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THE TROPFEST BOOSTER – SHOT ON MY SHORT FILM LEARNING CURVE

Author: Matt Day, winner of Tropfest Australia 2017 with his film *The Mother Situation*

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One of the many things I've learnt making short films, is that before you set out to make your film, have an idea of which festival(s) you're making your film for. From my experience, every festival has its own particular flavour, and as soon as I had the idea for *The Mother Situation*, I knew it was a Tropfest film.

It's a (very black) comedy, and comedy always plays well to a large crowd. If it's funny of course. Unfunny comedies don't play so well. And the crowds at Tropfest are very large indeed. I knew it was a story I could tell it in under seven minutes and I also knew it was topical – euthanasia, house prices – all the funny topics.

Once I've finished a short, I want to move onto the next one. I don't want to spend forever filling out festival applications and spending money on submissions. This is why Tropfest is such a great festival. It plays over one night to a massive audience. And that's why I was there – to get in front of the maximum number of eyeballs in the minimum amount of time. I wasn't there to win, nor did I expect to, but boy was I happy when I did.

I like working under creative restrictions, and so far all of my short films – I've made six – have been shot in one day, in one location with a bare-bones cast and crew. There are practical reasons for this of course: It's easier to gain access to a location when shooting for one day; everything costs less; and cast and crew are more likely to come on board if you're only asking for a day of their time.

But there are also creative advantages to this approach. It focuses the mind on what's most important. There are no insignificant aspects in filmmaking: cinematography; music; make-up; production design; costume – all of these things can add (or subtract) to the success of your film. But for me the essential aspects, the ones that you simply must get right if your film is to succeed, no matter what, are story, performance and sound. Yes, sound! Audiences will forgive a lot, but they will never forgive a boring story, poor acting or not being able to hear what the bloody actors are saying. So write a great story, get the best actors you can, and don't skimp on the sound. Ever.

So far, I've done most of my post-production myself. I edit, do the sound-design and grade the picture. I taught myself the basics by watching films with a focus on each particular aspect, then I learned the practical stuff from YouTube. No, this does not make me an expert, not by a long shot, but it does give me a huge amount of respect for those who are. I recommend this to any filmmaker staring out. Nothing gives you more appreciation for these skills than taking them on yourself.

Watch a favourite film with a focus on just the editing. When do they cut? Why? What shots do they use? What effect does that have on me, the audience? Read Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye*. Now read it again. Now watch a film with a particular focus on the sound, something like Robert Altman's *Nashville*. Watch films for the cinematography and the production design. You'll discover that often praise for great cinematography should instead be praise for great production design. This is not to downplay cinematography, but great cinematography is like great acting – it should almost go unnoticed. Watch any films lit by the late, great Harris Savides. See what I mean?

Learn about acting. You want to make great films? Then they should incorporate great acting, and you, the filmmaker, are responsible for every performance on screen. I recommend reading *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder as a great place to start. It's very clear and concise, and best of all, practical. If you don't know how to speak to actors in order to get the performance you need from them, you shouldn't be directing. You will always be at the mercy of the actors, and believe me, you don't want to be in that position, especially if you can't afford, or don't know, great actors who will work with you. So many directors just hope that the actor will turn up and deliver the performance they need. Don't put yourself in this position. I've been acting professionally for thirty years and I've encountered some directors who almost seem to be afraid of actors. But I suspect they've simply never acquainted themselves with what it that actors do? So learn about acting. Go to the theatre. Read as much as you can. Best of all, do a short acting course – that could be one of the best things you could ever do to improve your directing.

Always be thinking about what it is you want to do next? What story you want to tell? Don't be at the mercy of the funding-bodies – I've never been lucky enough to receive funding – not yet anyway – although I've tried. Find a way of making whatever it is you want to make for little or no money. This goes back to imposing restrictions. *The Mother Situation* cost around \$1,500 to make. One thousand five hundred dollars. Most of that was on location insurance, equipment-hire and catering. You don't need a hundred-thousand dollars to make a short film. Having said that, I will be trying for funding for my next short film, as I would like to start paying people. And maybe shoot for two days. And not do all the post myself. Hopefully my Tropfest win will help in that regard? Another great reason for entering Tropfest: Everyone in the industry takes notice.

And by the way, if you really want to be a filmmaker, and you are watching as many great films as you can to learn about the craft you love, pay for them. If you don't... if you steal them... you are not part of the filmmaking community and you never will be. You may never be caught and you may be able to justify it to yourself in whatever way you want, but how can you truly have respect for yourself as a filmmaker, if you don't respect the work of other filmmakers first?



<http://mpa-i.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/b.jpg>

Film still from “The Mother Situation”

About the author

Matt Day has established a reputation as one of Australia’s leading film and television actors having appeared in numerous television series including *Rake*, *Tangle*, *Hell Has Harbour Views*, *My Brother Jack* and *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo*. Feature credits include *Sweet Country*, *Touch*, *My Year Without Sex*, *Love and Other Catastrophes*, *Muriel’s Wedding*, Woody Allen’s *Scoop*, and *Kiss or Kill*, for which he received nominations for a Film Critic Circle Award and an AFI Award for Best Actor. His international television credits include *Shackleton* (with Kenneth Branagh), *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Commander*, *Spooks*, *Hotel Babylon*, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* and Bruce Beresford’s *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself*. Short films as writer/director include *Wish* (Turner Classic Shorts 2008 Special Mention, 2008 London Film Festival, 2008 Encounters Short Film Festival, 2008 Foyle Film Festival, 2008 Edinburgh International Film Festival, 2008 Stockholm Film Festival) *Beat* (2011 St Kilda Film Festival) *Title Card* (co-written and directed with Brendan Cowell, Flickerfest 2016, 2016 St Kilda Short Film Festival) *Perry* (2016 St Kilda Short Film Festival) and *My Everything* (2003 Toronto Short Film Festival, 2003 Borges En Curt International Short Film Festival) .

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