

GONE FISHING

BUILDING A MOVIE WORTHY OF AN AUDIENCE

Having made three indie features, written three best-selling *Guerilla Film Makers* books on filmmaking, and taught hundreds of filmmakers through my masterclasses, I was taken aback when one young, fresh-faced new filmmaker asked a question during a seminar, the question, that I had been avoiding for some time: “That’s all well and good, all this stuff you are telling us to do, but why don’t you take your own medicine? Why are you not making films?”

By *Chris Jones*

I felt like I had been in a minor car accident. You see, she was right. Somehow, without my noticing, I had slipped from being a filmmaker into being an author and teacher. Don’t get me wrong, I find writing books and teaching a real gift and I feel blessed that I have had both opportunities. But when I reflected, filmmaking is where my heart had always been. For me, the ability to tell a story using the most dynamic, visceral, visual/auditory and simply BIG AND BRIGHT format ever invented—cinema—is a toy no youngster at heart can resist.

So, I committed there and then to make a change.

I dusted off some projects and hit the tarmac. Within a year or so I was confidently sitting in a meeting with a very powerful British producer who said (paraphrasing): “I love your script, we want to make it for big bucks, but you can’t direct... you have no real track record.”

Yet again, I felt like I was in a minor car accident. And again, I knew... he was right. The films I had made were low-budget (under \$1m) and were produced way back when, and the books I had written were viewed as a fascinating asset, but of no real value to a multi-million dollar movie.

So again, I committed there and then to make a change.

This meeting was the genesis of GONE FISHING, a short film that I completed in January 2008: a 13-minute, self-contained cinematic experience, to showcase what I was capable of as a director. And what a wonderful opportunity this would also be: I could take all those rules, guides, principles and laws that I had developed while writing the books and teaching the filmmaking



James Wilson in GONE FISHING

classes, and put them into practice. At the very least, this would either prove or disprove them. I would, in fact, take my own medicine.

So, I made a list. There were a good 30 or so “rules” on that list, like shooting at 25fps if you are in PAL world (not 24fps), not using video assist so you can “be” with the actors, casting the best actors you can get hold of, not using your mates as crew by default, shooting on film (not digital) if suited to the narrative, aiming VERY high, setting a specific goal worthy of your time and your helpers time, and so on. Some were very specific and practical, others were more ephemeral.

I had seen many filmmakers fail because they simply didn’t aim high enough, paying lip service to ambitious goals, but at the final hurdle, choosing to put friends who would be easy to work with into key cast or crew positions, or shooting on a low-end digital format, or even shooting high-end HD, when they should really be shooting film (I have nothing against digital, if it’s the right format for the story) and then wondering why they didn’t get the outcome they had hoped for.

As you can see, a single choice, like “I will use the camera that I bought last summer” (and not the new one that is much better, that I can blog, borrow, rent etc.) can spiral a filmmaker either upward or downward. Many new filmmakers choose the easier option and wonder why they don’t get the result they had envisioned.

Whatever you choose, you will always do the very least you consider is needed to get the job done. It’s human nature, and commonly called *the path of least resistance*. So really, my success or failure on GONE FISHING would lie in the choice of the *logical end to my endeavour*, and also in knowing that *I would ALWAYS choose the path of least resistance to that end goal*—so the trick to success lies in the choosing of that goal—a small hill or the highest mountain? Failure is an almost certain statistical outcome, but failing to climb a hill creates few new opportunities, whereas failing to climb a mountain will certainly open up a new world. So the greater endeavour becomes an almost certain win/win proposition.

I announced that my goal would be to win the 2009 Academy Award® for Best Short Film. That, I felt, was about as big a goal a short film could score.

As I made the announcement, I felt the immediate pressure. I needed to be at the very top of my game, with top cast and crew, 35mm film, and a narrative that would reach out and connect with audiences

in a positive way. And I needed money.

This helped prove another rule that I have, which is along the lines of, “Build a project worthy of people’s money and the money will find you.” I funded the film by asking anyone and everyone for £50. In return, they could come to the set, attend the premiere (at BAFTA), even have their picture taken with the Oscar® if and when

never will be. The Blog has evolved from a simple “diary” to more involving video entries that really capture the excitement and the emotional rollercoaster we are on—from the premiere to more recently the Kodak Awards and the Rhode Island Film Festival. It’s nail-biting stuff. I now consider the Blog to have been one of the key tools that helped get the film made and out there.



Director Chris Jones with 1st AD Jonathan Andrew

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we win. We raised £22K. Some people put in more than £50, some people put in £5K. And all with no hope of any repayment. I had been clear, you won’t make a penny. But we could all go “in spirit” to the Oscars.

Like all great stories, it’s not the outcome that is compelling, but the journey undertaken. And I knew that if I involved people in my journey, they would feel like they were themselves part of that Oscars bid too. In that way, whether we get nominated or not, whether we win or not, is unimportant, it’s that we try our very best. The David and Goliath confrontation is always compelling, and we always align with David...

And so, my Blog was created to document, on a near day-by-day basis, that journey. And if you go there now, you will see that it’s a journey that is not yet complete. It

As I am writing this, I am surprised at how much I am going over the “setup”. But then I realise that this is also one of my rules too. If you build the right foundations, the execution is relatively simple. In essence, I could bang on about how we made the film, the problems encountered, the camera used, but really, it’s unimportant. The movie is largely made before you get on set, by the choices you make and execute in the run up to the shoot (and starting with the story you choose to tell). Too many filmmakers are so eager to get to set that they fail to build an ambitious, robust, and detailed strategy. I know, I have been there, and I get it. But nonetheless, it’s a pitfall that remains.

So, will we win the Oscar®? I can only commit to doing everything in my power to try and generate that outcome, and right now, we are starting to mobilise an army of GONE FISHING helpers... I can tell you though, IT’S REALLY EXCITING!

I also commit to sharing everything that I have learned about that journey to the Oscars so that if you choose to make a bid for the Oscars yourself, your chances of success should be that bit better... just log onto the Blog at: www.cbrisjonesblog.com.

Onwards and upwards! ■