

GREEN PAGES

a short film by Sasha C. Damjanovski

Everyone loves book adaptations in cinema. But the **phone book** is a book too, wouldn't it be fun to try an adapt it? This was the first germ of the idea for Green Pages. A fun challenge and an act of subversion, at the same time. The second came from working as a graphic designer for Loot (a classifieds newspaper). My job was to take details from the sales team and enter them into the system by turning them into pretty little ads. This struck me as amazing – billions, literary billions of pieces of data, majority of it seemingly meaningless, all have to be entered into some system or other, every day, all around the world. Imagine it – a person working for a phone company, and their sole job is entering new numbers, names, addresses, names, numbers, addresses..... Strange, yet real – just my kind of story.

and , the actors playing Martha and Jeremy, were very excited at the prospect of making such an unusual film. They have both done lots of theatre work and liked the idea of doing a complete performance for the camera – from start to finish. However, as we started rehearsing, they discovered that working with no script, tying all your emotions and physical actions around a meaningless stream of words and numbers was actually very hard. It took a couple of rehearsals just to 'retrain' their brain not to look for meaning in the 'script' but in the story. The script we were working from had no dialogue in it, it was more of a detailed treatment describing the sequence of events, actions and reactions. The words (ads) were given to Johanne on sheets of paper just as we see them in the film. She was reading, Jason repeating. People sometimes ask – was there lots of improvisation, considering the non-scripted nature of the film. There was none. Every idea, every move, look, every gesture was tried, tested and agreed on. Every detail. I accept improvisation as an approach, sometimes it's even inevitable, for example, but in this case, I knew the story I am trying to tell, and as there was no traditional script, the actors were only too happy to work within a strong structure. I think their wonderful performances clearly show this.

The **camera** was always going to be just as much of a challenge. First there were the stylistic issues. From the story point of view, it was very important that the two characters stay behind the desk, but how do we then make the film feel like a film, and not like a video recording of a theatre play. Thus, the camera had to be choreographed into the story. Phil Mash, the cinematographer, came to several rehearsals and even recorded some tests on mini DV so that we can discuss various visual solutions. In this sense, Phil was a part of the cast of the film – he too had to hit his marks at very specific points in the story.

We also knew we won't have a steady-cam, which meant we had to make some height-decision, so to speak. Camera on the shoulder would mean a high angle view throughout the film, considering that characters are seated. I preferred to 'stay with them', on their eye level, so the camera had to be on Phil's hip. But I also wanted one particular high angle - I wanted to incorporate the security camera in the frame, when we look at them from 'Jeremy's' side of the desk. So a little rise was built for the Phil to gently walk onto, and then gently come down from at certain points in the film. The same solution was used at the coffee machine in order to keep both characters in shot.

No steady-cam also added the problem of sheer weight - the HDcam is not a light camera (around 8kg with battery and zoom lens) and the complete take Phil had to shoot was around 20 minutes long, because we were also shooting 'Jeremy's' wait at the beginning of the film. (This was later dropped for the security camera POV, see below.) No small feat a credit to Phil's sheer strength as well as skill.

There was also the issue of focus. Elloise Parfitt, the focus puller, had measured 27 different focus points throughout the film. Her job was made harder because we didn't have a radio-controlled focus, which meant she had to physically shift the focus rings on the camera lens, without disturbing Phil's work. It is a small miracle to me how she managed to hit them all, without a single hitch and without once obstructing the cameraman in any of the takes.

Phil, and indeed the whole team, loved the challenge and rose to it admirably, but it was hard work. The film was shot on Sunday, and it was a relatively short day (9.00 - 16.00), but I remember the next day we all said that none of us have ever felt more tired after a shoot. The single take puts an enormous pressure on everyone, the sheer concentration required from everybody is very draining. We shot a total of five takes. Number two and four were aborted due to mistakes early on, which means we only really shot 3 complete takes. It was interesting to observe that after I called 'cut' on the third take and told everyone that 'we've got a film' (it was an excellent take) the atmosphere changed very noticeably. It seems, a huge burden was lifted off everyone's shoulders, and a great sense of achievement was shared on every level. Even the mistake in take four didn't curb the enthusiasm and take five felt like flying, especially for the performers. It was wonderful to watch, and I think we all had much more fun with it, somehow. Hence, this fifth take became Green Pages.

The **editing** was about viewing and choosing the right take, but also about transforming the selected take into a film. Excellent and complete as it was, take five was still only 'rushes'. I find this quite amazing – a little bit like a pretty view that only becomes an image once we put a frame around it, once it becomes a chosen composition,

cutting out the rest of the image. It was the same with Green Pages – it needed titles, music, grading and above all, it needed that moment of magic at the end. This ending moment and the titles were also the biggest intervention. Watching the take I realised we needed something to help us set up this strange world, invite the audience into the reality we have created. Due credit to Toby Meakins (1st AD) for suggesting, at the time, that we shoot 'Jeremy's' waiting on a mini DV, through security camera's POV. It helped us create an interesting title sequence, which combined with the excellent (i.e. idiotic) company hymn, that we hear over it, completely sets the mood of the film.

Robin Doelly, the online editor created the magic moment at the end. Naturally, during the shoot, we just carried on rolling through the kiss, then asked the actors to leave the frame and shot some of the empty space as a template. I am still surprised that people 'buy' this without questioning. Technically, this is a cut and I was very aware of this problem considering our goal was a 'one take' film. But at the same time, these are the end credits we cut to – my name appears over that blank screen, and the story clearly ends with that moment of magic. Ideally, I wish we could have left the empty room clear for a while, with my name appearing a touch later, over black, but then we wouldn't have had a one take film.

The sound mix is extremely simple. There is hardly any sound design in the film. The lift sounds imply that the office is tucked away in the depth of the building, somewhere (another reason we see no windows), as this is the least important, least valued job in the company. The irony is that this is probably the most important job, without it there would be no company. I am a great fan of sound design (Delicatessen, anyone?) and it was painful not to be able to play and experiment with sound ideas – alas, the complete budget of the film was £600, and most of it was already spent by this point.

In any case, whilst Robin was doing his thing, and Ken Williams and the others created a decent sound mix, Nikola Kodjabashia composed the perfect score - the unashamedly upbeat end music beautifully reflects my romantic, idealistic belief that the human spirit will always find a way to fight the System. Our film was born.

You may see Green Pages as a comedy or a warning or a wink at hope. All I know is – I loved every minute of the experience! Thank you for supporting our little film.

Sasha C. Damjanovski
writer, producer, director
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