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THE ACTOR BEHIND THE CAMERA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth
University

by

ZECHARIAH HENRY PIERCE
Bachelor of Arts, Theatre, 2009

Director: DR. AARON ANDERSON
Associate Chair of the Department of Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2016

Acknowledgement

I am incredibly grateful to my family, to whom without their undying support, graduate school would not be possible. Thanks to my in-laws for your gracious hospitality and loving care, my wife for your strength in defending the homestead, and my children for your endless supply of love and entertainment. You are the reason I am where I am.

To Dr. Aaron Anderson, for your encouragement and inspiration in exploring the unknown and crossing into uncharted territory. I hope to find as much success in bringing theatrical arts to all walks of life, and still have time to be a rockstar dad.

To my students, actors, and producers: thank you for your patience, your trust, and your willingness to let me experiment with my identity in new roles. Without you, I would still be looking for a thesis topic.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgment.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction: Accidental Filmmaker.....	1
Chapter	
1 The Problem.....	15
2 The Opportunity.....	20
3 The Bigger Opportunity.....	32
4 The Class.....	44
5 Conclusion: The Solution.....	65
References.....	67
Appendices.....	68
A 491 Class Proposal.....	68
B 491 Actors Going Viral Syllabus.....	70
Vita.....	74

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: Paul Valley Budget.....	21
Figure 2: Cartoon.....	24
Figure 3: Medical Video Script.....	39

Abstract

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Major Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson
Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Department of
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Through an accidental discovery of an interest in the film making process, I decided to explore the opportunities that would come through self-education in the field. Along the way, I found that the process of working behind the camera can, in fact, help the actor's career in front of the camera and provide a chance to train in a nontraditional way. After directing two projects (one simple and one more complicated), I decided to propose a class in which students would be required to self-produce their own video projects online. The class was vastly popular, and the students' responses to the class work lined up with my learning objectives perfectly. The actor must take

control of his/her career by constantly working on the craft, and that can easily be done through going out and shooting one's own work. Even if it doesn't result in being 'discovered,' the *pursuit* allows the actor's creativity and perspective to be ever widening.

Introduction: Accidental Filmmaker

I found my light off the glint of a sword. That's only partly true. It was actually off of the point of a spear wielded by a Shaolin Monk striking the bearded axe that belonged to a Viking. This would make a lot more sense if I were to inform you that this fight took place at the 2015 Virginia Beach Bash that is held annually at Regent University in the Spring.

I had intended for that weekend conference of workshops (that specializes in stage combat, but with a focus on the cinematic medium) to be a reintroduction to fighting from my acting standpoint. I have often been involved in some sort of combat, be it a childhood activity nearly leading to my black belt in Tae Kwon Do, Muay Thai classes with my wife, to varying forms of sword play in productions at Georgia Shakespeare. When Dr. Aaron Anderson, my professor, asked me to accompany him to the conference, I jumped at the chance to further my combat experience. My idea was simple: the more experience I can get as a combatant, the more I am liable to be cast in roles requiring that particular skill. This seemed like air-tight logic to me,

even though it actually goes against a lot of what I have learned in the film and television profession, namely that a beginner level skill is not one worth promoting: think, "Jack of all trades, master of none."

On many (if not all) casting websites, actors must fill out as much detail about themselves as possible, and there are places to fill in the actor's special skills. Usually they expect you to only fill in your skill if you are more than adequate in its execution. The thought being that if they're going to cast someone as say, a race car driver, they don't have to hire someone else to make you look like one. Otherwise, they'd just hire an actor for acting and then a stunt-double to cover all the shots of the actual *thing* being done. So you are either very skilled at something, or you're not, but only list it if you're the former.

This way of thinking is a little discouraging, particularly if you have a lot of interests like me. Either way, I really wanted to revisit my stage combat days by attending the Virginia Beach Bash. Upon arriving, I helped Dr. Anderson unpack and check-in to our hotel. During that process, I was able to meet some of the attending Fight Masters and instructors who would be heading the workshops for the weekend. Being that I was attending as Dr. Anderson's student, my experience would be

slightly different than any other person normally attending the conference, hence being able to meet everyone prior to the start of the workshops. In this first meeting, I met Michael Chin, Richard Clabaugh, and Paul Burke who I would be working with most of the weekend, unbeknownst to me. I will pull their biographies from the Virginia Beach Bash website, to give a little background on each of them:

Paul Burke - *"Paul is an Instructor with the IDCA Irelands National Stage Combat Society and a qualified Stunt Coordinator with Stunt Register Ireland. He was fight coordinator on multiple episodes on Season 1 and 2 of Fox TV's Sleepy Hollow. Other film and television work includes Hammer of the Gods, Banshee and The Tudors. Paul was Travis Fimmel's stunt double for 3 Seasons of History Channels Vikings. Theatre fight choreography includes the world premieres of Conor MacPherson's The Night Alive at the Donmar Theatre London and Sam Shepard's Ages of the Moon at the National Theatre Of Ireland"*

Michael Chin - *"Michael G. Chin is a professional actor (AEA, AFTRA, SAG) and is a sanctioned Master instructor and choreographer with the Society of American Fight Directors. He is a student of Northern Style, Shaolin Long Fist Kung Fu. Chin serves as fight director in residence for both The*

White Horse and Pan Asian Rep in NYC. He has taught/choreographed/consulted in the NYC area on Broadway, NYU, The Public and Classical Theatre of Harlem. Nationally he has worked at the Burt Reynolds Institute for Theatre, Brown University, and Yale School of Drama, among others. Chin currently teaches at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA, Juilliard, and teaches privately for Fights4, all in New York City."

Richard Clabaugh - *"Richard Clabaugh has been a cinematographer and director on numerous features and worked with such talents as Russell Crowe, Viggo Mortensen, Christopher Walken, Ben Affleck, and Peter O'Toole. He was the director of the feature films, Python, Little Chicago and Eyeborgs. He was an instructor at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, School of Filmmaking for nearly 10-years and currently runs productions companies Crimson Wolf and RedCom Productions producing original motion-picture, television and web content."*

It is from my experience with these three gentlemen, particularly Paul and Richard, that set me on my course for this thesis.

The first day of workshops, I was having a difficult time choosing which classes I wanted to take. Was it to be swashbuckling, knife-fighting, or bare-knuckle brawling? I couldn't make up my mind. Being slow to choose, the classes filled up quickly and I was left with none of those options. I then noticed a class called, "On Filming Action," which seemed interesting. I went for it. This class was described on the website as, "Every fight must tell a story. This class explores a variety of technical means for enhancing action and narrative via in and out of camera techniques as well as post production strategies and software applications."

Upon entering the class, the first thing I noticed was that it was taking place in what seemed like a mini cinema. There were rows of theatre seats in front of a decent size projection screen. The instructor, Richard Clabaugh, stood behind a computer with a camera and tripod connected to it. We studied two different films he had worked on: *American Yakuza*, where he was the Director of Photography (DP), and *Eyeborgs*, which he directed. Being that this was a class about filming action, we only focused on a few different action sequences per film.

I was so new to film making at this point that a lot of what we talked about in that class went right over my head. There were things that I found interesting, like using a

paintball gun to shoot small breakable balls filled with smoke, dust, or zirconium. This gives the effect of a bullet hitting near the actor to give the impression that the person firing a gun at them is having near misses, without actually having to shoot real bullets at the actor. Although interesting, I am certainly not quite to that level as a filmmaker to warrant that much of a special effects budget.

Something that I did learn (in theory anyway) was the way to 'trick' the audience's perception of distance using the lens of the camera. The formula is as follows: Long Lens = Compress Distance, Short(Wide) Lens = Exaggerate Distance. The example best makes sense in my mind when referring to the 'damsel on the railroad tracks' scenario. If you wanted to (safely) shoot a train coming down the tracks at the girl tied to the tracks, you would have to make sure the train was a long way away. This would not create any sense of danger or immediacy, however, so the drama in the shot would be lost. That's where the long lens comes into play. If framing the girl in the foreground and the train in the background, the long lens will 'compress' the distance between them, making the train appear much closer than it actually is. This now allows the filmmaker to safely shoot the sequence without actually putting anyone in any danger. So when would you need a short lens? Let's say you wanted some

robbers to jump in their getaway car and speed off. If you used a long lens, the distance they'd cover while driving off would appear to be very small and the effect of movement and speed would be lost. Using a short lens, however, would exaggerate the distance they cover in the shot and therefore give the effect that they were going much faster, covering more distance than they actually did. This was the main thing that I took away from this particular class. Even though my experience in filmmaking up to this point had strictly come from an acting standpoint, I was fascinated how certain techniques used by the director and DP could severely alter the performance of the actor.

At the end of this class (of which there were 3 students, myself included), Richard asked us if we were going to follow this 'path' through the entirety of the weekend. I was a little confused, as I didn't know that there were 'paths' to follow. I figured I'd just learn something about filmmaking and then go do a little fighting. As it turns out, there were indeed two separate paths for this conference. The people training to fight on screen and the people filming them. I had accidentally chosen to be behind the camera, and I was curious to stay the course. I agreed to continue on this unexplored path, to which I had no experience or knowledge of how it would help me as an actor, but

I was curious as to what opportunities it could open for me as an artist in other ways.

The next step on this path included gearing up with camera and tripod and visiting the advanced Shaolin Monk Staff fighting class called, "Berzerkers at the Shaolin Temple! Part 1" (Regent). This class was described as:

The first of a three class sequence integrating actor/ combatants and filmmakers. In this class performers will be taught a fight combination. Directors, DPs and Camera Ops will confer with Director Richard Clabaugh on shot strategies, and develop a shot list for session 2 (Regent).

Michael Chin and Paul Burke choreographed the fighters and we (myself and the other two students) worked with Richard on setting up the shots.

This is where it became trial by fire. We were three students assigned to three different fights. That meant we would each be playing three roles: director, DP, and camera operative. Ideally, this would be set up so that three people would collaborate on the shoot. Due to the small class size, we would have to take it all on at once. Not only would I be playing behind the camera for the first time, I would be playing multiple roles. I had no idea where to begin. My first thought was to film the fight walking around them in a Michael Bay style

sequence. Richard immediately advised me against that plan mainly due to the fact that it makes editing in post rather complicated if you don't plan ahead in great detail. When I asked why, he gave me a brief explanation of 'The 180-degree axis rule.' This rule basically says that you have to keep the camera on one side of your actors during all your shots, so that they maintain their positions in reference to each other on screen. This allows the audience to follow who's talking to who and orients the action. Since I had no idea where to start, Richard told me to just 'work my way in.' This just means start with a wide 'master' shot and then just get closer and closer getting more detailed as I move in. A popular basic shot sequence is: master, two-shot, close-up. I ended up doing just that. One of the big differences in that sequence when shooting action comes when you need to highlight the choreography as well. A shot of the axe nearly hitting the face, a staff hit to the gut, or a reaction to getting hit are all just as important as making sure the actors are filmed. The choreography becomes the conversation in place of dialogue. I planned out as much as I could and during our next meeting (part 2 of this class), I shot as much footage as I thought I needed and we were done. Paul and Richard watched all of us during the shooting portion and occasionally stepped in to give us a shot suggestion

(thankfully). These shot suggestions ended up being vital to my composition, as they gave the 'conversation' much more punctuation in an otherwise bland dialogue.

The next step was a slight diversion from my three-ring-circus project into the simpler role of camera operator. Each year at the Virginia Beach Bash, there is a demonstration of a stunt that is executed by the guest stunt artist (Paul Burke this year) and filmed by Richard and his crew (us). This year, it was decided on to do a 'high fall' into a traditional cardboard box crash pad. The scenario was written to be a chase between two 'cops' and one 'robber,' all three of which wielded guns that shot blanks. The cops essentially chase the robber into a building, occasionally firing at each other, whereupon the robber finds himself cornered on the outside of a building as he tries to escape and is shot down. I was one of 3 cameramen being used to film the sequence, and Richard directed it.

Watching Richard direct in this setting was difficult, as we were really pressed for time, so he didn't do much explaining as we set up each shot. It was basically him moving us and telling us what to film. It was obvious he'd been directing for a while though, since he didn't waste a single moment or shot on something that didn't end up in the final product at the end. It all seemed to have been made in his head and he just put all the

pieces together on the fly, that or he had prior knowledge of what we were going to do and took extensive notes beforehand, but it just didn't seem like that was the case. Overall, I just enjoyed being able to be more involved with this special part of the workshop, as the other participants were instructed to just stand back and watch.

The next phase of the VBB journey took me to the editing room, where I would spend the rest of my weekend. Little did I realize that this part of the path would be the most time consuming. Richard explained to us that normally his wife (a professional editor) conducts this part of the workshop as his experience in editing is much less in depth as hers. He gave us a very basic rundown of Adobe Premiere, the software Regent University (the location of this conference) has on their computers, and worked on the stunt video as we worked on our fight videos. Again, the phrase 'trial by fire' comes to mind. Learning how to edit and learning new software with a deadline of the next afternoon was overwhelming, to say the least. We recorded some grunts, and various 'hit' sounds on several surfaces to add to the video, enhancing the aural storytelling, but the biggest challenge (outside of learning the software) was adapting to the fact that the footage I had collected was insufficient to what I had intended to do. That being said, I

learned a valuable lesson: you can (and have to, sometimes) completely change the story and/or tone of your shoot and work with what you have in post. My video ended up having a comic undertone to it, and that was solely based on trying to make something out of nothing. I worked into the night, only stopping to run to McDonalds for dinner, bringing it back to eat and edit. I ran into Aaron later that night for a drink and he was shocked that I hadn't done a single bit of fighting the whole weekend. I gave him the rundown of this experiment I was trying, and he said, "Okaaaayy," with the sort of tone that says, "I don't know if you know what you're doing, but I'm glad you're committed to your plan." I didn't (know) but I was (committed) and it all came together the next day at the viewing.

I woke up early the next day to finalize some edits and render the video so that it was ready in time for the morning recap and public viewing. I remember Richard saying to me that an editor's work is never really done. You work your hardest until the deadline and then you turn it loose. There's always something more to be done to it, something more to tweak, something more to fine tune. That was definitely true. All who attended the Bash gathered in the larger cinema room and each of us was to show our video. We were asked to preface our video with a short introduction to give a little insight to our

process and share what we learned along the way. I had been so overwhelmed with the amount of information that I took in and the amount of new things that I'd been thrown into, that I didn't exactly know what to say at first. I decided that exposing my lack of experience might be an interesting introduction (exposing myself as a rookie, which would be an excuse if it didn't go over well). I focused on the fact that, due to my lack of experience, I didn't plan out the shots as well as I'd hoped, so I did most of the storytelling in the editing room. I said that it felt a lot like an improvisation, that I had several different ingredients and had to piece a story together with what I had, and that, like a painter, I let my colors inspire me to their potential. I was last to show, and I was shocked to get the biggest reactions from the audience, even though I had the least experience among the 3 filmmakers, and certainly the least polished piece. I don't know if that's because mine was the only one to take a humorous tone (which is often a crowd pleaser) or if my end result (or aesthetic) was indeed more fun to watch. Either way, as I drove home that day, I felt as if I had to further explore what I had been thrown into that weekend, because I had more questions: Was this a useful thing to know, as an actor? Would delving into the

techniques of filmmaking make me a better actor? How could I use this in my career?

Chapter 1: The Problem

There is an unfortunate reputation that the acting profession often holds: one of laziness. With other performing arts, there are tangible ways in which to practice. A ballet dancer practices at the bar and works on choreography, a painter paints, a instrumentalist practices scales and rehearses music. What is an actor to do?

In the profession, due to the collaborative nature that acting finds itself in, it is difficult to practice. I have heard some make the argument that actors just need to learn and perform monologues and go over them constantly by themselves. I don't think I agree with that notion entirely, as it shuts the actor up, removed from any outside influence. There are certainly times when it can be helpful, but there needs to be more. If you look at all the acting roles in existence, very few are a single actor that never interacts with anyone else. How, then, can an actor practice interactive communication but not rely on other people? The experiential nature of living in the moment and reacting to a fellow actor really only happens when

the actor is working. Otherwise, it's all about trying to get work through the audition process.

Now, I'm a firm believer that auditions are ways for we actors to practice our craft. I try to look at every audition I do as an opportunity to play, to act, to practice. Often, the audition is an actor's least favorite part of the profession, but if one were to look at it as another opportunity to practice, it loses a lot of its intimidation. If we look at our possible employers as partners for which to practice, the audition room doesn't seem nearly as scary.

So are the only times that the actor is able to practice with a real human being ones when working or auditioning? What about the other times in between (a time that, for most, is the largest portion)? It's a difficult situation, for if an actor isn't working (as an actor), there inevitably has to be other jobs to provide the logistical reality of paying bills. Practicing doesn't inherently pay, but if your only opportunity to practice is when you are actually getting paid (or trying to be hired), that doesn't leave a lot of room in your schedule to do it for free. The ideal situation would be for there to be opportunities for the actor to practice the craft, while developing a career that promotes visibility in the business. This ideal world is something of which I scratched the surface

of at the Virginia Beach Bash. Could an actor, with no prior film-making or directing experience, begin to self-produce his own work by just jumping in with both feet? I was certainly keen to find out.

Being an actor, there is certainly a part of me that harbors those pesky insecurities that constantly pick at me saying, "you're not good enough." It's a common thing among artists, or just people in general I'm sure. However, actors tend to be a little more neurotic in that department. This was my default taking on the tasks I did at VBB, but I'm glad to have pushed through that feeling. The result ended in a pursuit of what it means and how it's possible to be a self-made director and producer on a very small scale.

There is one definite way to completely kill all your self confidence: compare yourself to other artists. Actors do it all the time, or maybe it's just me. Either way, I can speak to its toxicity. This is especially true in a field where I had no experience. As I delve into an art form of which I have no formal training or prior knowledge, it was incredibly easy to see other people's work and get discouraged. How was I to continue to feed the fire that was ignited at VBB on my own terms and without the careful guidance of Richard Clabaugh? I'm

not a stunt person, so creating these stunt reels that Paul Burke showed off didn't seem prudent.

Before coming to graduate school at VCU, I had the makings of a small studio that I setup in my home back in Georgia. I used it to record my film and television auditions for various projects shooting in the southeast. Occasionally, I would also film a few of my fellow actor friends when they needed it. I enjoyed working with them, giving feedback to their performances and helping them send in their best audition. I wouldn't consider this a director role by any stretch of the imagination, but it was a role outside of the traditional acting one that had grown familiar. It was certainly more than just a 'coach' as I was in control of the camera settings, lighting and background, so there was certainly a level of production that was incorporated each session, but ultimately, the actor was in control of what the final take was to be.

Between my previous experience filming auditions for myself and other actors, and the weekend at the VBB, my appetite had been whetted to delve deeper into the production side of camera work. I wanted to direct. I wanted to shoot. I wanted to edit. I had no experience directing, but I was determined to get started. Right as I was finding myself with these new desires, an opportunity to employ it presented itself in the form of a

joint collaboration between the Virginia Commonwealth University
Campus Police and the VCU Theatre department.

Chapter 2: The Opportunity

I was first approached by Dr. Aaron Anderson to be a possible replacement for Paul Valley (the VCU senior acting teacher who was moving on after the semester ended) on a project that was a collaboration between the VCU campus police and the theatre department. Essentially, the police department wanted to produce a series of videos making certain campus safety issues more approachable to students. The topics ranged from sexual assault and bystander intervention, to petty theft and mental health. They had several youtube videos that served as examples of what Officer Chris Pruess had seen and liked that other universities/campaigns had done. Most of these were very professional looking, and had the look of a short film or commercial with a fairly high budget. My biggest critique of almost every one of them was the fact that they were way too long and that I got the point of the video with 5-8 minutes left. There was no way anyone my age or younger was not going to click away after the first 2 minutes. So despite their budgets being relatively high (or at least appearing that way),

why weren't these videos going viral? Even despite my critiques of the example videos, I agreed to take the helm as the director.

As the current acting for camera professor, Paul Valley had been asked to head the theatre side of production and to draw up a legitimate production budget. He had a budget by the time I came around, and the total was \$55,585.

Figure 1:

PAUL VALLEY BUDGET

Budget Dated: 01-18-15
Shoot Days: 4 Days
Post: 2 Weeks

Producers: P. Valley
Location : Richmond, VA
Prepared By : G. Highsmith

NON UNION

Acct#	Category Description	Page	Total
101-00	DIRECTOR	1	\$1,800
102-00	TALENT	1	\$2,400
199-00	Total Fringes		\$574
ABOVE THE LINE TOTAL			\$4,774
201-00	PRODUCTION STAFF	3	\$8,000
202-00	EXTRA TALENT	4	\$1,500
203-00	CAMERA	4	\$4,772
204-00	ART DEPARTMENT	5	\$4,500
205-00	GRIP DEPARTMENT/SET OPERATIONS	5	\$3,680
206-00	ELECTRICAL	6	\$3,230
209-00	WARDROBE	7	\$3,650
210-00	MAKEUP & HAIRDRESSING	7	\$2,700
211-00	PRODUCTION SOUND	8	\$2,240
212-00	LOCATIONS	8	\$2,605
213-00	TRANSPORTATION	9	\$2,123
214-00	PRODUCTION FILM & LAB	10	\$525
299-00	Total Fringes		\$3,212
BELOW THE LINE TOTAL			\$42,737
301-00	EDITING	11	\$3,400
302-00	POST PRODUCTION SOUND	11	\$1,500
304-00	COLOR CORRECT & ONLINE/LAB	11	\$2,400
305-00	TITLES, OPTICALS, INSERTS	11	\$500
399-00	Total Fringes		\$273
POST PRODUCTION TOTAL			\$8,073
Total Fringes			\$0
Total Above-The-Line			\$4,774
Total Below-The-Line			\$50,811
Total Above and Below-The-Line			\$55,585
Grand Total			\$55,585

This was essentially to show that if VCU were to produce a professional shoot, the total would reflect what it would take to fund it. It was also supposed to be larger to show that VCU could cover more than half of the cost with resources already in existence within the university, and via a grant could fund the other portion. For example, if a shoot cost \$90,000, the university would only have to pay for \$40,000. That would be a \$60,000 bonus of professionalism added to the project. This was important information when writing grants and asking for money (particularly across departments), for it's a way of saying you essentially get more than you pay for. Although this wasn't an aspect of 'behind the camera' that I was expecting to explore, I was grateful for the crash course. I would later (in the next chapter) put it to use on a smaller scale.

After reviewing the massive budget, I began to have second thoughts about taking on the project. I didn't feel that my first job as a director should be anything of this scale. I mentioned this feeling of incompetence to Dr. Anderson a few times, and he eventually gave me a quote he found from the renowned director, James Cameron: "Pick up a camera. Shoot something. No matter how small, no matter how cheesy, no matter

whether your friends and your sister star in it. Put your name on it as director. Now you're a director. Everything after that you're just negotiating your budget and your fee" (BrainyQuote). This was a helpful motivator, as it reminded me that everyone starts somewhere. Learn by doing.

My first step as the new director was to figure out the story I wanted to tell. Since my topic was to be dealing with sexual assault/sexual consent, I wanted to research what message tended to be received well with young people. I turned to social media. Fortunately, around this same time, a lot of my friends were passing around a couple of different videos and articles that dealt with the issue brilliantly. One that really inspired me was collaboration between blogger Rockstar Dinosaur Pirate Princess and Blue Seat Studios. Rockstar Dinosaur Pirate Princess wrote a blog comparing sexual consent to a cup of tea. Her comparison was wildly popular to the point that her words were adapted into a script for a voice actor to perform alongside an animated piece portraying her comparison. The end result is a sharp-edged, witty take on a contemporary approach to the subject (Video link: <https://vimeo.com/126553913>). What makes it contemporary is the idea that messages about sexual harassment should be pointed at the aggressors and not the victims. This approach made complete sense to me, especially

after reading another article from *The Washington Post* that stated 40% of college-aged students didn't fully understand consent and that 1 in 5 women say they were sexually assaulted while in college. These are staggering numbers, which only fueled my idea that my video should also be about clarifying this notion of consent.

The other article that was being passed around carried a similar tone and concept. Instead of a video, it was an *Upworthy* article that had a series of short cartoon strips comparing consent to several other nonsexual related situations, painting a picture of ridiculousness. This was much more helpful on a logistical level, as I needed to find a way to storyboard this project, and I have no artistic skills whatsoever.

Figure 2: Cartoon (Aker, 2015)



Meanwhile, Officer Pruess, Dr. Anderson, and I had another meeting for me to pitch my ideas of what I wanted to do and the new direction I thought the videos should take. Since the example videos that Officer Pruess presented to me were a little dated in how they were approaching the problem (bystander intervention, having people step in and 'save' the person in trouble), and also were too lengthy, I wanted to convince Officer Pruess that my idea would have a greater potential to go viral on social media. I knew this was important to him, as he expressed the interest in VCU leading a national conversation by setting standards through this interdisciplinary collaboration between the VCU Police and the VCU Theatre Department, and this would only be achieved if we were able to find a large online audience outside the walls of the university. The meeting went well enough. He liked my idea, but the project was now shifting. My pitch involved short, 30 second videos that got to the point but did so with edge or humor. This meant that I could shoot several videos at a small fraction of the previously proposed budget. If I could shoot something, maybe other people could do the same. Maybe we could open the project up to the VCU student body and offer the grant money we asked for to be given in the form of prize money. First though, they wanted to see examples of my ideas. Dr. Anderson told me to think of it like the stunt

test footage that Paul Burke showed us at the Virginia Beach Bash. That made sense. I needed to put something together that didn't need to be polished or overly produced, but still got my point across so that Officer Preuss could better understand my idea.

I had recently purchased a decent amount of gear to improve my audition tapings: I bought a Canon 70D DSLR as my main camera and got a small shotgun mic, memory cards, lenses, stabilizing mounts, editing software, and a subscription to lynda.com. One of the students at the VBB had recommended the Lynda subscription, as it is touted as one of the best online tools for learning things like filmmaking, editing, and a large number of other related tools. It proved to be an invaluable resource. I spent in excess of 20 hours over the summer learning about the fundamentals of shooting with a DSLR, editing on Final Cut Pro X, and how to tell a story through basic camera moves. I felt ready to put some of these techniques to use.

I mentioned earlier that I liked the cartoons because they provided me with a basic storyboard in which to follow, in addition to providing the tone of the message I wanted to convey. I decided that since I would only be shooting test footage to show as an example, and not as a final product to be

produced fully, that I would just aim to translate a few of the cartoons to the video medium.

Since I would be shooting two-person scenes, I decided to ask my wife to be my scene partner, as I wanted to keep things as simple as possible. I figured we could shoot 3 different scenarios in a day, and I could set the camera up, remotely start it, and act alongside her. This meant I couldn't do any fancy camera moves, but again simplicity was the name of the game here. I chose 3 cartoons, by which I'll name them *Car Borrow*, *Sleep Drink*, and *Gym Clothes*. In each setup, I attempted to record sound two different ways, in order to get clear dialogue. I mounted the shotgun mic on top of the camera and then had a wired lavalier mic connected to an external sound recorder that was attached to whomever was speaking in front of the camera.

My shot sequence for each piece was very simple. Basically an establishing shot followed by over-the-shoulders. Quick, simple, to the point. The script was very simple, as I took the letter boxes from the cartoons and improvised the dialogue with my wife to find a fluidity within the lines. Once we found that, we just started recording it. At the end, I edited them together and appended text projecting the overall message in the final frames, hopefully connecting the dots of the analogy.

In shooting, I ran into a few issues that I didn't quite know how to fix on the fly. Firstly, I found all the sound that I recorded via the lavalier mic, to be mostly unusable. I didn't adjust the sound levels on the external recorder (a Zoom H1), so the dialogue was low and muffled. Thankfully the shotgun mic on top of the camera picked up enough, that I was able to hear everything I needed. Not a big deal, as I reminded myself that this was only a test to show as an example. It didn't need to be Spielberg. Another issue was the logistics of filming at home with my wife: we have two toddlers. Our easiest solution was using the power of Netflix to distract them during one of our shoots, which proved useful, particularly when paired with a bowl of dry Cheerios. We got far enough away that we could hear if they were in distress, but their noise didn't get picked up on our mics. There were only a couple of takes that were interrupted by a quarrel or a random cry for mom. Lesson learned here? Spend money on a child wrangler, if shooting in a setting with children... Or call grandma. The last issue that I ran into was lighting my scenes. I own a small lighting kit that I use to light my audition recordings, but they aren't big enough to properly light full rooms. I decided to put the camera on 'auto', use the natural lights, or lights from the house, and just go with it. The best results came from the scenes that used

only natural light (*Gym Clothes* and *Car Borrow*). They looked great, and all the color of the shots were the same. The problem came when I was shooting interior shots, in different rooms, or in a room that had lots of natural light, but also used overhead lights that weren't daylight color. This resulted in my edits between characters each having their own hue. It didn't look very professional, but as test footage, I got what I needed.

My final edits were still fairly rough. The sound was clear but not polished, the lighting was mixed and inconsistent, the script was improvised and unoriginal, and our acting was nothing worthy of praise. Even though all this was true, I had 30 second clips to show as an example for what I thought would work. I uploaded them to dropbox and I came to Dr. Anderson with the links. He watched them, turned to me, and said, "These are great!" I started to make excuses for what I thought were the obvious flaws in production, and he interrupted me reassuring me it didn't matter. Ron Keller, our interim Chair of the department, was passing by the office, so Dr. Anderson called him in to give his opinion. His reaction was very similar, and he had no ties to this project. Another professor, David Toney, came in, watched, and had a positive reaction as well. Three people, all who had no reason to inflate my ego by lying, gave me their thumbs up. Dr. Anderson asked that I upload these to

Youtube, so that we could send the links to Officer Preuss and some other people involved in this project, namely administration in the Title IX department. I was a little embarrassed to be spreading these videos as far as we were, as I was hoping only Dr. Anderson and Officer Preuss would be the only ones to see it, but I let that go and uploaded them for this expanded audience.

What I didn't understand at that time was that these videos were being used as an example in a grant that Dr. Anderson was writing to get funding for a school-wide event, in which students competed with their videos promoting/educating/bringing to light various issues that students encounter, e.g. sexual assault, bystander intervention, petty theft, etc. Dr. Anderson, turned to me in the next meeting we had after these videos had reached the proper people and said, "Your job is done here." I thought to myself, "This can't be it. All I did was throw something together that I wasn't *super* proud of, and now I'm done?" I *was* proud, though. I may not have been in charge of a multi-thousand dollar shoot, but I had been an integral part of an interdepartmental collaboration that was working to find solutions to real issues that students face. If I were to be honest, I'm relieved that the project had shifted as it had. The size and scope of my premiere directing experience ended up

shadowing almost exactly the circumstance that James Cameron had outlined in his quote. Except I cast my wife.

Chapter 3: The bigger opportunity

Now that I was a campus renowned director, people were lining up to employ my services. That's not entirely true, but another opportunity did present itself in the form of a passing conversation between myself and Dr. Anderson outside the theatre building. He spends part of his time at the VCU School of Medicine in a program that helps train doctors in their bedside manner. Essentially, the program hires local actors to play patients with random ailments, and the doctors come in and do their best to treat them. The actors then give feedback as to how the doctor performed in communicating effectively. He helped develop this program along with the Vice President of Health Services, Dr. Alan Dow. Dr. Dow approached Dr. Anderson for another project he wanted to undertake. The project was a classroom aid, where doctors-in-training would watch a series of videos in a 'choose-your-own-adventure' style progression where the actors would play out the decision you made. To get this underway, Dr. Dow wrote out the entire script, including an in-depth character analysis. He just needed someone to film it,

hence why he approached Dr. Anderson. Having just finished the VCU Police collaboration, Dr. Anderson figured I'd be interested in this new project, particularly because there was the probability of being paid.

Dr. Anderson was not wrong, as I was eager to take on another project, particularly one that may yield some financial return. I agreed to do it and got a hold of the script. This script was written in an odd format though, and was difficult to follow, as the format for the 'choose-your-own-adventure' made for a confusing through-line. The other aspect of the script that made it difficult to read was the fact that it was written in in bullet points that differentiated character lines. Dr. Dow wrote it and is not familiar with programs like Final Draft or similar writing software, so I had to do my best to understand the scenes and ideas he was trying to convey.

After reading it through, I had a phone meeting with him to get a better idea of his vision. There were lots of places in the dialogue that would have allowed for humor, but I wasn't sure if they were written intentionally. He assured me they weren't. These were to be real doctors in real situations and he wanted as much of that reality portrayed as possible. I asked him how realistic we'd be able to be, since some of the scenes took place in an operating room, and at the time, I wasn't aware

of a free operating room that we could take over and use for shooting. Again, he assured me that wouldn't be a problem as we had access to the 9th and 10th floors of the School of Medicine, including an actual operating room that is used for simulation operations.

After learning that, I needed to see the spaces in which we'd be working. Dr. Anderson took an evening to show me around and I took as many pictures as I could to take home and match up with the script. Normally, this kind of space would be rather expensive to rent for a private company trying to use it, but since this was an internal affair run by VCU, the cost of this space was nothing. That meant the location section of our budget was taken care of, but what was the rest going to cost? Dr. Dow asked me to put together a budget as to what I thought was needed to get this done. I asked Dr. Anderson where he thought I should start, and he aptly told me to use the VCU PSA budget as a reference and go from there.

I figured I would play the role of director *and* editor since I knew a good deal of the post-production would take place over the winter break between Fall and Spring semester, and I didn't want to have to coordinate working with someone else's schedule during that time. I also asked for the largest amount for the actors as they were paid hourly, and I wasn't sure yet

how much time we would need per actor, so I did the math so that all of them were called for the entirety of the shoot. This proved to be a large excess, as I will explain later. Since our script was broken down into 9 different scenes (most of which had multiple endings), I decided to break down the budget into an itemized price per scene:

Expense plan (personnel)

Director (\$300 x 9 scenes)*	\$2700
Lighting designer/Op. (\$100 x 9 scenes)*	\$900
Sound designer/Op. (\$100 x 9 scenes)*	\$900
Assistant Director/Casting Director (\$100 x 9 scenes)*	\$900
Editor (\$100 x 9 videos)*	\$900
Actors \$20/hour for 10 actors per shoot @ 3 hours per shoot x 9 videos	\$5400
Total personnel costs	\$11700

* (note: budget is for 9 scenes within 8 'lessons' from Unit 3.2 to 4.3)

After proposing the above budget to Dr. Dow, I quickly received an email back from him approving the budget in its

entirety. The end total was more the double what Dr. Anderson said was probable to be approved, but apparently the coffers were deeper than either of us realized. I had the money, now I just needed people.

Two things I learned from shooting the test footage for the VCU Police project that were crucial to make a video look professional: you need good lighting and good sound. I knew I would have to hire someone who was more adept at those technical aspects than I am in order to attain a professional looking product. On top of that, I needed someone to help with casting, the script, and the logistics of scheduling time in the spaces we needed. I also needed actors, obviously, and I had no clue who would be able to handle the medically technical language that filled the pages of our script.

I expressed my concern for a lot of the logistics to Dr. Anderson, and he put me in touch with Stacie Rearden, who is the Standardized Patient Coordinator for the VCU Center for Human Simulation and Patient Safety. This is the program aforementioned that Dr. Anderson and Dr. Dow started that employs local actors to play patients for doctors-in-training in a medical simulation setting. Dr. Anderson's advice was to use Stacie as my stage manager/assistant director, since she already runs a lot of the day-to-day at the facility with which we would

be using. In addition, she already knows the pool of actors that would be best suited for our script. She was essentially killing a lot of the logistical birds I needed dead with her one stone: casting, facilities coordinator, and scheduling needs.

Through a series of emails, Stacie agreed to join the project. I had a director/editor and an assistant director/casting director/script supervisor; now all I needed was a cast and someone to light them and make them sound good. Dr. Anderson, Dr. Dow, Stacie, and I met to discuss the next step. Stacie reassured us that she could easily cast the characters from the pool of actors that were part of the Standardized Patient program. She also noted that we would be able to pull costumes from the existing stash that the SP program used in their normal operation. Dr. Dow said he'd make sure that we could officially have the spaces we wanted to shoot from, as I provided a list of rooms from going over the script with the pictures I took from my tour with Dr. Anderson. In terms of getting a sound and lighting person, Dr. Anderson said he'd reach out to the cinema department to see if they had any recommendations from their students or recent graduates. My next job was to go back through the script and create a shot sequence for each scene. I needed to know what kind of coverage I needed in order to piece something coherent together in post. Due to

the awkward nature of how the script was written and my lack of artistic skills, storyboarding this entire project was out of the question (I also didn't have any handy cartoon strips to follow this time either).

To make it easy on myself, I decided to draw out aerial views of each scene and sketched circles to represent my actors. I drew a triangle to signify where my camera would be and then decided I would start long and close in. Essentially, I would shoot a master shot, move in closer for some 2-shots, and then get close-ups and/or over-the-shoulders. The script didn't call for much action, with the exception of a couple that took place in an operating room. Even with those scenes, I wanted to keep the action as implied just out of frame, so that the actors differing reactions (again remember it was a 'choose-your-own-adventure' style shoot) was key to maintaining a variety of choices for the students to choose from in the final software. I kept it simple and used a basic shot sequence of wide at the start and moved to over-the-shoulder for the exchanges. Here's a scan of the script with my doodle notes using arrows to represent camera position and circles to represent actors. At the top of the figure, I used an aerial view of our set and at the bottom, attempted a more three-dimensional angle.

Figure 3: Medical Video Script with Shot Layout

11.

STEM (PETER, HIGH EFFICACY)

BERNSTEIN
I need one of you to sew up Mr. Hendricks' laceration while I am in the OR. I'll check your work when I'm done. Who has time?

PETER BRANCH (HIGH SELF-EFFICACY)

PETER
(enthusiastically)
I can do it. I did a lot of wound closures during some overseas rotations in medical school.

BERNSTEIN
Great.
(leaves)

PETER
(to Nurse Miller)
Can you help gather the supplies needed to close Mr. Hendricks' laceration?

NURSE MILLER
I'll grab the kit and meet you in the patient's room. You go talk to Mr. Hendricks.

PETER
Roger.

EXAM ROOM

PETER
(entering)
Hi, Mr. Hendricks. I'm Dr. Dahl, and I'll be stitching up that wound on your forehead.

MR. HENDRICKS
(skeptically)
How old are you, kid?

PETER
(laughs, plays along)
Old enough to have done this a bunch of times.

(CONTINUED)

Dr. Anderson came to me with options that the cinema department gave him for a sound and light person. We sent out offer emails, and our first rounds accepted the offer. Brandon Muller was officially our boom operator and Caleb Plutzer was officially

our lighting designer/technician. However, they accepted our rate of \$500 per person for the time we'd be shooting. I lowered their rate to see if we could save money, even though I received everything I asked for, money wise.

It has to be noted, that at this point, Stacie was already going above and beyond the call of duty, which gave me a sense of guilt, in that I budgeted her at a much lower rate than her hours were reflecting. I told Dr. Anderson that I wanted to change the numbers around a little, so that she was getting the proper amount reflecting her work, hence why our initial offers to Brandon and Caleb were almost cut in half.

Due to the fact that the school of medicine would not allow us in the building once the university closed for the holidays, I planned on shooting all 9 scenes in the time span of 2 full days. I figured that because almost half of our scenes were in a similar location, our set-ups would not take too long, so shooting each scene would take no more than a couple of hours. With that in mind, I asked Stacie if she thought we could schedule it all in 2 days with our actors and with the space's availability. She said it was possible, so she began working on the schedule.

Shooting the entire project in 2 days also presented us with another perk: more money savings. Our actors were paid on

an hourly rate and we ended up not needing to call every actor for the whole time, so we had a surplus of funds going forward. This would allow us either to up the pay of people involved, or give us a surplus to pull from if we needed to go back and reshoot anything.

The week before we were scheduled to start shooting, I met with Brandon and Caleb to bring them up to speed on our plans, give them a tour of the space, and see if we had enough gear to outfit our shoot. We would be using my camera, tripod, and I offered my lighting kit as well, should we need it. We also decided to use a boom pole and zoom H6 that belonged to the theatre department. Even though, I thought we were fairly well equipped between my personal gear and what Theatre VCU had in the closet, apparently Caleb had bigger plans. Boy was I glad he did. He decided that for the spaces we were working in, it would behoove us to borrow a van-full of gear from the cinema department that ranged from stands, blankets, gels, lights, and other accoutrements that I wasn't familiar with. Our production value was getting bigger, while our budget stayed the same. This was great! They were agreeable to the 2-day shoot window, and we decided on an hour earlier call, so that we could be unloaded and set up before the actors were ready.

On the first day of shooting, things moved at an alarmingly smooth and efficient pace. So much so, that we were able to film an extra scene that wasn't even on the schedule. By the end of the day, we had lessened our load for the next day, while getting everything done without a single hiccup. Given the fact that I have spend enough time on professional sets as an actor to know that this phenomenon was not the normal way of operating, I second guessed myself as to what I was doing wrong. Things couldn't be going this smoothly. Caleb and Brandon were a large part of why things ran so efficiently, particularly Caleb. He normally works as a camera operator on larger budget shoots, but as his training at VCU showed, he is able to play many different roles on a crew. Even though I was in the director's seat, he was constantly by my side if I had a question about how something looked. If I was out of ideas, he was willing to pitch in and help make the shot work. I would constantly rely on his input to my decisions, so in many ways, he was my Director of Photography. I told him what I wanted and he made sure we got that look.

The next day came, and we kept up the same pace. Even with a couple wrenches that were thrown into the mix, e.g. we had to lose an actor sooner in the shoot schedule than I had anticipated, we were able to improvise a little and get

everything done by the end of the day. I wrapped our actors and helped load our gear back into our cars to take back to the cinema department, and the shooting portion of this project was done.

I was so impressed with the expediency in which we worked, I was keen on paying Caleb and Brandon double what they had accepted to work for. Dr. Anderson, agreed that we should indeed do that (particularly since that was close to what we had originally budgeted their positions for) and since we made such good time and had padded our budget in the actor department, it would be no problem. We were also able to give Staci a significant increase as well, due to the significant amount of extra hours her duties required. Now all I had to do was edit it all together over the Christmas holiday and give Dr. Dow the final product by the end of the break.

Editing proved to be a much larger assignment for this project than I had yet to experience in previous endeavors. I certainly enjoy the process, and after learning the Final Cut Pro X software from lynda.com, I had a much deeper knowledge of what was possible. Although certainly not an expert by any stretch of the imagination, I felt adequate in my ability to get this job done. I think a large part of my enjoyment in this part of the work is the control I have in my actors performances. I

was able to pick and choose different moments from varying takes that I liked and spliced them into one performance. This is something that really separates stage and screen acting, in that the actor loses a lot of control in the final product. However, there is a lot of freedom in that loss of control as well. We are imperfect beings, and how lovely for the ability to cut out all the imperfections to build a stellar performance?

When it came to syncing the sound that we recorded via the zoom and boom, I anticipated a much lengthier process, as Final Cut Pro X only syncs one audio clip at a time. I researched possible alternatives that would expedite this process and discovered a software called *PluralEyes* by Red Giant. It takes large batches of audio files and video files that recorded the same scenes and syncs them up automatically via their sound wave similarities. I found it to work flawlessly for this project, and it saved me a huge amount of time while giving me better quality sound to work with. Brandon had offered to do all the sound mixing for me, but I thought I wouldn't have enough time to get the files back and forth.

I was able to finish the editing within a couple of weeks and began uploading final files into google drive for Dr. Dow to view and give feedback. The only adjustment I had to make was in the way I had cut the scenes together. Because I tried to keep

all the scenes in their entirety together, I didn't realize that Dr. Dow wanted them in their separate pieces. For example, each scene had what we called a 'stem,' which was essentially the start of each scenario. Then there would be a place where the viewer would choose one of usually two options in which the scene could play out (we called these 'branches'). So Dr. Dow wanted the 'stems' and 'branches' all uploaded as separate files, so that his software person could setup the choose-your-own-adventure learning experience with the scenes being broken up as choices for the students. Once I made those changes, Dr. Dow expressed his excitement and happiness with the final product.

There was a general consensus among all who were involved in this project that the next time this was to be taken on, there needed to be more effort in the writing of the script. It didn't really flow very well, nor did it sound like actual things people would say, even in the medical field with all the technical jargon. This was certainly a challenge for our actors, as it would be with any poorly written script, but overall I think they did the best they could with what they had to work with.

Chapter 4: The Class

With my involvement in the previous two projects, I began to wish that I could have explored this idea of making my own opportunities in my studies as an undergraduate. Making videos to post online was certainly not a new concept, but being an avid watcher of YouTube videos, I began to notice people I was used to watching online make their way to television. I had recently read an article on The Guardian (online) where Alex Needham recounted a panel session at the 2015 SXSW with top casting directors in the film industry. He states, "While in the past Kaplin said he used to visit comedy clubs to find people to star in his films, these days casting directors often look on YouTube and Vine in search of tomorrow's stars," and, "'YouTube stars are trendsetters,' said Weber. 'Often they come alive on camera but they're not well-trained'" (Needham). This got me thinking.

One of the biggest pieces of feedback I had received as the teaching assistant for the Acting for Camera class at VCU was that the students wanted more time in front of the camera. A

class of 30 in any performance class, the professor will most likely struggle to give a decent amount of one-on-one time to each student, so I found this to be a fair critique of the VCU class given its size. That given, (on top of the fact that I wanted to have another teaching assignment in my time as a graduate student) I wanted to combine the idea of giving students more time on camera with this new trend I had read about where actors involvement on YouTube was a factor in casting decisions. I decided to propose a class based on these two needs and asked two of my fellow graduate students, Alex Burkart and Tim Fitz-Gerald, to co-teach it with me. Alex has many contacts in the industry where the casting directors from the article operate and Tim was a co-teaching assistant from the Acting for Camera class who was as interested as I was to explore this new territory. With our experience and interest combined, we hoped to provide a well-rounded perspective to this unchartered pedagogy.

The first step was for us to write out a proposal to the VCU Theatre faculty for the class. See Appendix A for the proposal. Once the faculty reviewed our proposal, we were informed that it was approved for our class to be taught in the Spring semester. It was agreed upon that it was a necessary addition in an ever-changing business of digital performance,

and we needed to provide the opportunity for our undergraduate students to explore that realm. We were thrilled.

After telling Drew Richardson, a recent VCU MFA graduate, about our class, he recommended that I read a book called *The Viral Video Manifesto: Why Everything You Know is Wrong and How to do What Really Works* by Stephen Voltz and Fritz Grobe. The authors came to Youtube fame by way of several Coke and Mentos experiment videos in which they created elaborate fountains only using 2-liter Diet Coke bottles and Mentos candies. Their book explores *why* people share videos online and gives guidelines for people who want to go viral to follow on a basic level. Their claims take their viral experience into consideration but also delve into many other viral videos and find common ground among them. They basically give 4 characteristics that any video needs in order to be successfully shared:

1. Be true
2. Don't waste our time
3. Be unforgettable
4. Ultimately, it's all about humanity (Voltz, Grobe 23).

They, cleverly, compare online videos to a street performer, who is constantly competing for people's

attention as they pass by. This made a lot of sense to me, as the internet can be a lot like a busy city street when it comes to marketing and people's attention span. Alex and Tim liked the book as much as I did, so we decided to use it as our book requirement for the class. What we needed next was a proper syllabus.

Like our proposal, our syllabus was also a result of a 3-way collaboration. Our biggest goal was to get our students creating as much content as possible so that they had many opportunities to find their 'brand' and have room to fail. We did that by assigning 10 weeks of one video due per week. Since the class was only to meet once a week, that gave the students ample time to put something together.

Our first class, we went over the syllabus and gave a brief overview of what would be expected in terms of their projects. We got them thinking about their ideas and assigned them (along with reading the book) to bring in 'pitches' (project proposals) for their ideas and where they wanted to go with them. Since we wanted to allow for ample time for viewing the projects, we capped the class size at 13 (it was originally going to be 10, but we had so much interest that we expanded it slightly).

I was optimistic after hearing about all the different ideas the students presented the next week. Everyone seemed to have a fairly firm grasp of who they were and what they wanted to do. The following week, when it came time for their first projects to be viewed, I was blown away. Several of the students had truly unique and entertaining videos.

As the weeks continued, there were only a select few students who consistently came to class with videos that seemed to continually show a drive for creativity and uniqueness. A lot of students, however, seemed to lose steam and/or motivation to do anything worth sharing. Part of it may be due to some 'senioritis,' but a lot of it I suspect is due to the fact that they were running out of ideas, and just throwing things together without much thought. However, upon writing this, I found that many students found a second wind after pushing through their frustration, and produced some of their best work.

I decided to get feedback from the students as to how they were applying their craft to this specific process and what struggles they had. I sent out 6 questions:

1. How has this class helped you feel more relaxed or comfortable acting in front of the camera? Explain.

2. What aspects of your previous training do you feel you used the most while producing your videos?
3. What new perspectives have you gained through the process of making your videos? How have those perspectives influenced your acting?
4. Do you think working on social media mediums is relevant to your career? Why or why not?
5. Do you enjoy the process of making these videos? If so, what motivates you (other than a grade) to do good work? If not, what about the process frustrates you?
6. Will you continue this work after this class is over? Why or why not?

The responses I received were all fairly similar in their tone and idea. Overall, their take-away from the class was exactly for what I was hoping. Here are a few of their responses (slightly edited, to keep them anonymous).

Question 1: How has this class helped you feel more relaxed or comfortable acting in front of the camera? Explain.

Student 'A':

I feel this class has made me more comfortable because the editing process forces me to watch myself a million times. My biggest obstacle before has been

getting used to hearing my voice and not commenting on how much I'll hate watching it back while filming. I don't really have an issue anymore watching myself in these clips which gives me more room to now expand the content I'm doing and to quit playing it so safe.

Student 'B':

I don't think I feel MORE comfortable with the performing aspect, but I do feel more comfortable with editing. iMovie is becoming more and more my friend each assignment that's required.

Student 'C':

My style of learning, especially when it comes to theatre, is very much do or die. It was really awkward getting used to acting in front of the camera at first but by just simply doing it more and more, the comfort starts to grow.

Student 'D':

Merely having a built in weekly deadline has helped immeasurably. It forces you to move beyond your nerves because you really have no other choice, and the quickest way to overcome those fears is to just do it and see for yourself what works. There's something comforting in seeing yourself mess up a lot on camera

that makes moving forward/progressing more tangible. It's like moving through a check list of mess ups and successes. You get more accustomed to both sides of the spectrum.

Question 2: What aspects of your previous training do you feel you used the most while producing your videos?

Student 'A':

Acting for camera has been the best "previous training" because of how much I learned about angles and lighting in that class. Through a couple little student films I've done I've learned the basics of how to act on camera. The biggest aspect I've pulled from other class are the types of angles that work best for different kinds of shots.

Student 'B':

Editing. I rely so much on editing because I subconsciously feel like my ideas are mediocre and tweaking scenes makes me feel a little more at ease with the final product. I first tapped into "editing" in last semester's Acting For The Camera class. After that I became fascinated with the editing side.

Student 'C':

Blocking. Figuring out which perspective you want to audience to see you from. On stage, you always know where the audience is going to be so it's easy to adjust from there, when working with a camera you get to choose where the audience sees you from and its important to make sure that it's a logical and satisfying shot.

Student 'D':

Definitely improvisation. Whether its in terms of just trying a new idea with a friend or figuring out what to do when editing is more of a mess than anticipated, it's all improv (to varying degrees). Being okay with improvisation too. Being okay with waiting and seeing what works and what doesn't.

Question 3: What new perspectives have you gained through the process of making your videos? How have those perspectives influenced your acting?

Student 'A':

I'm diving into a genre I've never dabbled in before and I'm being forced to create my own work which is also new for me. It's been really fun growing as an artist in this class because for the first time I'm

creating my own work in every aspect from writing, to filming, to editing, and promoting. It has influenced my acting because I am working in a completely new genre. I've been cast in a few comedies but I've always been the asshole character or the dry character so having to actually be the "funny" one is totally new. The entire process though has made me a lot more aware and knowledgeable of the other aspects that go into this such as the technological aspects.

Student 'B':

I think I've gained the perspective of "vision". As the days go by, I become more and more aware of what angles work/doesn't work, how long a viral video should be, what the audience might anticipate for the context of the video, how important time/effort is, etc. Trimming and merging clips have been the bet parts for me in this class. As video submissions increase I get a clearer sense of what works or doesn't work which, in result, affects my acting each time I submit.

Student 'C':

I've learned that I'm not really aiming for viral status. Of course having a viral video is like hitting

gold, but I've noticed how Youtube isn't like it used to be when they wrote the textbook for this class. I use Youtube as a channel to view all the videos from one particular person. So my perspective has gone from all my focus on what the video is to focusing on what I want my videos to say as a whole about me. Channels like GoodNeighborStuff really inspired the truth of my sense of humor to come forth.

Student 'D':

I've definitely grown my ability to look at my work and seeing not only what would make it objectively stronger, but also what I stylistically want more of in my work. I think any opportunity to just mess around with your aesthetic gives you a clearer pathway to your work's specificity. I know now more so just how much I love moments of stillness in videos and acting. And that's something that only really became majorly apparent as of this week's class.

Question 4: Do you think working on social media mediums is relevant to your career? Why or why not?

Student 'A':

Absolutely. Yesterday I went to the talk back for the potential Musical Theater professor candidate and he really emphasized the fact that you can't just go out and be an actor but you have to create your own work to give yourself a start and to be put on the map. If I could take away anything from my senior year it's the importance of promoting yourself. I mean, how many times do you hear of an actor getting their big break because they starred in something they wrote? In modern day we have so many different mediums to produce your own work completely for free that it would be a crime if you didn't take advantage of that. In their generation, producing your own work meant getting it up in a little theater. In our time it means getting it out on the internet.

Student 'B':

Personally, yes and no. I do think it is relevant because we are actors and when you market yourself well it can lead to BIG things. No, because I often steer away from social media. Once I become at that "certain" level of actor/celebrity I'm pretty sure social media won't be a thing for me.

Student 'C':

Yes. Because no matter where I go and audition, if any of the casting directors would like to see more, I have personal videos of me in character on the internet that they can look at. Even the mere mention of having an online presence can help you land a job in the future.

Student 'D':

Yes, because it's a place to take control of your own career. More importantly though, I personally connect to the concept of making stuff for yourself (especially in acting). In a career that's based around intense rejection, I think a connection and usage of these platforms for really your own artistic desire is a very important idea. It seems relevant to some form of sanity.

Question 5: Do you enjoy the process of making these videos? If so, what motivates you (other than a grade) to do good work? If not, what about the process frustrates you?

Student 'A':

I really do enjoy making youtube videos mainly because of the editing process actually. I find editing to be really therapeutic for me. I am motivated to create

the videos I do for class because I really do want to figure out how to create my own work and market myself as an actor on youtube... What's frustrating is trying to find a character that's likable yet still within my type for our class' purposes. I know I really don't have the funny aspect about me unless it's like I mentioned earlier where I'm a secondary asshole character. It was EXTREMELY frustrating feeling like I was being put in a box to just make something "funny" because that's not the way my brain works and that's not something that comes naturally to me at all. It's been fun the past couple weeks since I've had decent ideas but now that I'm out of ideas it'll get interesting again.

Student 'B':

Yes and No. Producing my own work was/is so intriguing to me so I am always motivated to do good work. Since my personal humor is a bit different than everyone else, it has been a little frustrating not being able to attack the "comedic core" in the audience. I don't want people to think I didn't try, but every time I submit a video it looks like I tried too hard.

Student 'C':

I do enjoy making the video, however I don't enjoy coming up with the idea. Figuring out a decent idea that is actually film-able in the small amount of time we have has been the part that has caused the most frustration so far. Editing is easy, and filming the shots is also really easy. The starting point is toughest.

Student 'D':

I do enjoy this process. I wish I had more time as a student to dedicate to the output of this work. I really want to grow a wealth of work that I'm proud of that, that I can look at and genuinely enjoy. I really want to grow my ability to use these platforms to get my specific worldview out there. I'm really just frustrated by the whole journey of learning and how that requires considerable junctures of failure. Part of me still thinks its somehow possible to be birthed fully formed with talent and technique all in one somehow. So, every time I can't easily and effortlessly make what's in my mind a reality, I get pretty frustrated (but that's just a matter of continuing anyway).

Question 6: Will you continue this work after this class is over? Why or why not?

Student 'A':

100% If I keep this channel it would be to show who I really am as a person and I don't feel my first videos did that. Those first videos seemed very "this is a class project." If a funny idea ever pops into my head then absolutely, I'll make it and share it but making funny or potentially viral videos is not really up my alley. I have always wanted to commit to making a channel for my singing and just post covers and maybe original songs but I've never had the time. I hope after I'm done with school I will make time to build that up because singing is what I feel I have going for me the most right now. I'll always post things to youtube (especially a performance like an open mic or a dance combination) because that could help get my talents out into the world but these little sketch comedy things will most likely end after this class. Sketch comedy is something I have always always wished I was good at writing or acting in but I just never have been. It's really great to have gotten to

exercise that non-existent comedy muscle for me and I will continue to expand it.

Student 'B':

Maybe. I think I will be able to be more successful with my videos when I'm not "assigned" to turn something in for homework. Of course, that's how classes go. With time, the proper tech, and a decent sized crew I could make some things happen. So far, I have been relying so much on my one friend to be the camera guy/girl and she has been the main reason for me to even have a completed video for class. So, in short, I would make more videos when the time is right.

Student 'C':

I plan to. Maybe not a video every week but I would definitely like to keep making videos this summer to continue the small journal of memories I've already got started.

Student 'D':

Yes, I really think I will. I think it's gonna take more than 10 videos to really unearth personally what I want. I think this is a really productive, efficient, supportive start, but it's just a start. I

think the real possibility of improvement and success lies in further solo work beyond this class.

Student 'A' made several points that reaffirmed my purpose for creating this class. Particularly, realizing how important this kind of work is in a contemporary setting for actors to help brand themselves and their type. I reached out after reading this responses and encouraged student 'A' to find other genres outside of sketch comedy. I explained that comedy is a popular genre online, but it isn't the only thing that is successful. If there's a desire to sing or dance, then that is what should be pursued.

Another thing mentioned was the editing process and how therapeutic it was. I know everyone doesn't have the same relationship to editing, but I also share the love of it. For me it's the control over the actor's performance. It benefits me as actor *and* director. My performance is improved by taking the best of all the takes, and as a director I can improve the story-telling through cutting in and out of what I want my viewer to see.

I'm not surprised with student B's responses, as it was one of the students that had a really successful first video and then declined in quality as the weeks continued.

I surmise that a large part was a lack of substantial ideas. The comment about forgetting about social media once reaching a 'certain' level of actor/celebrity also tells me that these projects are a means to an end and the process is just getting in the way. Hopefully this student will learn that if there isn't anything that really speaks to the heart in the work, it will fall on deaf ears. Another thing i've noticed this student struggle with is the time constraint: always seeming to be 'finishing' (because they're far from being finished products) at the last minute, which hurt the creative process to a certain degree.

This was not the only student to mention the time constraint. Two others had opposing opinions on how that aspect of the class helped or inhibited their projects.

Here I see a difference in how being crunched for time affects each student in varying ways. One feels frustrated and inhibited while another is energized and emboldened. From other responses I've received, there seems to be a similar dichotomy: it's frustrating to be under such a time crunch, but it forces the work to be creative.

Overall, I am quite happy as to how this class has developed. The students seem to be really excited about the work, and I have been legitimately impressed on a number of times seeing their work develop into pieces that I could see being shared and sent to viral status. Only time will tell if any of them actually attain that level.

Conclusion: What is the solution?

So what have I learned after 2 projects and a class? Several things, but it all revolves around a single concept: just go do it. How does the actor practice? Go create your own projects in which to act. Why does an actor have to rely on others to write/direct/produce? If nothing else, I learned so much more about the acting process by watching other actors from the lens of my director or editor role. So now, when I'm on set as an actor, I have a much broader perspective of how my performance is used after I am wrapped.

It was in the editing room where I gained the most perspective as an actor, even more than in directing, surprisingly. I lost count of the number of times I yelled at my screen when my actors in the medical videos dropped out of the scene and started apologizing for a flub in their lines. I was constantly reminding them on set to, "just keep going," as I needed as much to work with when splicing it all together. When they didn't, I was limited in the story I could tell through my cuts. As I understand it, my students felt similarly in the 491

class. The only difference is they continue to develop their own sense of timing as actors when they are forced to watch themselves over and over again. So much of editing lies in a sense of timing. You can make a bad actor look better, but a great actor look phenomenal.

Do you want to produce videos that have a higher quality of production value? Use tools like lynda.com to teach yourself how to edit/film/direct your pieces and improve your aesthetic. These things, by just going out and experimenting will not only improve your skills in the *actual* doing, but may introduce you to other people with similar interests. Had I not said 'yes' to the VCU Police PSA project, I would not have been asked to take on the Medical School videos. An unpaid gig led to a paid gig (which wasn't even a goal of mine when I started) and an opportunity to further develop my directing.

If the actor has to find work to support the career of acting, like a survival job, why not find something in the field in which you love? Maybe becoming a local videographer can replace the need to wait tables or tend bar, and possibly be more lucrative and more flexible. Even YouTube videos can eventually start to bring in money, if the viewership is high enough. There are many examples online of people who's career thrives on the money they make from ads on their Youtube videos.

Plus, the added perk of gaining an audience online is that you now have more value as an actor when producers consider you for a role in their project. Everyone wins.

The value of these skills and the perspective they bring to the acting craft are things I didn't learn in my undergraduate studies, which is why I think the 491 class we created needs to continually be developed and taught. The interconnectivity that has come through the evolution of technology and the internet has vastly changed how the business (of acting) has developed. People have more access to tools that can change the direction of their career. Actors don't have to wait for success to be handed to them in order to become film-makers. The opportunity lies in the willingness to blaze our own path. You just have to say "yes."

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Appendices: 491 Class Proposal and Syllabus

APPENDIX A: 491 Class Proposal

THEA 491: Actors Going Viral

Instructors: Zechariah Pierce, Tim Fitzgerald, and Alex Burkart

Proposal

Course Objective:

To explore the vast world of acting talent that began through self-produced work on the Internet. This course will utilize acting for camera, basic filmmaking and creative writing techniques to help actors produce their own work to be seen and shared online, taking their careers in their own hands.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will develop a personalized aesthetic for their own style of writing and camera performance as well as their own "type"
2. Students will demonstrate their understanding of the science behind how online videos go viral
3. Students will collaborate with classmates to produce content for accounts they create on social media
4. Students will explore the fundamentals of video editing to enhance their video shoots
5. Students will study various artists who have started successful careers through their work produced online

Assessment Criteria:

1. Can student successfully produce short videos given specific prompts by instructors?

2. Can student identify their own artistic style and define what makes them unique?
3. Can student utilize the viral video formula properly?
4. Can student demonstrate basic video editing techniques?

Value to Students:

This course will provide the students with the chance to experiment with a newer but vital part of the acting profession. Many actors are faced with a lack of opportunity, especially on screen, so this gives them the tools to take control of their career through self-producing. Through the classwork, they will also attain a greater understanding of their type and how that can benefit their castability. This class also leaves the students with valuable editing and camera technique that will aid them in available jobs outside of traditional acting contracts.

APPENDIX B: 491 Actors Going Viral Syllabus

Actors Going Viral

Fri 10-12:50pm

Zechariah Pierce
piercezh@vcu.edu
404-918-5011

Alex Burkart
burkartap@vcu.edu
323-717-1573

Tim Fitz-Gerald
fitzgeraldta@vcu.edu
323-377-5557

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TEXTBOOK

The Viral Video Manifesto: Why Everything You Know is Wrong and How to Do What Really Works By: Fritz Grobe and Stephen Voltz

GRADING

The class will entail each student (individually or in a group) producing 10 different videos to show to the class for critique. If working in a group, each student must be IN the video and not just behind the camera. The videos will be graded as pass/fail (100 or 0), and be averaged up at the end of the semester for a final grade.

Grading scale:

- A: 90-100%;
- B: 80-90%;
- C: 70-80%;
- D: 60-70%;
- F: 59% and under.

CALENDAR

January 22nd:

Overview of class

Discusson: Why is acting for web platforms important?

Exercise: Figuring out what your “online personality” or What do you offer?

January 29th:

UNIT ONE: Observation

Discussion: The Viral Video Manifesto (TVVM)

Assignment Due: Please read TVVM and be prepared to discuss in class.

Also, bring in 3 examples of web based performance that makes you personally excited. This should be something that you’d be willing to share on social media. Make sure that it is an actor performing as opposed to someone’s home video they’ve uploaded to YouTube.

February 5th:

UNIT TWO: Pitching Projects

Discussion: Editing, filming, and writing. Intro to Lynda.com

Assignment Due: Bring in 3 ideas of videos that you’d like to produce. We will brainstorm these ideas into tangible projects as a class.

February 12th:

Assignment Due: Personal YouTube accounts created and first Pilot video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class.

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

February 19th:

Assignment: Second video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

February 26th:

Assignment: Third video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

March 4th: SETC- NO CLASS

March 11th: SPRING BREAK- NO CLASS

March 18th:

Assignment: Fourth video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

March 25th:

Assignment: Fifth video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

April 1st:

Assignment: Sixth video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

April 8th:

Assignment: Seventh video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

April 15th:

Assignment: Eighth video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

April 22nd:

Assignment: Ninth video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: How does each video stand up to TVVM criteria?

April 29th:

Assignment: Final video uploaded and ready to be viewed in class

Discussion: Which video are you most proud of? Who got the most views?

Vote on which video has the best chance of going viral. OK, now what?

ATTENDANCE

See VCU attendance policy

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

It is your responsibility to be familiar with the university's email policy, honor system, code of conduct, and important dates. Check the website for further information, if needed.

***This syllabus may change as needed throughout the semester based on the needs of the students, however no extra work will be added. ***

VITA

Zechariah Pierce was born in Decatur, Georgia and raised in Bethlehem, Georgia. He received an Associate of Arts degree in Theatre from the University of North Georgia and a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre from Brenau University. He has worked as a professional actor on stage and screen and currently teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University as he is finishing his MFA in Performance Pedagogy. After graduating in May of 2016, he will be moving his family to Gainesville, Georgia, where he has accepted an Assistant Professor position at the University of North Georgia.