

AMERICAN SHORT FILM

The Making of *Midwestern*

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FADE IN:

EXT. DIRT ROAD BY FIELD -- DAY

JOHN, a heavy set man in his 40's, is doing light measurements and blocking shots. Text in corner says, "John - Filmmaker"

JOHN

Movies are the books of our time.
No one sits down to read a book
if there's a movie. Who has time
for that?

(pause)

Making movies is a noble
profession. Unlike mopping floors.
Mopping floors is a job for the
masses. And that's not me.

(pause)

I mop floors for the money. I
don't want to do it, but it gives
me money so I can make my film.
So that makes it noble.

(pause)

Stories come exploding out of my
head. Its like the aliens in
Aliens. Except, instead of coming
out of my chest, they come out of
my head.

(pause)

I tried entering screenwriting
contests, but I always lost. That
made me a failure. I can't be
that any more. I put all my hopes
and dreams into the hands of
others. And for what?

(pause)

Now it's just me. Making the Great
American movie.

INT. JILL & ERIC'S LIVING ROOM -- DAY

ERIC and JILL are waiting to be interviewed. The DIRECTOR off screen asks a question. Text in corner says, "Jill & Eric - John's friends".

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

How did you first get involved
with John and his movies?

ERIC

John and I met in high school. We
hung out a lot because we both
liked computers.

(MORE)

ERIC (CONT'D)

For years we went to this computer conference. One year John wanted to make a video for the conference and asked for our help.

JILL

Sounded kind of hokey.

ERIC

But it came off great. People gave him a standing ovation. How can you argue with that?

Pause.

JILL

You can't.

ERIC

No. You can't.

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

John sits at his computer typing.

JOHN

When I was making my short films, I was munching M&Ms and drinking coffee when it struck me - I was on such a sugar-caffiene high, I wasn't paying attention to lighting, sound or which lines we did or didn't have recorded.

John turns toward the camera.

JOHN (CONT'D)

And I thought to myself - My God, what am I doing this for? The sun was causing massive glare and the mike was so far away you couldn't even hear the actors' lines.

(pause)

It's good to face these issues now. Cuz when you go to shoot Midwestern, you need to have them resolved.

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB, in her 30's, is sitting being interviewed. Text in corner says, "Deb - John's Sister".

DEB

My brother has been working on Midwestern for as long as I can remember. Midwestern is the story of a filmmaker struggling to make movies, but who lives in Michigan. John's ex-wife Nancy is claiming that Midwestern was her idea. I heard she got a lawyer.

(pause)

She must be pretty confident someone is going to make his movie. Why else would she care?

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE -- DAY

NANCY is sitting at a table with her LAWYER. Text in corner says, "Nancy & Lawyer - John's ex-wife".

NANCY

When we were married, I'd tell John my ideas for Midwestern. He would act like he wasn't listening, but I knew he was. All the things he's done I've had as ideas first.

(pause)

I'm an idea person.

Her lawyer whispers in her ear.

NANCY (CONT'D)

Just the other day I had an idea for a documentary film called "American Short Film".

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

This is for "American Short Film".

NANCY

See.

She is vindicated.

EXT. JEFF DANIELS' HOUSE -- DAY

John stands across the street looking at the house.

JOHN

My goal is to make a movie. Nothing else will do. But I need help. If I made it on my own, things would suffer. And nobody ever paid admission to see an excuse. You

(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)
have to do what is best for the
movie.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN -- DAY

Sign - "University of Michigan".

INT. UNIVERSITY BUILDING HALLWAY

John walks up to a bulletin board and sees a posting for a
screenwriting group.

JOHN
See? Now this is something. These
are people who think, eat and
breathe movies. I'm sure they'll
see what a great script I have
and want to help me make my movie.

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB
So he contacted the screenwriting
group and they agreed to critique
his script.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
Did you read his script?

DEB
Yes...well no. I would, but I'm
afraid of what's in there. Other
people can read it and don't have
to sit across from him at the
dinner table on Thanksgiving. I
mean, what if it's bad?

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
Don't you think he'll make it as
a filmmaker?

DEB
Maybe. But he would make a lot
more getting a real job. I'm kind
of concerned. Have you seen how
thin he's getting?

INT. SCREENWRITER MEETING ROOM -- NIGHT

People are sitting down. They are all dressed in black.

JOHN

Thanks so much for giving me this feedback. I consider feedback a gift. Especially harsh feedback. Because you're willing to risk how people look at you to help me make the best script I can. So let's start.

REVIEWER #1

Well for starters, I like the dialog...

(pause)

but there's no story here.

REVIEWER #2

This actually reads more like a play than a movie.

REVIEWER #3

This script is better than anything I have ever written. But it doesn't work for me on any level.

REVIEWER #2

You seem like you'd be better at writing for TV than movies.

REVIEWER #3

The climax? He wins the Nobel Prize? Wasn't that the climax in A Beautiful Mind? This is basically A Beautiful Mind if it were a comedy about a filmmaker.

REVIEWER #4

I couldn't put it down. I tried, but I had to read it to the end. And when I was done, I was so mad that you had wasted my time.

REVIEWER #2

Pop up books. Your style of writing would be great for pop up books.

REVIEWER #1

There's not enough conflict in here. Movies are about tension. It needs more tension.

JOHN

I wasn't trying to write Casablanca. I was shooting for
(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)
 something more like My Big Fat
 Greek Wedding.

REVIEWER #4
 That is exactly the kind of movie
 that got me into writing. I hated
My Big Fat Greek Wedding. I want
 to write better ones so they never
 make another movie like that again.

REVIEWER #3
 Me too.

REVIEWER #2
 Me too.

REVIEWER #1
 Me too.

JOHN
 Oh.

EXT. JEFF DANIELS' HOUSE -- NIGHT

John stands across the street looking at the house.

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE -- DAY

Nancy and her lawyer.

NANCY
 I can't believe John spends all
 his money on the film. Why doesn't
 he think of me?

Her lawyer whispers in her ear.

NANCY (CONT'D)
 And the little ones - Sparky and
 Gibby.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
 Are they here? Can we see them?

NANCY
 Sure they're over there.

As Nancy gestures over towards the bookcase, her lawyer tries
 to stop her. There is a glass bowl with 2 fish in it on the
 bookcase.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
 You mean the fish?

Her lawyer is covering his face.

NANCY

Yeah. We got them when we were married and now I have to pay for their upkeep myself. Don't you think that's wrong?

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

The printer finishes printing a page.

John is standing at the printer and picks it up.

JOHN

The screenwriters feedback was good, but I need people to help me make my movie. So I decided to start my own group. It's a filmmakers group. I'm posting signs all over the University and local coffee shops.

INT. FILMMAKER MEETING ROOM -- DAY

There are 10 people sitting and John is up front with an easel and paper.

JOHN

The movie is called Midwestern. It's the story of a filmmaker and the challenges he faces in making his film his way.

FILMMAKER #1 raises their hand.

FILMMAKER #1

Any computer-generated graphics?

JOHN

No. This is the story of a real place and a real guy. Why would we use computer generated graphics?

FILMMAKER #1

We could do the whole film in C. G.. We wouldn't need any actors at all.

JOHN

That's not this film.

Filmmaker #1 gets up and walks out.

JOHN (CONT'D)

Like I was saying, people try to force the filmmaker to change his film or stop him from making it at all.

FILMMAKER #2 raises their hand.

FILMMAKER #2

I'm a friend of your ex-wife and she says you stole her ideas.

JOHN

She never talked about my movie. I have no idea what she's talking about. Has she read my script?

FILMMAKER #2

Her lawyer advised her not to.

JOHN

Then what ideas does she think I stole?

FILMMAKER #2

If I told you and you hadn't stolen them already, I'm sure you would now. I'm not falling for that.

She and two others get up and walk out. Just inside the door is Nancy and she is angry. After the others walk passed, she walks out.

John's energy level drops.

JOHN

Back to the movie. There is no sex, violence or nudity in it. It's not about any of that.

Five more people get up and leave. The only person left in the room is LARRY. John is completely frustrated.

JOHN (CONT'D)

I guess we can cut to the chase. What do you think is wrong with my movie?

LARRY

Nothing.

JOHN

So why are you here?

LARRY

I want to help you make your movie.

There is a moment of connection. John's energy level rises.

JOHN

Picture this: We start in close. Then we zoom out until you can see the whole town. Shots like that are the difference between making a movie and great movie making.

As he says this, the camera starts in close and zooms out to show the whole room.

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB

Meeting Larry was really a turning point in the whole movie making process. He's not a movie maker, but John needed someone to believe in him and his movie. Larry did that for him.

EXT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

LARRY

I love movies. Things always work out in the end. I want to help John make that happen.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Have you ever worked on a movie before?

LARRY

No.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Then what are you going to do?

LARRY

I'm going to help him make his movie.

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

John and Larry are in front of a white board.

JOHN

So I budgeted several options. For \$45,000 we can make Midwestern - The Motion Picture. For \$15,000 we can make Midwestern - The Short Film. For \$1500 we can do Midwestern - The Slide Show. What we have is \$127.85. For that we can set up a lamp and film us doing shadow puppets. But...

John takes down the whiteboard and uses a table saw to cut it. He shows the cut off piece with just the top line.

JOHN (CONT'D)

There are no options. This is the only option. What do you think of that?

LARRY

Next time can we use your whiteboard?

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB

John came to the family and asked for the money. But we didn't have it. I told him if he'd get a good job, eventually he'd have the money. But he doesn't listen to me. So he tried to sell the script to the movie studios.

(pause)

I hear that's hard.

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- MORNING

John is depressed and in bed. Larry comes in with the mail.

LARRY

More letters from the studios.

JOHN

I can't do this anymore. The only reason I can do this today is because I did it yesterday. If I quit today, I waste all the work I did yesterday.

LARRY

But one of these letters could be it.

JOHN

I'll tell you right now, they're not it. No one is going to make my movie but me. This is why the script is so good. Midwestern is happening right here and right now. We are fighting the lack of money, the rejection letters, people telling us to go get jobs.... It never ends.

LARRY

What do we do next?

JOHN

Road trip.

EXT. JEFF DANIELS' HOUSE -- DAY

John is standing across the street looking at the house. Then he walks over to the car. Larry is leaning against the car smoking.

LARRY

What is this for?

JOHN

Hope.

LARRY

Hope?

JOHN

Yeah, hope. Jeff Daniels lives in that house and he can help us make our movie.

LARRY

How do you know Jeff Daniels lives in there?

JOHN

It's right here on this "Map to the Homes of the Stars of Southeastern Michigan." I got it from a kid sellin'em on the corner.

LARRY

How can Jeff Daniels help us?

JOHN

Did you see Escanaba In Da Moonlight? Or Super Sucker?

LARRY

Yeah.

JOHN

He made those.

LARRY

So why don't we go up and ring
the doorbell?

JOHN

Don't you see? If we go up there,
there's a good chance we'll get
rejected. And until we're rejected,
there's always hope. Up there,
rejection. Here, hope.

LARRY

I still don't get it.

JOHN

Why do you think people buy lottery
tickets?

LARRY

Powerball or scratch off?

JOHN

Never mind.

They both get into the car.

EXT. FUNDRAISER HOUSE -- DAY

A sign out front: "Midwestern Film Fundraiser. Free Food."

People are milling around in the background. Larry is being
interviewed.

LARRY

We're having a barbecue to raise
money for our movie. People can
come and eat and donate money.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

How much do you expect to raise?

LARRY

Well the food and drinks cost us
the \$127.85 we had so far. We're
hoping to make that back.

John is cooking food on a grill. He is using a spatula to flip burgers. He is passing out food to people. He picks up a megaphone and talks through it.

JOHN

People, eat up! And make sure and donate. We can't make the film without you.

Larry walks up. John puts down the megaphone.

LARRY

We're not getting many donations.

JOHN

What have we gotten so far?

LARRY

Three dollars and fifty cents.
And the phone numbers of two actors.

JOHN

What's wrong? Everybody is eating.

LARRY

Maybe the sign shouldn't say "Free Food".

JOHN

The sign says "Free Food"? Why does the sign say "Free Food"?

LARRY

Cuz that's what I wrote on it.

JOHN

Why did you write that on it?

LARRY

We wanted to get as many people as possible and it worked. Look at all the people.

John picks up the megaphone and talks through it at Larry.

JOHN

Yes, but we're doing this for the money. Now we have no money to make the movie. It's over and it's all your fault.

John throws down the spatula and walks off.

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB

It wasn't Larry's fault. He was the best thing that happened to the movie. But you can't make a movie for three dollars and fifty cents. For the first time John was ready to quit. And he blamed Larry for that.

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT -- DAY

John is backlit so you can only see his shadow. Even so, you can tell his hair is a mess and he is holding a coffee cup in his hand pacing back and forth.

JOHN

\$127.85. Now that is something. \$3.50 is nothing. You can't even get a Big Mac meal for that. How am I supposed to make a movie with that.

(pause)

That's it. It's over.

(pause)

Unless... road trip.

EXT. JEFF DANIELS' HOUSE -- DAY

John stands across the street looking at the house. He walks across the street and reaches for the doorbell. Just then Larry walks up across the street.

LARRY

Wait.

John walks back across the street. He is still angry at Larry.

JOHN

What are you doing here?

LARRY

I got a job.

JOHN

Okay. So?

LARRY

Well I had a job, but after a week they said it wasn't working out.

JOHN

Too bad. So why are you here?

LARRY

Here's my paycheck. I want to donate it to the movie.

Larry hands John a check.

JOHN

Two hundred dollars? Two hundred dollars. Two HUNDRED dollars. Two hundred DOLLARS. TWO hundred dollars. TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS! Now this is something.

John and Larry turn and look at the house as if it were God. A chorus of "Hallelujah" plays in the background. Both of them are now standing looking at the house.

EXT. DEB'S HOME -- DAY

DEB

As a percentage of the \$45,000 he needs to make his film, he still has a long way to go. But that money gives John hope. That and a Big Mac meal for dinner that night.

EXT. DIRT ROAD BY FIELD -- DAY

John is being interviewed. Larry is in back using a tape measurer to measure things.

JOHN

I'm sending the script to name stars to get an interest level. I figure we'll get snubbed by the big stars, but we don't need them. This movie is going to be great because everyone working on it will believe in it. Midwestern isn't about stars, it's about real people making a real movie. And it's all going to happen thanks to our Executive Producer - Larry.

John starts clapping in Larry's direction. Larry walks up and shakes John's hand.

JOHN (CONT'D)

We have money and people with a dream. Maybe not all the money we
(MORE)

JOHN (CONT'D)
need, but it is something. Now is
when the movie magic begins.

Screen goes black except for the words "The End".

FADE OUT

CREDIT SEQUENCE

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE -- DAY

Nancy and her lawyer.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
Aren't you concerned about how
you'll look to people who see
this?

Nancy pauses to ponder the question.

NANCY
Well they say a camera adds ten
pounds.
(pause)
By the way, how many cameras are
on right now?

The lawyer slaps his forehead.