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“SHUFFLE”:
From the Shelf to the Screen
by Kurt Kuenne

I was on page 60 of my first draft when I got the bad news.

I was in a groove. The story was flowing out of me. My fingers could barely type fast enough, and I wanted nothing more than to get the whole thing down on paper.

I was right in the middle of a major set piece when the phone rang. My managers Aaron and Sean were on the line.

“Got some bad news for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Chris Columbus just sold a screenplay to Warner Bros. about a guy who lives his life out of order.”

I was two thirds of the way through the first draft of my screenplay “Shuffle”, about a man who begins experiencing his life out of order.

“You’re kidding me. How similar is it?”

The competition’s screenplay was more of a broad comedy/adventure, which bore little resemblance to what I was writing, at least in my mind. I was writing something that might best be described as Frank Capra in the Twilight Zone, a desperately paced fever dream whose circumstances terrify the film’s protagonist – until he becomes aware that there is a pattern to his experience, and he works to uncover why this is happening – and what (or who) is behind it. Its very concept demanded uprooting the structure of conventional storytelling, and one of my favorite things about it was that sequences taking place years apart were often juxtaposed right next to each other, leaving us not to wonder how things would turn out – that much was obvious – but rather how they got that way. What had happened during the intervening years to change the circumstances and disposition of the lead character? The narrative conceit gave me many delicious opportunities to reveal layers of character in an unusual way, to have a character go on a detective odyssey whose subject was himself. I was so excited to get this thing out the door and share it with everyone.

And I was now being told it would never see the light of day.

Different as the scripts may have been, the loglines sounded exactly the same. There was no way around that one.

“You may as well put it down and move onto something else. Sorry ‘bout that, man. I know you’ve been working hard.”

But I didn’t. I wrote around the clock for two more straight days, powering through the climax of the film. The uselessness of what I was doing didn’t matter to me. I wanted to tell that story so badly that it had to come out of me and onto the page. I knew that if I didn’t seize the moment and write it right then and there, it would eventually unravel in my mind and I would lose it forever.

I showed it to my managers, who liked it, but reiterated that there was nothing they could do with it right now. I put it in a manila envelope, shoved it in the closet, sulked for a day or two, then moved on to other things.

A few months later, my friend Dan Austin asked me, “Can I read that out-of-order thing you were working on?”

“If you want to, I guess. It needs rewriting, but there’s no point. Nothing’s ever going to happen with it.”

A couple of months passed. I got busy writing a new script, shooting a documentary and making a short film. One afternoon, Dan called.

“Dude, I read ‘Shuffle’.”

“Oh, yeah – I forgot that I gave that to you. What did you think?”

“You were so down on it that I was expecting not to like it – also, it just sounded like an experiment in form, which I’m not big on, so I was wary going in, but – dude, this is really good. I cried. I love the characters. I love the story surprises. You’re right, it needs rewriting. So rewrite it. You should do something with this.”

On Dan’s advice, I re-read it for the first time in over 6 months. And I fell in love with it all over again. I fell in love once again with the lead character of Lovell Milo – a man whose very name sounds like it’s being said out of order – a man with a lifelong love of photography and “stopping time”. I loved the way the layers of the story peeled back bit by bit to reveal that it was, in fact, a love story, and always had been from the start. I did a rewrite in a less than a week. I again gave it to my managers. Again, they liked it, but there was nothing they could do right now. The other sale was still too fresh. Again, I put it away and forgot about it.

The following summer, I directed my old friend TJ Thyne in a short film called “Validation”. While shooting the movie, it began to occur to me that “Shuffle” would be a great vehicle for TJ, of whom I’d been a fan since I first saw him perform at USC, where we had been classmates and neighbors. I got the crazy notion that perhaps “Shuffle” was small scale enough that we could make it together as a low budget feature. I handed the script to him at the wrap party for “Validation”. But a pilot he’d shot in the

spring for a show called “Brennan” – whose title was changed to “Bones” right before it went to broadcast – had just been picked up to go to series, and his life got crazy. He never read the script.

“Bones” became a runaway hit, TJ began to get recognized on the street every time we hung out, I made a couple of other short films and a documentary, and once again, I forgot about “Shuffle”. “Validation” began playing the festival circuit and also turned into quite a success in its own right; TJ joined me on the festival circuit when he had time, and we began to talk about doing another movie together.

“Have you written a feature that I would be right for?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a few things. There’s one in particular I gave you a couple of years ago, but you never read it.”

“Send it to me again.”

At long last, he read “Shuffle”. He fell in love with it. He held readings of it with his repertory group, Theatre Junkies, and the whole group became enchanted with the story. As winter turned to spring that year, he said he wanted to produce it with me on his hiatus from “Bones” that summer.

Three months later, we were shooting. TJ and our friend Chris Stone raised the money in less than two months. The perfect people to help us realize our vision appeared as if by magic. The perfect cast – including a coterie of brilliant child actors, without whom the script had no chance of playing – materialized within a matter of weeks. One of Hollywood’s greatest make-up artists, Barney Burman – who would win the Academy Award® for Best Make-up for “Star Trek” shortly after our shoot – came on board to realize our many age changes despite the fact that we couldn’t afford him. I will never forget the moment on our second to last day of shooting when Barney led TJ out of the make-up room after five hours of working on him. It was night time. Their silhouettes crossed the driveway from the make-up room and as they entered the lit set, a hush fell over the entire crew. TJ was 92 years old. He was in character, in make-up and Barney helped him to his mark as you would an infirm elderly man. We all felt that we were in the presence of something truly special. You could hear a pin drop.

I was making final tweaks to the film’s edit when I got the good news.

Leonard Maltin had seen the trailer for “Shuffle” on line and invited me to screen it for his class of 300+ students at USC, one week prior to its bi-coastal festival premieres at the Hollywood and Heartland Film Festivals. I had taken that class when I was a student at USC. Now, I was returning with my old classmate to our alma mater to present our new film in the very theatre where I’d studied so many years ago.

At 8:15 PM, the lights went down. The curtains opened. The main title appeared, then the screen went black. TJ's voice rang out through the theatre, saying the lines I had written 7 years prior:

I'm 28.

Yesterday, I was 15...

And the film that I almost stopped writing on page 60 unfolded before its first audience.

Never give up on something you believe in, no matter what the obstacles.