

# producer q+a *with Joshua P. Dilworth*

## *1.) How and why did you decide to become a filmmaker?*

It's funny. I'm not sure I ever really decided in the conventional sense. Well, that's not quite fair. I suppose I should start at the beginning. I did a good amount of theater in high school, but when it came time, I unreservedly checked the little box on my college applications that read "No, I do not plan to participate in college". I wanted to have time to throw the football around on Sunday afternoons.

Freshman year at Haverford I blindly found my way into a improv and sketch comedy group called *Lighted Fools*. It wasn't something I had ever planned on doing — and I auditioned on a whim, without telling anyone. But I guess they thought I was funny. Here was this different kind of performance — it awoke something in me that I'd be lost without today. It was in the *Fools* that I met Nick. And it wasn't long before he was trying to convince me to do a play with him. And it's not like either of us knew what the hell we were doing. I mean, Nick had been acting since he was a kid and I'd been in a few plays myself, but that was it. And when I say "do a play" I mean direct, produce, and serve as dramaturg, artistic director, set builder, publicist, music designer, casting director — well you get the idea. We were pretty much shooting from the hip, and employing the help of whatever friends had the time to lend a hand. But the play, a beautiful production of Wilde's *Salome* was a huge success, and so we decided to keep "doing plays". As we progressed, our productions began to incorporate film and video more and more — and so the eventual transition to filmmaking proper seemed entirely natural. By the time the curtain went up on *Decadent and Depraved*, a piece I wrote my senior year at Haverford about the relationship between Hunter S. Thompson and the English cartoonist Ralph Steadman, projected images were completely integrated into the production. I always like the idea of coming at the audience from as many angles as possible — you have to really open your eyes if you're to take it all in.

I especially enjoy the collaborative aspect of film — it makes for a very layered final product. But in general I think that certain stories are best suited for certain mediums. And ultimately, the sorts of stories I'm wanting to tell right now are best conveyed on film.

## *2.) Was it a difficult decision? Was it an easy one?*

Such things are never easy. Though a prominent businessman once told me over lunch that "the secret is that there is no secret". If you can accept this, anything is possible. I thought for awhile about pursuing a Ph.D. in Performance Studies at either NYU or Berkeley, but eventually decided that the opportunity to make films was one that I needed to seize immediately. But I'll have that Ph.D. if it's the last thing I do, goddamnit.

## *3.) Tell me a little bit about your background and schooling.*

I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the son of a graphic designer and a development director. I'm the oldest of three boys, which is another story altogether. We were always very creative children — these days one brother is an art history major and a budding sous-chef, and the other is studying architecture. I attended a Catholic school called St. Agnes Elementary in Catonsville, Maryland, where I majored in kickball and strange hairdos. I spent my high school days at The McDonogh School in Owings Mills, Maryland, where I graduated in 1998. I then attended Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania, graduating in 2002 with a double major in English and Philosophy. Most recently I received a Professional Certificate in Directing from NYU SCPS.

## *4.) Who and what are the greatest influences on your work thus far?*

Marilou Allen, my boss when I was the Director of Serendipity Day Camp, taught me more about producing than anyone else. The thing is, she doesn't even know what a producer does. But she knows a lot about people, and she knows a lot about tough decision-making. I think she'd be astonished to hear me say all this. I don't really have any mentors or idols, though. I always said that if I was going to do this, I'd have to do it on my own terms. I try to learn from everyone I meet.

And I read a lot of books. I'm a big believer in self-education. My liberal arts background sent me off into the world with a big appetite and a high learning curve. I'm just trying to keep up.

**5.) *What attracted you to The Surprise?***

Nick had been working on it for a long time, and I think that it was at a point where it was ready for the next step. In the theater you get to a point where the piece craves an audience. *The Surprise* was at that point. And it was such a choice-filled script. We used to say that if we gave it to both David Lynch and David Lean, each movie would be full and robust - and completely different. There was opportunity in the script, and that's one of the first things I look for. If a script is already pre-directed, I'm not interested. "*The Surprise* had a very strong structural backbone and it raised very important social and moral questions. When Nick and I spent 6 hours one day arguing about it and ended up in a place nowhere near where we started, I knew that we had something.

**6.) *How many people did you have in your crew?***

About forty-five. We had an army. On the last day of the shoot, my second assistant director remarked to me that I'd yet to ask a P.A. for coffee. She radioed down to the craft services level and in 35 seconds I had a cup of joe prepared to my exact specifications. I thought, "I could get used to this!" In all seriousness, though, our crew was amazing. They went to war for Nick and me every day. They're in every frame of film, though no one will ever notice.

**7.) *Could you speak a little bit about the difference between theater and film? Was the transition easy or difficult?***

As a producer, the transition was very easy. There was a problem of vocabulary and nomenclature at one point, but that's about it. You're still telling stories and you're still articulating visions. As a director I think the two are quite different, but I'll defer to Nick on that one.

**8.) *What was the greatest difficulty you encountered while filming The Surprise? How did you manage to overcome it?***

Wow. Probably staying healthy. I almost completely lost my appetite. It was a good thing my Mom was around to force-feed me. We lost locations and camera trucks and plenty of money, but these were all repairable. I can fix problems, but only if I'm healthy and well-rested. There were times, too, when I was so busy running the show that I was forgetting to enjoy myself. The wonderful and talented Rebecca Perkins, who has done the makeup on everything Nick and I have ever done, took me aside one day and reminded me of what an amazing thing it was that we were doing.

Another producer I know once had the singular experience of speaking with Mohammad Ali. He said that it occurred to him that producing was a lot like boxing. You prepare for months, even years, but you only get 10 minutes in the ring.

It's important not to lose sight of how you got here and where you are going, even for 10 minutes. Producers always have to see the big picture, and that's a hard thing to do when you're running 5 hours behind schedule. But sometimes the answers are right in front of you, if only you can only see the forest for the trees. On a movie set, everyone has a specific job, and as a producer you want that degree of concentration and single-mindedness from your crew. It's your job to understand the process as a whole, and to know how to most effectively shepherd the project in the proper direction.

**9.) *What will you change the next time around?***

I'll have a lot more help during preproduction. And I'm renting GPS systems for every vehicle, damn the cost.

**10.) *What has surprised you most about the whole experience?***

I have a lot more respect for crappy films now. It's a miracle that a film gets completed at all. And despite that fact that, for us, everything that could go wrong did in fact go wrong, we still made it through. You tend to notice your bad luck a lot more than your good luck. I think we had quite a bit of both.

*11.) You're also the co-president of a production company, Eighty-Watt Cinema.*

Indeed. Nick and I have always thought, from the beginning, that we need to control our own destiny. They say that film is the second most expensive art form – only architecture is more costly, as my brother Zachary can attest. Filmmaking is a business, and Nick and I are committed to learning that business, from the ground up.

*12.) How do you feel about the industry in its current state? What about the independent scene? Where do you see yourself and Eighty-Watt fitting in?*

I couldn't really tell you. We have big ambitions. But as I said before regarding the difference between film and theater, I think that different stories have different needs. Always story. Just because a film is risky and difficult, it doesn't mean the project can't or shouldn't be made. But the reverse is also true. Nine times out of ten, films don't get made because they don't know what they are or what they want to be. There may be a great story in there somewhere, but it's this sort of taxonomical extravagance that dooms a lot of projects. Too often a film is forced to swim upstream; its own shepherds want something for it that it doesn't need. It's an old Aristotelian notion: the virtuous person fulfills that role for which he or she is best suited. Virtue requires self-knowledge: know thyself (and thy project!). We're committed to telling any story that has a chance of making its money back, and we're committed to meeting the needs of every project we make.

*13.) What would you say to other budding filmmakers trying to put together a successful short?*

Rob a bank. I don't know. I think I've already said it – the secret is that there is no secret. And I'm not merely feeding you rhetoric. There is no secret. You need discipline, craft, perception, artistry, intelligence, composure, versatility, determination, gracefulness, courtesy, judiciousness, and decisiveness. But these are all life skills that you should be developing anyway. You do need to be well-read. And you need to immerse yourself in this job – there's no testing the water here.

*14.) What's on the horizon for you?*

A feature, of course. And my own professional directing debut, with a short film tentatively titled *In Burnt Norton*, a piece that's been brewing for some time now. I'm really excited about it, but it will have a glorious Q & A all its own, so I'll cut myself short, for now.