

At The Moment of Creation

An exploration of how directors know and assess screen performance

by

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. M. J.', is written over a light gray rectangular background. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Abstract

This Doctor of Creative Arts project consists of a major creative work, *Gingerbread Men*, a 29 minute film, an additional creative work attached as an appendix, *10 Days to Die*, an 87 minute feature film, a set of filmed research interviews presented on DVD, *Research Interviews*, approximately 70 minutes and this exegesis *At the Moment of Creation*.

This doctoral project is an enquiry into how directors read, know and assess the actors' performance on a film set while the camera is rolling. The major creative work, *Gingerbread Men*, serves as an experimental tool to explore the manner in which a film's visual style impacts on the nature of the actors' performance and in particular as a method of understanding where agency lies for the creation of the characters in that film. Research prior to the production of *Gingerbread Men* led to the selection of the long-take, single shot per scene filming style as a means of forcing myself, as the director, to only be able to make decisions regarding the actors' performance on set at the moment they were being created and not in the editing suite, as is typical in modern filmmaking. *10 Days to Die* then experiments with the clash between these two filming styles in a feature film context, however this is only lightly touched on in the exegesis.

The exegesis explores particular aspects of film directing to better understand how the role of the director impacts upon the methods used to know and assess the actors' performance. In looking at the role of the director on a film set, how directors perceive themselves as an audience for the actors' performance, what directors and actors consider are indicators of an unsatisfactory performance and how recent discoveries in cognitive science and neuroscience further our understanding of people's ability to distinguish facial emotional expressions and the manner in which directors know and assess the actors' performance are investigated and discussed.

The exegesis concludes that knowing and assessing the actors' performance is a complex higher level function that relies heavily upon tacit knowledge, embodied

knowledge, acute perception, empathetic projection and emotional experience in distinguishing authentic complex human behaviour.

Acknowledgements

A paper that combined the Literature Review and the Framing the Creative Work chapter was presented as a peer reviewed paper at the Australia, New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) conference held at Old Parliament House, Canberra, in July of 2010. The paper titled *SELECTING A DIRECTORIAL METHODOLOGY FOR A CREATIVE PRACTICE FILM* was subsequently published in the conference proceedings and is available at the following URL <http://www.anzca.net/conferences/conference-papers/94-anzca10proceedings.html>

The film produced as the major creative work, *Gingerbread Men*, was triple blind peer reviewed and screened at the Australian Screen Production, Education and Research Association (APSERA) conference held at RMIT University, Melbourne, in July of 2008. The screening was followed by a short discussion.

The feature film *10 Days to Die*, which is submitted as an appendix, was screened at the Gold Coast Film Festival in November 2010.

I would like to warmly acknowledge the unrelenting support, faith, and inspiration given to me by my primary supervisor Associate Professor Gillian Leahy. Supervising me has not been an easy or straightforward task primarily because for the entire duration of my candidature I have lived at significant distances from Sydney and UTS. For the first period of my candidature I lived in Canberra and for the last period I lived on the Gold Coast. Dealing with the tyranny of distance between us raised several difficulties most notably not being able to have regular supervisory meetings, and having to resort to email and telephone conversations in order to stay in touch. Throughout all of this Associate Professor Leahy guided my research with considerable poise, aplomb and a keen eye for when I was veering off course. For her commitment and faith in me I shall be eternally grateful.

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Warm thanks also go to the teachers who taught me about film and television directing. Thank you to John Ludbrook and Bill Constable at Curtin University all those years ago who first introduced me to the creative, challenging, exciting and addictive nature of the 'industry'. Particular thanks go to Bill for his guidance and belief in me when I applied for the directing program at the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in 1984.

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My warm thanks to Professor Brian Stoddard who was the Dean of the Faculty of Communication at the University of Canberra in December 1994 for giving me my first academic position as a film and television lecturer, and thus re-igniting my passion for life-long learning and the teaching of film and television production. I still remember my undergraduate years and those memories inform how I teach.

Special thanks go to the group of kind, generous, and talented actors and directors who allowed me to interview them on camera as part of the research component of

this DCA: Tony Wickert, Richard Sarell, Tom Cowan, Jo Lane, Laurie Campbell, Alan Hopgood, Margaret Mills and especially Solrun Hoaas, who sadly passed away on the 11 December 2010. The knowledge that came from those interviews formed a large part of my work. I edited those interviews into a documentary format that became the *Research Interviews* DVD that also forms part of this DCA.

Thanks also to Professor Raoul Mortley and Professor Bruce Molloy for the encouragement and support they have given me since I commenced my current position as Associate Professor and Director of Film and Television within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Bond University. Their faith in me to steer the Bachelor of Film and Television into the future has given me much needed trust in my abilities. Without their support in giving me the time and space to complete my writing of this exegesis I would have struggled.

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Without doubt this has been the most demanding undertaking I have attempted in my life to date and the most rewarding.

Preface

I love actors and I love working with actors. I have always considered myself an actor's director.

By this I mean that as a director my primary focus is working with actors to explore the emotional and psychological possibilities of their characters and the narrative of the story I am telling, rather than placing the visual and montage aspects at the centre of my filmmaking practice. When I am on set, those times when my attention is centred on watching the actors' perform are the most enjoyable.

Since graduating from the directing program at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in 1987 I have continually sort to broaden my knowledge and understanding of acting and directing so as to enhance my ability to direct actors. Over the many years since 1987 I have generally found that information regarding directing actors falls into similar groupings. Most texts, both industry and scholarly, either focus on acting, blocking or rehearsal techniques, or on analysing the finished performance in films using one of the many cinematic theories. While the many directing texts predominantly discussed directorial practice from script development and pre-production, through to production and post-production.

The more I read the more I came to realise that one aspect of directing actors, the process of perceiving and assessing an actor's performance on set while the camera is rolling, was under represented in all forms of film literature. Yet for me this is a significant moment in the whole directing process. Knowing how to cast, rehearse, and block actors are all important aspects of directing, but if a director cannot properly assess an actor's performance on set while the camera is rolling then all the rest matters little. Learning how to perceive and assess an actor's performance was not something I learned at film school. When working with the people who taught me to direct actors we would discuss the actor's performance, but rarely did we discuss how to perceive that performance, understand it, and importantly *know* it.

My interest in this aspect of directing actors lead to this exegesis and the other work that makes up my submission for the Doctor of Creative Arts degree. It is strongly recommended that at least two of the DVDs that accompany this exegesis, *Gingerbread Men* and *Research Interviews* are viewed before reading this exegesis. Chapter One frames *Gingerbread Men* as the major creative work and Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five draw heavily on the research data that came from the interviews contained in the *Research Interviews*. Therefore, watching these two DVDs will greatly inform the reader. The third DVD is a feature film *10 Days to Die* and is only discussed in a minor way, but is an additional example of my creative work.

My primary supervisor Associate Professor Gillian Leahy and I discussed how to best approach the thorny question of the terminology used in this exegesis. Should I use the terms ‘good’ performance or ‘bad’ performance, ‘good’ director or ‘bad’ director? The words ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are problematic and can be so loaded. However, out in the industry actors and directors predominantly use words such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when describing an actor’s performance or directors.

At the Moment of Creation is an exegesis that explores how directors read, know, and assess the performance of actors on set while the camera is rolling. It is primarily intended for film students and novice directors and it is my sincere hope that the research and ideas discussed are of interest and use to them, as well as to more experienced directors, film academics and scholars in general.
