

On the fly,

My (Brief)
Life as a
Johnny Depp
Look-alike at
the Toronto
Shoot-and-Edit-
a-Short-Film-in-
48-Hours Festival

LAST YEAR, I decided to apply for On the Fly, a Toronto festival/institution that offers filmmakers the opportunity to shoot a short film in 24 hours and edit it in another 24. It was clearly a whim. I hadn't used a movie camera since my Grade 11 stop-motion opus for my Man and Space course; in the 1970s, you got credit for stuff like that.

Plus, I'm weirdly terrified of cameras.

Besides, the odds I wouldn't get selected were pretty overwhelming. Acceptance was based on random ballots—and there were countless applications. On the Fly, for those not in the know, began in 1996 as the brainchild of aspiring filmmaker Andrew Bee, who figured if he got friends together on weekends he could shoot something for no money. As he's said elsewhere, he told too many people. By 1999, there were 300-plus applications and a host of artists and filmmakers had participated, including Sarah Polley, Clement Virgo, Sudz Sutherland and Jennifer Holness.

Eventually, I did get selected and my reaction was mixed. It's a heluva lot easier to talk about something than do it, plus I instantly forgot every idea I ever had. I considered adapting one of my wife Kerri's short stories, but I'm even more terrified of actors. Instead, I decided to write something myself, based on a practical joke played on me at the 2003 Toronto International Film

Festival. While I was out of the office, my co-workers taped a picture of Johnny Depp behind my desk, commenting—I guess—on my rather shaggy appearance that year. I wrote the script, *JD & Me*, on the premise that I was so flattered, I started to ape Depp's look, becoming a bottom-rung celebrity impersonator. (Kerri once worked with look-alikes, so I had a lot to draw on.) Best of all, the only performer I needed was myself. I could do it with stills and voice-over, like *La Jetée* or *This Is a Photograph*, only way more juvenile. I wrote the script in about two hours over several pints of Guinness at my local pub.

The first thing you realize when you're doing a low-budget project is that you're relying on the kindness of friends—and maybe a couple strangers. It's all about cajoling, pleading and blackmail. I quickly discovered that there's a certain cachet in just putting on a show, because very few actually say no. Festival operations manager Alka Sharma agreed to



produce—she was one of the practical jokers, so I figured she owed me anyway—although neither of us really knew what producing entailed. Then I asked festival receptionist Nick Pagee—who is tireless and very inventive—to AD and cover whatever came up. The next week, we ran out to shoot stills with me posing beside a *Secret Window* poster wearing a toque, hoping to be recognized. We got kicked out of every place we tried to shoot—cameras make security guards nervous—and I thought I looked fat in all the

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photos. (Though Nick looked hysterical as a crazed fan who insists I'm Depp.)

I asked Riddle Films's Jason Charters if he could shoot it, or do the sound, but he had to drop out two weeks later. This turned out to be a boon because he suggested two very capable people: Erica Shaw, an experienced soundperson, and cameraman Rhet Morita, who had worked on a ton of films, including the horror flick *Prom Night III: The Last Kiss*. Sarah Abbott offered to edit. My brothers Brian and Tom contributed the music. Brian did the score (I gave him *Superfly* and, pretending I knew what I was doing, told him I wanted something like that, but different), while Tom covered a song I needed to cue the final scene. Later, Ben Murray (the other practical joker) offered to help out. By now, some local filmmakers knew I was shooting a film, and they were generally supportive.

In addition to providing equipment, On the Fly also offered seminars on how to make a low-budget short film, covering virtually everything. (Almost every alarming thing they talked about would come true.) At the first meeting at Toronto's Win Win Pictures, Andrew, Scott McLaren and Debra Felstead, the three principals of On the Fly, laid out the rules. Nothing could be shot before the assigned day, which screwed up my whole plan. I started to panic.

One of the first recommendations was to rely on the support of fellow filmmakers. I was somewhat mortified by my premise, but since Lesley Grant, another participant, is a script consultant and an old friend, I risked it. She reaffirmed what I'd been thinking about for a while—the script read like a magazine article with pictures. I needed to add some live-action sequences. Then I discovered scheduling problems. I was supposed to be in Denmark and India on programming trips for TIFF on the shooting and editing days I had been assigned. This ultimately led to frantic long-distance phone calls to Alka about pre-production stuff. I felt like I was harassing her. She was busy, and I'd

already dragged her all over the place, on a moment's notice, taking stills, including Atom Egoyan in a memorable cameo as an Atom Egoyan impersonator.

I returned home from Denmark two days before the shoot and things seemed cool. Everyone showed up on time that morning, and Erica and I knocked off the voice-over early, giving me time to do an off-the-cuff sequence at Southside



Filming JD & Me.

Louie's, the pub where I wrote the script and which Kerri and I frequent. As we were shooting a bit on College Street, Alka ran over and asked the owner if we could shoot in the pub for a couple minutes. (Alka and I turned out to be the most un-directable actors—giggling through every take.) A passerby asked Nick if I was really Johnny Depp. Nick had him going for about a minute.

When we got back, we ate (my mother did the craft services) and re-enacted a couple of memorable sequences from Depp's oeuvre, including *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*,



with Ben hamming it up brilliantly as Hunter S. Thompson's sidekick, talcum powder substituting for cocaine. My fellow TIFF programmer Sean Farnel dropped by with his son Jimmy, who played a kid whose birthday party I'm hired to appear as Depp. (Nick came up with one of the best moments in the film, suggesting I light my cigarette off a candle on a birthday cupcake.)

Later in the afternoon, we felt the rushes weren't bad, which was good because I hadn't enough people for the party scene. We did a few pickup shots as Alka and Kerri frantically recruited people. Eventually, Rhett and I decided different angles and wigs would give an impression of more party-goers. We wrapped at 11 p.m., returned the equipment and drank beer, exhausted and exhilarated.

And I succeed in practically never touching the camera. It was the most fun I'd had in ages (especially the live, impromptu stuff) and realized I was a convert to the whole small-crew, DIY thing.

Two weeks later, I got back from the programming trip to India and met Sarah Abbott early the next day to start the edit. (You had two, 12-hour slots. One from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., the other from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.) It was exacting work and I was a little depressed at the end of the first 12 hours because the film felt totally lifeless. Plus it was almost 10 minutes long, way too long for what was essentially a one-note joke. We cut three minutes, unfortunately losing good stuff, including Nick as the crazed fan and the *Fear and Loathing* bit. Adding the score finally gave it some punch. I called a couple of people who had worked on it, and some who hadn't, for feedback. My fellow programmer Stacey Donen gave the best advice: it's still too long. Sarah and I hacked away some more, eventually redoing part of the voice-over at around 2 a.m.

I was twitching, waiting for my film to come up when the screening—at Toronto's cavernous Bloor Cinema—rolled around a couple of months later. The sound was faint, probably because we dropped the soundtrack in a little too high in the mix. Another set of lessons: Don't get too enamoured with scores, and Final Cut Pro sound is different than theatre sound. (Scott told me later he jacked the volume up as much as possible.) However, this glitch didn't ruin things. People were laughing anyway. I survived the experience, so I considered it a success.

I calmed down enough to be able to watch the other films, and I was pretty impressed with most of them. Highlights included Sook-Yin Lee's *Girl Cleans Sink* (which was later programmed at TIFF), Ingrid Veninger's *The Bunny Project*, Heather Braaten's *Those Who Wait* (which won the Best First Film prize) and Lesley Grant's *O-blivion*. By the end of the night, I decide once is enough, although Alka tells me she's got a couple ideas, and I'm thinking maybe I could work with actors after all.

A couple of months later, I'm shopping at HMV and the girl behind the counter tells me I've got a real Johnny Depp-look going. I briefly contemplate expanding the film to a feature, but instead decide to shop there more often—or at least hang around in the video section.

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