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# The Routes of Wild Flowers, a Path of Obstacles & Professionalism

Contributed by Noralil Ryan Fores  
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The making of *The Routes of Wild Flowers* reads as a quintessential David versus Goliath tale; a little film overcomes the constraints of average expectations, a bitter winter and a limited budget, crew and shooting schedule, making for a feature, says producer Veronique Lee, that is so much more than merely a student film.

Up until the last two weeks of shooting, *The Routes of Wild Flowers* was simply titled *Plant X*, a temporary moniker better suited for a sci-fi horror film than for a quirky yet personal narrative about human connection. As director Jon Brence explains, it was only by chance that the film stumbled upon its title. "I went back home to my mother who's living north of Pittsburgh, and I said, "Well, here's the story. It's about this traveling between these characters in Pittsburgh, and (the main character) is carrying this plant. They're all very eclectic people," Brence says. "Here my mother was a master gardener in Pennsylvania, and she said, "Well, they're sort of like wild flowers. They're just blooming all over the place, these different people." And, she was like, "Well, how about *The Routes of Wild Flowers*?"

With that passing remark, Brence returned to set for a cast and crew vote, and the student feature film, produced in the dead of the winter, garnered its springtime-inspired name.

The making of *The Routes of Wild Flowers* reads as a quintessential David versus Goliath tale; a little film overcomes the constraints of average expectations, a bitter winter and a limited budget, crew and shooting schedule, making for a feature, says producer Veronique Lee, that is so much more than merely a student film. "It's all these young professionals trying to make an actual movie, more than just one person with a camera standing in a room. I felt like I got to be one of these executives at a major production company," she says.

Appropriate for its "little guy, big obstacle" production story, the film took home the Underdog Award from the Victorydance Film Festival two weeks ago, a welcome surprise for all its unpaid and hard-working cast and crew.

Developed out of a class at Carnegie Mellon University, the film's narrative follows a band of four eccentrics—Boris, Otto, Janet and Bree—as each try to get to downtown Pittsburgh during a bus strike. While Boris hopes to present a precious flower to his love interest Nadia before she returns to their joint homeland Russia, mother-daughter pair Janet and Bree makes their way into town for a talent show at which Bree is meant to sing. Otto, by all accounts, just seems along for the ride. While the initial intentions are all divergent, the goals of these characters intertwine as the film progresses. The characters all fall into unexpected but vital emotional connections, a personal mark that director Jon Brence was eager to explore.

"We, as humans living in society, are all entirely too focused on ourselves. We need to really reach out and make connections with other people in the world and our surroundings," Brence says. "In this picture particularly, we have all these people who live in less than a five-mile radius who have either never come in contact with each other or don't know what (each other's) deal is.

"Individuals will just sit in front of the couch, or they'll sit in front of their computer, and they'll cut off from the world. I encourage people to get out and explore, meet people. This life is not solely based on what your experiences are, but you should be learning what others' experiences are and just accepting, enjoying and being grateful for everyone who is around you."

Brence's lofty ideology here isn't wasted in words. His directorial approach throughout *The Routes of Wild Flowers* embraced the collaborative even the smallest ways. "Toward the last film day, (Jon) let the costumer, the make-up person and myself take other roles behind the scenes," says actress Lucia Metrailler. "He let me run the camera and let one of the other girls hold the boom. I thought that was neat, that he let us do that, to see what it was like on the other side of the coin."

"I always try to establish these aesthetics on set so that when we go into the project every person has that same ideal of, "Well, we're going to take a journey together, and we have to do it as a group in order to make the full vision of the project carry through," Brence explains. "I can't imagine being on a set where the lead actress doesn't know who the grip is."

The collaborative process, even in this environment, is tough, however, when a production fights against limited time, manpower and most notably the unpredictability of a Pittsburgh winter. "I remember the first weekend I got up at six in the morning, and I looked outside my window and there was a foot of snow on the ground. I was like, "Oh, my goodness. There's no way we're going to be able to shoot today just for continuity's sake," Lee says.

Although a bit of time was lost to these practical concerns, the filmmakers kept as much focus as possible, consciously working, as Kohta Asakura—one of the film's producers as well as cinematographer and editor—says within a state of controlled chaos. Bouncing off diverse influences from the work of Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, and Robert Altman, Asakura, as cinematographer, negotiated this "controlled chaos" with clarity and flexibility.

"Because this story was told as the characters move along the bus routes, I wanted to empathize horizontal movement. We would shot sometimes across vertical structures so that we could have things panning across the screen, not unlike what Robert Altman does in trying to get movement. Even in simple dialogue scenes, the camera would just kind of sway slightly to give it a sense of movement, that these characters are moving and going towards their goal," he says. "Really we just took character nuances and the nuances within the scene and let that dictate the way the camera was moving. Taking those cues we storyboarded everything, and a lot of times, as much as we'd pre-planned all the shots, a lot of it was really on the spot."

The on the spot changes also reflected onto the acting, the improvisational nature of which threw Metrailler for a loop at first and then gradually felt organic as she shot scenes. "I remember (Jon) gave me one little motion to do, and this was one of the changes. I'm coming out the house with my daughter, getting in the car and the car won't start, and he said, "Put your hands on the dashboard and rub it." So I said, "Okay. Fine."...It was so natural when the car honked and the windshield wipers started going, all that was improvisational. It just happened, and it all started when Jon gave me this little instruction."

Other elements of the filming and acting depended heavily on forethought and study, the most obvious the need for Boris and Otto to nail down working Russian accents.

"I was always conscious of keeping the accent throughout the whole movie," says lead actor Harry Gerhardt who spent many hours listening to CDs and reading books in preparation. "I wanted it to look like I was a Russian. That was a challenge for me—to make that believable and make it consistent throughout the whole film."

For CJ Hammel, who plays Gerhardt's jolly companion Otto, problems in nailing the accent turned from a bane into a boon. "I was always struggling with my Russian accent, and Jon always said during the filming, "Don't worry about it. You're doing just fine." If you think your accent's bad, don't worry about it. It's working perfectly." That's all he'd say, and that's all I needed to hear really. I didn't even question it really," Hammel says. "Jon concealed the end of the film for me for the very reason that—as you find out at the end—I'm really an American struggling to act like a Russian. As it turned out, I literally didn't realize or understand the story right up until we filmed that last scene."

“At no point did I want (CJ) to be thinking when he’s delivering his lines, “This is all fake. This is all phony.” I wanted him to give the best he could of being, “I’m a genuine Russian individual, best friends with Boris,” Brenc comments. “I thought that (withholding information) would be the best way to achieve that rather than have that underlying tension...”

The choices in editing were just as interesting—if less effective—than the directorial decisions. By using archival footage of bus strikes and allowing multiple images to run on the screen simultaneously—much in the way Mike Figgis’ Timecode does—the film plays with the passage and meaning of time.

“We really wanted (The Routes of Wild Flowers) to be a timeless piece in that you couldn’t tell if this was the 90s, 70s. That was the idea behind the archival footage,” Asakura says. “When you’re in Pittsburgh, as much as it tries to be this up and coming city, it’s very unique in the sense that it grows up on its own timeline compared to the rest of America, especially coming from New York. It’s got this quaint feeling. It always kind of feels the way it always felt for anyone who’s been here. Because essentially a lot of these characters are immigrants, it’s like they’ve stayed in their own world and kept it the way it was. As the whole world around them is revolving, they are still in their own time zone.”

“In terms of using the small compositions within a composition, I always felt like they were the leaves of a plant, as these different ideas and different parts of the story are stemming out of the main branch. They are supposed to be vignette pieces to show really different aspects of the story in a condensed time.”

The post-production process didn’t go into communication blackout much in the way it often goes on films. With an invitation to see a rough cut, actress Clare Fogerty snuck into a building at Carnegie Mellon to see three edited scenes. “Up until that point I had no idea what the film quality or cinematography would look like. You’re just kind of going off of your own performance, judging that and not knowing what it’s going to look like or how it’s going to translate to the film,” Fogerty says. “We were lucky that we got to see a clip of that, and I was very impressed from the initial stages of the quality. So the second half of the process I was very trusting because I already had an idea of what (the filmmakers) were going for, and I knew that I could trust what they were trying to create.”

The end result from editing leaves the audience with a positive message. “You could tell at the end that my daughter’s and my life were going to change for the good. It just seemed like we were starting to understand a little bit more about where we were going with our lives and that things were going to change,” Metrailer says. “That’s a symbol of hope, and that was a very important message in the film. You’ve got to go through this path in life, but you can end up changing it if you want. It’s all a matter of how we do it. It’s up to us to change (life) if we want to do something different.”

For more information on the film, visit  
[www.theroutesofwildflowers.com](http://www.theroutesofwildflowers.com).or friend the film at  
[www.myspace.com/routesofwildflowers](http://www.myspace.com/routesofwildflowers).