beware, not all commentary tracks are valuable in the sense of learning to make movies.

Some commentaries may involve a collection of the actors from the cast of the movie, who tell stories and joke around while reminiscing about the production. These can be really fun to listen to and entertaining, but they do not contain much about the technical aspects on the making of the film. We have to avoid these.

The biggest No-No that you can find in a commentary is the discussing or talking about the action that is on screen. This will kill a commentary faster than lightning. In most commentaries many of the filmmakers and actors develop the “watching syndrome.” It isn’t their fault, it just happens. They tend to just describe what is happening on screen. They talk of how this character is running through that door because that bad guy is chasing him and he must be scared. Basically, it is what Christopher Walken would describe in the film, *True Romance*, as “a little game of show and tell. You don’t want to show me nuthin’. But you’re tellin’ me everything.”²

Some of our best and greatest filmmakers working today just cannot give a decent commentary. It’s a fact. They sit and watch the film, and forget that they are being recorded. There isn’t a problem with that. I commend them for even trying. But if you are looking to learn, the “watching syndrome” is just a waste of time.

We already know what is happening on screen because we have seen the film before. Life is too short to spend two hours having somebody telling you something you already

know. What an aspiring filmmaker needs from other, more senior filmmakers who have found success, is information. The practical information on filmmaking which we do not have; the inside stories, hurdles jumped, arguments with actors, crew members, and producers. This is reality, and to gain a foothold in any career, we need to grasp the reality and pitfalls of that career and learn from them. There is no better way than a useful DVD commentary.

Now, there are thousands of DVD's and many of those have commentary tracks. We do not have time to listen to them all because we have to make movies of our own. While serving out the rest of my time in the military, I had a few years of waiting before I could start filming. Those years were spent reading filmmaking books and watching DVD commentaries. I have forgotten the bad ones that put me to sleep and left me without any information (costing me hundreds of hours) and I kept a list of the ones that were most helpful.

During this research time, I always thought of a “what if?”...

What if there was a list of DVD's that one could refer to in order to learn filmmaking? Instead of spending thousands on a film school, what if you could spend a hundred bucks at your local video store and rent these movies? The result would be the equivalent of a filmmaking medical school—learning the craft from the professionals.

This is why I have created the DVD Film School: A collection of films on DVD that will not waste your time if you are looking to gain information on making a feature film.

The DVD Film School Syllabus is divided into three parts:

- Part 1: Filmmaker's Commentary – 25 DVD's where the filmmakers let you inside the making of the film and instruct on almost every aspect of filmmaking from scriptwriting to camera placement to editing. Every genre is touched on (comedy, action, horror, big budget, small budget, etc.) in order to give you a well rounded base on how to tackle your film. These will be your class lectures.
- Part 2: Behind the Scenes – 25 DVD's which feature a look into the making of the film and what it is like on set during production. Some give the vantage point of the major studios and large productions, while others give the point of view from an independent shoe-string budget stance. Information can be gained from them all. These will be your practical demonstrations.
- Part 3: Reading Material – Now what school is complete without books? Here is a list of books that can give you a base of knowledge to build your filmmaking career on. Some supply textbook definitions for technical terms that might arise throughout the DVD course, so you will not be caught without an answer. Some will teach you the basics of screenwriting while others will give you a heads up on planning your production. A few will inspire you to move forward and never give up (those are always priceless). Now, although there are other filmmaking books out on the market—thousands of them in which one could spend years reading—I spent the years reading the bad ones, which means you don't. These were the ones which helped me the most and did not waste my time. They will do the same for you.

There is no “hands on” section of the DVD Film School. That is the point when you step out and make a feature film of your own. It is only then, that your education will jump light years ahead—more than any instructor, book, or school could ever get you.

Are these DVDs in any particular order?

No. I have numbered the list to make for an easier reference, but you can start anywhere you choose. Area-specific information varies between each commentary. One might have more of a concentration on screenwriting and acting, while another might take a closer look at editing and producing. Between them all, everything that is taught in a film school is covered in great detail. Just start with one and dive right in. Think of it as the base camp for the filmmaking mountain you are about to climb and start your trek.

Are these the only DVDs worth watching?

Not at all. There are new movies coming out on DVD every week. Classics are being reissued and special editions of movies are now commonly packed with loads of extras. I found that I learned the most from these particular DVD's because they were packed with the inside information that I needed to prepare for the *And I Lived* production. In watching hundreds of commentary tracks, these were the ones that did not waste my time. I took all their information straight to the set. Don't stop at this list, either. Watch as many DVD's as you can, because you are learning from the professionals and you never know when you will hear a piece of instruction that will save you on your set.

"*I hate that director and his movies are terrible!*" you might say as you glance down the list. This may be true, everyone's opinion varies. But the fact of the matter is that all of these commentators are accomplished filmmakers, actors, and crew members. They have something logical to say about their craft and their movie. We should listen to them if we ever want to make filmmaking a career. This is the great benefit of being an up and coming filmmaker in the DVD age of the 21st Century. There are those that have gone before us and done what we aim to do—make a feature length film. These commentaries are their back stories in the filmmakers' own words. They have been recorded and logged for all of us to learn from. Just because you think the film is terrible doesn't mean you can't learn from its creator. Remember Ed Wood?

How much can you learn from a million dollar film when you are only making a \$500 independent film? One of the films found in our DVD Film School was made for \$7,000 while another was brought in for \$93,000,000. No matter what size the budget, the craft of filmmaking is universal. I've always been amazed at the camera tricks used to conserve film on independent features and how they are not used on the big budget films. On the flipside, I've always been in awe at the amount of storyboarding and planning that goes into the preproduction stages on big budget sets, but how little of it is done by independent filmmakers. To make the most logical and efficient production possible, we must acknowledge movies of all budget ranges, take the best qualities of each, and incorporate them into our films. All these qualities can be found within these DVD's.

I assure you that you will love the information gained from these DVD's. They will definitely serve you as a starting point to launch your production.

I gained so much from these commentaries, "behind the scenes" specials and books. I truly believe if it weren't for them, *And I Lived* would never have been. I see these DVDs as my film school instructors...without the twenty thousand dollar tuition fee.

So with all that said: grab your yellow legal pad of paper and most comfortable writing pen or pencil, turn on the old DVD machine and get ready to take notes. You are about to put yourself through your own film school at your own pace.

The answers are there and I know you will find them.

Best of luck....