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The Sound of Shadows: A Telling

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The social constructs presented by media and public figures has become of high interest in the modern day. The message that is portrayed in media and its effect on the view of gender, ethnicity, and religion has become more of a point of contention than the actual issue. A major question seems to be whether the creator is responsible for the conclusions that are puzzled together, or is the public pointing fingers in a quick and judgmental way? A recent blockbuster release, and Oscar nominated film; *The Wolf of Wall Street* has elicited a large amount of controversy because of the characters fueled by greed and sex. Many speaking out against the film state “the movie has become a fascinating test case for our sense of when the depiction of an act shades into complicity with it” (Rosenberg). The article blames the film as an agent to glorify such corrupt individuals, however, the film uses these characters as an example of what is wrong in society. In an interview director Martin Scorsese stated his view on the story of Jordan Belfort: “It’s not for us to say; it’s for us to present. And, obviously, it’s bad behavior. Obviously, the values are twisted and turned upside down... If it raises the ire of some people, (then it) might be a good thing because it makes you think about it” (Jacobs). Art no longer has become a method of conversation, but a forum for people to vent their frustrations of society on artists and their work. Those who align themselves with a cause find any bomb to throw in the arena of the fight for equality. This makes any artist responsible for whatever message may be construed even if it takes away from the focus of the piece. Not only does this create muddled work, but it also creates a world where art is trying to please everyone, and that just doesn’t seem quite right. A director should not be liable to the ignorance or mutation of other messages when focused on the themes they are interested in and working towards.
That being said, as the writer and director of “The Sound of Shadows,” I have been faced with issues that were never originally part of the thematic message. Gender portrayal, an issue that seems to matter a great deal since I occupy the minority, has become of major importance when originally the story was about the exploration of mind and motivation. I concerned myself with a story about the untold story and the ramifications when one side is taken as gospel. Although that message is still clear and apparent, in the aftermath I have been faced with another issue that must be corrected with the remaining control I have. Not only has “The Sound of Shadows” opened my eyes to this artistic dilemma, but it has also posed ideas in my mind concerning the relationship between actor and director, details of character, and the knowledge necessary to construct a film.

**Day 1**

Nerves galore. Before this moment I thought it would all be fine, and once I became a director on an actual film set I realized: I have had absolutely no training, and no idea what I’m doing with myself. I knew nothing about the technicalities of film, nor how to run a set. Why did I feel I was more capable of this than students who were majoring in cinema? The first couple of shots were a moment of suspicion and hesitation. I could feel the eyes of my crew on me as they decided whether I could be trusted or if I was a complete hack. I realized how inexperienced I was compared to others and was self conscious of every decision, thought, and the implications that could have. However, once things got going I forgot about all of it. I fell into the moment and I let instincts take hold. I am far from thinking I was perfect or learned it all in that moment, however, I am proud of the decisions
I made and the results I gained. I used all my resources and did my best with my experiences and the instincts that were given to me. The best moment was realizing that what I’ve worked towards is becoming real. This world I had envisioned was materializing and all these wonderful people had helped make it come true.

**Day 2**

When casting I had thought about the things I might have had to work on with each person. I wish I wrote them down. In the moment there are so many things going on that I forget what to address and how I had planned on addressing it. I noticed small things: movements that seemed to merge from nerves and tension, things that felt unnatural or unconnected. However, I was unable to focus on driving a deeper connected performance from my actors. Throughout all of this I questioned my role in that process. How much is a director supposed to contribute to the depth of a role? A director guides, but that is all. I realized the importance for actors to guide themselves to create a deep and complex character. I think the correlation of this depends on the experience of the actor, and also a director’s experience. A director with more experience may be able to guide the actor in a more direct and effective manner than one who is still figuring out a method and a path.

**Literary Influences**

There are a few literary works that have inspired the film since the start. *The Lucifer Effect* brought the inspiration for the psychological aspects of Lucifer’s story. A noted psychologist, Phillip Zimbardo explores the origin of evil actions, his thesis based primarily on “systems [that] create hierarchies of dominance with influence and communication going down-rarely up- the line”. A metaphor that Zimbardo uses to clarify is the idea that bad apples are
created from bad barrels, which are created by bad barrel makers (Zimbardo 10). All in all, the
people who create the system and hence the situation create evil actions. I took this principle and
applied it to Lucifer himself. What situation would cause Lucifer to become the greatest symbol
of evil? The audience takes a step into Lucifer’s mind to diagnose the problem and to explore
how a good man can go bad. The seven deadly sins represent the forces in his mind that sway
him towards evil thought and action. The sins create the situation that leads Lucifer down his
path to destruction.

Zimbardo’s analysis also brought into question our human tendency to persecute and
instantly blame any individual who has been characterized as the villain. We assume that bad is
only bad and good is only good. We refuse to mess with the often-fuzzy gray area, which can
lead to an acceptance of ignorance or the possibility of no real answer. The tendency to lean to
extremes is a common sin humanity tends to fall into. It is seen not only in our need to vilify and
glorify, but it is seen in our politics, religion, and our stereotypes.

As the story developed references to other literary works came into play as well. Paradise
Lost was the most prominent work that translated directly to “The Sound of Shadows.” Milton’s
poem recounts the tale of Lucifer falling and his battle against God. The religious connotations in
Paradise Lost are blunt, with settings directly referencing heaven and hell. Although “The Sound
of Shadows” does have religious undertones, the ultimate effect is not to create a religious story,
rather a story that examines the human mind through a religious context. The attempt is to allude
to religion, but there are freedoms taken within the plot that do not strictly follow any religious
belief. “The Sound of Shadows” takes Milton’s idea of a fallen angel whose “Pride Had cast him
out from Heav’n, with all his Host Of Rebel Angels,” and gives the audience a character to
sympathize with that has made the same decisions as the character Milton created (Milton Ch.1).
Furthermore, the film explores the relationship between human nature and religion. Lucifer becomes the beacon of humanity and the implications of his actions take form under a religious light. We begin to wonder, is human nature created by religion, or do we use religion as an excuse for human nature. With Lucifer we examine this gray area, as he toes the line between hero and villain. This difference is key in the success of “The Sound of Shadows.”

**The Creation of Characters**

My first challenge with the script was creating characters that were compelling and complex, while still maintaining their integrity to the main thematic message of the film. It was not until after my first two weekends of filming, that the implication given by the seven deadly sins portrayed by women became a concern from a feminist standpoint. In making all of the sins women, I automatically blamed the evil and sins of the world on the female sex. Of course, this was not the message I was trying to send at all. The idea of “The Sound of Shadows” always included the seven deadly sins. A musical with seven intriguing and virtually deadly characters, it seemed like a win-win scenario. I always pictured them as women. Perhaps the most influential part of this was my own frustration as a performer. The ratio of male roles to female roles is astronomically unbalanced, especially female roles with complexities such as the seven deadly sins. And though this may not forgive this large oversight, I still supremely believe that the movie taken as whole has no anti-feminist viewpoints. Isolated, seven women portraying the sins does create a larger issue, but the bigger picture is the analysis of a man whose mind has been corrupted. There is no place that states this corruption came from the women, in fact they are the result of the corruption. I think that message has a lot more to offer and is what I decided to focus on during the design and shooting of the film.
The biggest obstacle in creating seven different women was to make sure each had a story that was personal, yet still based on their sin. It was exciting to see these characteristics develop, and it was a project that my film’s art department and I worked on for months. One of my favorite characters was Gluttony. Here I had to create a character that was still evil by nature, however, there was a sweetness and vulnerability to her that the other sins did not possess. When I went to art about Gluttony’s image I had two ideas. She was sweet, and would not be stereotypically obese. I wanted to explore gluttony beyond its purely “overeating” definition. The bible references gluttony: “Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man;/ he who loves wine and oil will not be rich” (proverbs 21.17). Rather than focusing on the societal expectation of obesity for gluttony, the bible claims gluttony to be a waste of income or work. Whether this waste be towards food or a different object the person in question is still considered a glutton. We explored this theme in Gluttony’s fruit tray. In Gluttony’s first big scene we see Gluttony picking at a decadent fruit and cheese tray. The fruits are rich in color and overflowing. On the healthier side of the food pyramid, the fruit did represent waste that was created by the misuse of food.

Another theme Gluttony touched on was anorexia. In questioning the reason for Gluttony’s inclination towards excess in food my make-up artist came up with a metaphysical black hole that Gluttony was constantly trying to fill. We portrayed this idea with a skeletal figure in her costume and make-up. Gluttony’s costume had a trim pattern resembling specific
areas of the skeleton. This was a small nod to Gluttony’s emptiness and motivation for constant consumption.

The character of Lucifer came later in the creation of The Sound of Shadows. The idea came from Phillip Zimbardo’s The Lucifer Effect. In contemplating the seven deadly sins I wondered what the inner workings of Lucifer’s head would be. The sins seemed to be an obvious part of his mind because of the religious relationship. Once Lucifer was determined as the main character the next challenge was to create a Lucifer that still fell under the religious perception but from an opposite perspective. Lucifer had to be relatable and the hero of the story. To understand this perspective I researched elements that supported Lucifer and that described Lucifer as more than an evil force. One of the gems I came across was Aleister Crowley’s poem Hymn to Lucifer. Aleister Crowley was a philosopher, poet and the founder of the religion Thelema. The religion explores true will versus egotistical desires. Erroneously, Crowley would be referred to as a Satanist. This perception can be seen in his poem Hymn to Lucifer.

Ware, nor of good nor ill, what aim hath act?

- Without its climax, death, what savour hath•
  Life? an impeccable machine, exact•
  He paces an inane and pointless path•
  To glut brute appetites, his sole content•
  How tedious were he fit to comprehend•
  Himself! More, this our noble element•
  Of fire in nature, love in spirit, unkenned•
- Life hath no spring, no axle, and no end••
His body a bloody-ruby radiant
With noble passion, sun-souled Lucifer
Swept through the dawn colossal, swift aslant
•On Eden's imbecile perimeter.
He blessed nonentity with every curse
And spiced with sorrow the dull soul of sense,
•Breathed life into the sterile universe,
With Love and Knowledge drove out innocence
The Key of Joy is disobedience.

This poem was the inspiration for the lyrics of Pride’s Lullaby. The song gave insight into Lucifer’s back-story and provided an opinion of Lucifer from the sin’s perspective. This not only made Lucifer a real person, but as the sins mock him the audience begins to see the other side of a huge and set story. Lucifer becomes a man condemned rather than a personification of evil.

Day 3

Oh day three. You are a day of epic proportions: A day of exhaustion, a day of compromises, and a day of wonder. Day three, was the first big day of the big weekend. We saved all the difficult scenes for last so we could get our footing in the first weekend. And though I do not regret the decision, it has made for a tiring day. From the first weekend we realized the confinements of 8-foot walls and tried to devise shots that would eliminate this issue. After scouring movie musicals, I found a high angle shot in Moulin Rouge that would do the trick. We incorporated this shot into the choreography numbers to capture the movement from a
different viewpoint. This proved especially successful in Wrath’s scene “The Edge of Peace.”

There are many lifts in the sequence and the angle of the shot lent itself to the coverage of these higher climactic moments. This day was particularly exhausting because it was filled with dance scenes. My actors were expected to be at their top performance throughout the day, so giving them the proper amount of rest was crucial. I also had to find the balance between pushing them to their best performance and going past their peak. The more I would run the dance the better it got, but there is a certain limit when exhaustion starts to come in. I had to be very aware of their needs and body language.

**Day 4**

This was the day when exhaustion kicked in. There were moments when I had to hit myself in the face so I would respond and get my mind to kick back in. The first scene we shot was “Lullaby Reprise.” This song was the first and one of the only numbers with all of the sins participating. The number was supposed to be chaotic in nature, but that scene was truly a mess first thing in the morning. After a while we were finally able to gain ground and get the feel of the scene, but we spent a large amount of our precious time figuring out the details of that scene. That was a moment I should have organized better. I relied far too heavily on improvisational sections with actresses that were not trained enough to feel comfortable in these sections. Many actresses became tongue-tied and had their creative juices dry up. In the moment I had to find specific actions and directions to give the actresses so their movements would feel motivated. My lack of preparation for the “Lullaby Reprise,” still haunts me and I fear for the scene when it comes to post-production.

**Images of Inspiration**
Each work of art needs inspiration. A short film is no different. Various films were the inspiration for the sound of shadows, whether it was the look of the film, the editing, or the themes. A film that was closely linked to “The Sound of Shadows” from the start was *O’ Brother Where Art Thou*. *O’ Brother Where Art Thou*, is a feature film that takes the epic Odyssey and places the story in a rural Mississippi during the great depression. The film has a color tone to it that creates an element of fantasy in a very real world. An epic story, *O’ Brother Where Art Thou* is all about a journey and the quest to achieve forgiveness. Lucifer follows a similar formula in “The Sound of Shadows.” His story is outlined by a journey through Earth. Lucifer’s one goal is to right his wrong and to go back to what he knew before, to his “heaven.” Ulysses Everett McGill has lost his wife, Penny, and even to the end he is trying to regain his old life with her. Themes of regret and history unrepeated weave themselves throughout the film. Lucifer’s story is made of the same thread. Throughout every ordeal, Lucifer’s angel continues to be the main ambition. Even when his original goal is completely unattainable, Lucifer still performs his final act in search of her.

*Cabaret* and *Chicago* are two movies that became extremely influential as well. Their use as resources was invaluable not only in the way a movie musical is constructed, but also on the manner in which the story could unfold and look. Both *Cabaret* and *Chicago* have a story line in which the musical numbers are taken out of the plot and comment on what is unfolding in the main story line. *Cabaret* does this in the form of musical numbers at the Kit Kat Klub and *Chicago* uses a vaudeville stage. The numbers continue to propel the story forward, however, their true context is separated from the rest of the plot. “The Sound of Shadows” is constructed in a similar manner. The part of the story that moves the plot is Lucifer’s journey through the forest. His mind is providing commentary on these events, but at the same time affect his journey
on the outside. These films provided a reference for how to feed the story with commentary in a way in which both moved forward.

These films not only provided a strong backbone to the story, but also gave visual concepts in which to take a hold of. There are many moments in the film, which I consider homage to these movie musicals. This specific shot in cabaret was strong in showing the power of Sally Bowles and her presence on the stage. This moment was not only visually compelling but it strengthened Cabaret and Sally’s action in that moment. We used the same shot to symbolize the power of Lust in this moment and her control over Lucifer’s chair: A chair, which symbolizes the control of his mind, his whole being. Stylistically, the movement of the camera matched the genre, which Lust occupies. A cabaret type setting where owning the stage is of upmost importance.

**Fluctuations in Theme**

“The Sound of Shadows” began as a story about seven women vying for control and became about a man’s loss and struggle. This is a prime example of a major thematic change within the story. Even though the story’s concept remained the same throughout the process the ideals and focus of the story changed multiple times. Towards the beginning “The Sound of Shadows,” started as images in my head that I found to be compelling. Juxtaposition between
sins and the women they truly represent, as well as images of power and our constant search for it. Although, I originally focused on these images, as I began to write the music and the script the true message began to show itself. I found that I was telling a well-known story in a completely different way. Here we have an undisputed villain, seeking a way out of his destiny. This was the story of a man condemned and his fight to undo his wrongs. Lucifer symbolizes the struggle that humanity has between good and evil; and though evil may win in the end, all we can hope is that good fought to stay in the light.

A big question I have asked myself throughout the process is why I latched on to incorporating a type of minimalist steam-punk into the costumes and design of these characters. No other type of image felt right, and though there are adjustments that I would have made, costumes and make-up receives very few of these adjustments. This choice in style not only gave us an abstract way to translate the pasts of these characters into their clothing, but it also created a world with a type of corrupted image. The clothing is fantastical, and should not replicate reality, as is the case with everything in Lucifer’s mind. It is his own creation, and though these demons are fighting for control and freedom, he is ultimately the one who has presented the images we see on the screen. The human mind is a magical place, with caverns, mysterious rooms, and bright ideas. Lucifer’s mind is no different. The design of this mystical place had to have a sense of wonder and magic to it, with a dash of corruption. It is of course, a mind infected.

The Third Weekend

We finally shot our exteriors. The path towards this segment of the story has been filled with snowstorms, crew changes, and many headaches. However, the weekend happened, and we now have new beautiful footage. From the start this segment of the
shoot seemed to be cursed, and this was exemplified the most when our camera fell into water. That’s right. Our rather expensive SIU owned camera fell into a beautiful pool of water at Bell Smith Springs. I cried. That moment was a disaster. It still doesn’t feel real. The moment that camera touched the water and I heard my director of photography’s gasp and yell was the moment that the weekend went into overdrive. The game changed and we had to ride the wave, going with the punches and adjusting as was needed. The crazy thing is, we pulled it off. Somehow we got all of the shots we wanted for Saturday in three hours at the end of the day. My crew worked hard and so did my actors. I am indebted. Sunday was a smoother day, and we appreciated the warm weather. We finished all we had to calmly and the performance I got from Chris Ceradsky was wonderful. After the disaster of Saturday, Sunday was welcome and a pleasant surprise. The excitement will come once I can see the exterior shots mix with the interiors to create a storyline. In a way it’s terrifying also. I am stuck with the footage I have and must make a movie out of it no matter what. We planned and we conquered but there is still one last hurdle to jump.

**The Choreography**

A major part of the concept for The Sound of Shadows was the pointe dance between Wrath and Lucifer. From the beginning I had always imagined Wrath as being a fierce yet delicate creature. Her character could break or pounce at any second. This mimics the nature of anger in humanity. Anger tends to be a volatile emotion. One tends to lose their sense of reason during bouts of intense anger. Many crimes happen out of this type of passion. I wanted to reflect the delicate nature of this emotion through the Pointe dance. Ballerinas have the stereotype of being delicate and light. The way the genre is performed lends itself to that characterization. At the same time, however, an immense
amount of strength and determination is behind the fragile surface. Wrath’s dance had implanted these ideas. During the first section of the piece Wrath and Lucifer worked together a great deal. The movements were softer and more reminiscent of a pas de deux. After the major lift, we see a change in demeanor.

The movements become more aggressive and the dancers are no longer working to each other’s benefit as much as before. The choreography begins to resemble more of a battle. The relationship with Wrath then becomes the relationship between quicksand and sudden pressure. The more stress is applied to the area the farther in one gets drawn. Struggling causes the quicksand to have a lower viscosity and then traps the victim. Lucifer is caught in this same way. In his desperation to escape, Lucifer’s movements become more sudden and frustrated. He sinks deeper into Wrath’s sand and soon finds himself trapped.

**Lasting Impressions**

“The Sound of Shadows” became more than just a film, it suddenly became the glasses to the other side of a world I had never experienced. As an actress, there are many things directors consistently say: “Try something new.” “Play.” “We do not want to see you fail, we want to see you succeed.” There are many other clichés to add on, and though every actor has heard them I believe it is difficult to truly appreciate the meaning of these words until they come out of your own mouth. I began to see the issues many of my professors would comment on in class. They all appeared in front of my eyes, and I tried to combat them in the same manner they did. Sometimes successfully, and sometimes I found failure. Putting meaning behind a movement or a task is something that is more than visible it is glaringly apparent. Small words and phrases that have been shrugged off before now open up to a world of meaning and possibility. Ironically enough, even though I hear these words
and now know what inspires them, I still find myself trying to decipher their meaning rather than just taking the notes at face value. It seems the next step is to not only know my director means every word in its entirety, but I must believe in those words as well. They do not hide the answers to an actor’s performance.

This sudden flip of authority has also enlightened me to what a director needs and expects when working with an actor. The job becomes so much easier when an actor comes in prepared and relaxed. Ready to try new things and explore new areas. My biggest disappointment was finding myself with actors who seemed to be unfamiliar with the story and the script. During character discussions I found myself having to summarize the story multiple times and explain their characters role in the film. This should never be the responsibility of a director. An actor must know their material and their character’s relationship to that material. I now see the frustration many directors experience when dealing with immature or inexperienced actors. It is difficult to move on to bigger issues within the material or project, when the basics still have to be taught.

Throughout this process I have discovered new areas in art that interest and excite me. When starting I thought this project would quench my thirst for creating stories and images, but it has only inspired me to do so even more. And though I have reached an end that does not capture perfection, I have discovered a path that embraces mistakes as long as they instill a lesson. The way this film is perceived is now out of my hands. I have given it everything and I have validated my decisions in every way I can. Cracks have appeared, but they only taught me the importance of detail-oriented work. Obstacles have risen, but they only taught me the importance of instinctually based action. Even knowing that “The Sound of Shadows,” will not reach a high distribution market, I still worry about the implications
and stereotypes the film will condone. I have fought hard to stray from the teeth of angry
audiences. However, this in itself becomes its own social standard. There is no running
from the beast. Therefore, I must remain confident in my own decisions, and though it’s
tempting, I cannot look back.
Works Cited


