YOU’LL LIKE THIS FILM BECAUSE YOU’RE IN IT: THE BE KIND REWIND PROTOCOL

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You'll Like This Film Because You're In It: The Be Kind Rewind Protocol

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Introduction

Ask anyone point-blank to step in front of the camera and act, and you will face the same negative answer, unless the subject suffers from compulsive exhibitionism or has personal ambitions in the entertainment department. Now ask the same person to propose a film genre, then a possible title, and his engagement will be immediate. I have tried to find a system that, if followed, would provide a smooth transition between those two questions, transforming the embarrassment of ridiculing oneself before the lens into a joyful compulsion.

I developed and tested this system in March 2008 at the Manhattan art gallery Deitch Projects, which kindly transformed itself into a mini film studio where anyone could come with their friends to create a little film from scratch in two and a half hours. In just one month at Deitch Projects, more than one thousand people of all ages and social backgrounds shot 122 personal films of ten to fifteen minutes each. Together with Deitch, we provided cameras, sets, and a step-by-step protocol inspired by my experience shooting my 2006 film *Be Kind Rewind*.

In order to provide a minimum number of restrictions and a maximum amount of creativity and fun, the protocol consisted of two workshops in which participants followed instructions that guided them as they brainstormed ideas, created a storyline, and then planned out the other various narrative and production details. I worked very hard to find the best balance to stimulate everyone’s imagination and avoid inadvertent domination of the creative process by stronger or more compulsive members of each group. Basically, the rules were devised to allow the community to be the leader.

After preproduction and filming, the process culminated with a group screening of the completed film. Each time, it was a mini-celebration, and numerous times I witnessed the happiness, pride, and, of course, laughter that come with self-recognition onscreen.

The miniature film companies were usually composed of friends who arrived together, but outsiders often joined up, and by the end of the shooting process strong connections were formed between complete strangers. It was also surprising to realize that this activity (that’s the best way to describe the process) had allowed kids to interact creatively with adults without any kind of parental supervision. Young children were participating in the invention of stories at the same level as adults. In modern society, especially in the United States, these types of interactions are so overcontrolled due to fear of abuse, etc. that it could be argued that the protocol is one of the only contemporary ways to allow child-adult creative interaction in a safe, noneducational environment.

But our story begins in my own childhood, in another environment entirely...
WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD MOVIE CLUB

During the next few hours, you and your group will plan, shoot, and screen a film in your neighborhood. It's important that the group read and follow all the instructions. Have fun and don't worry about making mistakes, it's all part of the fun. Remember that imperfection is your ally.

Stage One

- During this time, your group will create a basic storyline for the film using Instruction Sheet A.
- The group must first vote on a cameraperson, who will be in charge of leading the discussion and directing the camerawork during the shoot. But most important, the cameraperson is responsible for the safety of the camera. The group must also choose a timekeeper, who should remind the group of the time every 15 minutes.
- At the end of the 45-minute period, your group should have established the following ideas: genre, title, and storyline.
- These parts of your story will be decided with a democratic vote, allowing everyone to have a say in the film's creation.
- When choosing the genre, title, and story, the cameraperson will ask the group for suggestions and write each of them on the board. When all of the group's ideas are written on the board, the group will choose one by voting. Members may vote as many times as they like.

*NOTE A good idea would be to pick two titles, genres, etc. and combine them to create a more imaginative film.
- All group members are expected to contribute suggestions and quiet members should be encouraged to talk.
- Please begin to follow the steps on Instruction Sheet A.

Time Limit: 45 Minutes

Instruction Sheet A

1. **Choose Cameraperson**
   As a group, vote on who should be the cameraperson. It is crucial that the camera person be vocal, assertive, and confident. They must never appear in front of the camera. **CHOOSE WISELY!**

2. **Choose Timekeeper**
   As a group, vote on who should keep track of time. That person must remind the group of how much time is left every 15 minutes.

3. **Propose Genre**
   Propose different genres. The cameraperson will put each genre on the board. When all of the suggestions have been written, choose one by voting, remember that you can combine multiple genres. Each member can vote as many times as they would like.

*NOTE Groups are also encouraged to use personal experiences as inspiration for their films.

4. **Propose Title**
   Everyone is invited to suggest a title. The cameraperson should write the titles on the board. It's OK if the group likes multiple title because you can combine titles.

5. **Choose Title**
   The group must vote on which title(s) to use. Once the group has voted on a title, the cameraperson must erase everything on the board except for the chosen title.

6. **Propose Various Storylines**
   The group should talk about their ideas for the film's storyline. The cameraperson will put all the ideas on the board. The group should vote on which ideas to keep. The group should then take all the ideas they have chosen and turn them into a complete storyline.

*NOTE Your storyline must be from 8 to 12 sentences. Don't worry about who will play what part or how to shoot certain parts, instead, focus on creating a complete storyline with a beginning, middle, and end.

7. **Write Your Storyline**
   Once your group has decided on a final storyline, the cameraperson should select an assistant to write it down.

*NOTE Your storyline should be concise and clear. Make sure that anyone could understand it. It should be written as though you were pitching your movie to a friend.

8. **Read Storyline Out Loud**
   The camera person should read the storyline out loud to the group to make sure that everyone is happy with the final version. Once the group is finished with the storyline, they should move on to Stage Two.

9. **Move on to Stage Two**

Stage Two

- This stage provides your group with a storyline grid to help plan out each scene. The grid should act as a detailed map for the group, containing all the important information to complete the shoot.
- Once again, the cameraperson will discuss ideas with the group. In the interest of time, one group member should be in charge of writing on the grid, while other members should create narrative cards.
Please read the description of each column before you fill in the corresponding box.

The following will be decided at this point: storyline, night/day setting, set/location, action, character names, roles, accessories/costumes, narrative cards.

*NOTE* A well-balanced grid is a well-directed movie.

Feel free to utilize all the props your group brought, locations around the area, and the craft materials to make anything that you might need.

Once the group has completed the grid, they should begin filming.

Time limit: 45 minutes

**How to Use the Grid**

- **Storyline:** Each of the 8-12 sentences of your storyline from Stage One should be individually placed into each of the storyline boxes. Each sentence should represent one scene. If a long sentence requires more space, you can divide it into multiple boxes.

*NOTE* The grid must be filled out HORIZONTALLY.

- **Day/Night:** Determine the time of day for the scene.
- **Set/Location:** Choose a location in your neighborhood to shoot each scene, but remember that you only have an hour to shoot so it must not be too far away.
- **Action:** Provide a more detailed description of the action and details within the scene. The scene MUST reflect the sentence that it is illustrating.
- **Character Names:** Determine which characters will appear in each scene. Be imaginative when choosing names.
- **Name of Group Member Playing Role:** The group must decide which members will play each role. Members cannot choose their own role, instead, they can only propose other members for roles. Any conflicts or overlapping roles can quickly be resolved by a vote. Avoid egocentricity and stubborn attitudes. Every member must have a role and appear on camera in at least one scene. If a member is not proposed for a role, they may create one for themselves and the story must be changed to include the new character.
- **Accessories/Costumes:** Decide which of your group's costumes and props will be used for each scene.
- **Narrative Cards:** These cards are used to create scene transitions or provide important information for the scene. These cards are optional but may be useful. Here are a few examples: "The next day," "In a small town," or "Georgina lost her mind at this point."

**RULES FOR SHOOTING**

- You have one hour to complete shooting.
- All editing must be done in camera.
- The order of shooting will be chronological, so the group should follow the order and details on the grid from Workshop Two.
- The first shot of the film must be the title card. Be sure to include credits as well.
- The cameraperson should exercise caution when preparing to shoot a scene. He or she should hit the record button after yelling "Action," otherwise the word will be heard in the group's film.
- There are no retakes. One take, good take!
- Don't forget, perfection is the enemy, it will lead to discouragement. Mistakes, repetitions, and stuttering will be all the more fun to watch at the end!
lived near one of the theaters? They would shoot random footage of themselves and their friends; perhaps some films would be fictional narratives, while others could be more unstructured. But most important, the films would be about the people who shot them. Each film would be roughly edited and screened in the theater over the weekend. People would pay the price of a regular movie ticket, and the money collected would finance the next shoot and pay for the rent of the cinema. The whole cycle would last one week. I know, the numbers don’t add up. I just realized that when I wrote the word “rent.” I guess I was counting on having the theater for free. The Louxor, for instance, has been empty since the mid-1960s: absolutely abandoned. Yet this is how a utopia defines itself, at least for me: It’s something that is not supposed to happen outside of your mind, like sleeping with the girl you are in love with. Sorry, that’s not the subject. Besides, a utopia is an imaginary city. But ideas are like cities: Once they are started they keep on building on themselves, accumulating incongruous layers over the years to form a complex texture resembling organic matter.

But I believed people would really enjoy these screenings. Not because the films would be anything particularly special in terms of entertainment value, but simply that they would love the film because they were in it. And their friends, and their family, and the streets they walk on every day, and so on. Exactly like a home video, only a neighborhood video.

Producers always tell filmmakers that the audience wants to recognize themselves in the protagonists, yet the actual life of a famous film actor couldn’t be more distant from the lives of the audience. It’s the same thing with the landscape and sets in a film. Most people don’t wake up in the morning with a palm tree in front of their window, a blue sky, and the L.A. smog. Everybody’s life is unique, and so is everyone’s environment. However, at the core, the producers are right: People want to see themselves and identify with what’s on the screen. Maybe there’s a principle of resonance, like in physics, that produces an emotional satisfaction, or simply the feeling of not being alone. Or even simpler, people noticing our existence… I know people would enjoy my idea. It was a perfect self-sustaining system. More people would participate each week, and more tickets would be sold each weekend, so there was a self-sustaining system. That’s a criterion in natural selection. You hear me, Dad?

But all of that was happening only in my head. I don’t think the idea even made it into one of my messy notebooks. I have a lot of naive concepts to make the world better. For example, I’d like to brand the word information and only let a television network call its news “information” if the network respected a chart carefully established by the hundred most respected reporters on the planet. Or to compensate neighborhoods ravaged by freeways by creating commercial and social constructions at equivalent surface proportions. Lots of possibilities...

But soon after my utopian idea, I began to work at an animation studio, painting dots on wallpaper for conservative children’s stories. I had my band, Oui Oui, and eventually I directed its videos and slowly forgot about my utopia.
End of digression. In this ongoing misunderstanding, I had only one advantage: Dave and his friends didn’t understand a single word from me either. And yes, I was speaking a sort of English. It gave me a slim 7 percent lead over them. I remember the first conference call with Dave and all the bands: Kanye, Dead Preq, Mos Def, the Roots, Jill Scott, et al. I gave them my salesman speech for ten minutes, and then silence. Erykah Badu broke it by saying, “I didn’t understand one word of what he said, but it must be good, because he’s French and they have Chanel over there.” Dave then had to repeat my whole pitch. He was used to my accent by then. For some inexplicable reason, a film eventually emerged from the multilayered and multicultural chaos.

The magic of Dave; the emotion of the Fugees reunion; those golf kids who were called the n-word because they poed on the court; the marching band from Ohio jumping in excitement when they found out they could come to Brooklyn for the concert. All of the images that went into the camera and the many more that went into my head tapped into a territory that I had never dared enter until then: people. More people than one or two. Groups of people. Community.

Many times I heard, “This concert is about the community.” What community? African Americans? Rappers? Rappers with a message? Nostalgic rappers? Nostalgic rappers with a message? Wow, this whole community thing is getting complicated. I guess I shouldn’t write on a subject I don’t understand. I looked up community in Wikipedia, and it mentioned something about Gemeinschaft: people bound by a common family, belief, or ethnicity. In contrast, Gesellschaft is classified more as a group bound by self-interest, like an association. Well, in this case the block party was a bit of both: mostly self-motivated African Americans participating in a celebration of their common bonds within the community. I know, I’ve ended up exactly where I started, but there is no better way to describe my confusion about this project.

As vague as my understanding of the concert was, I knew that Versailles, the mall, and the water towers were just my background: There was nothing to bond me with my neighbors. The shag carpets, the spherical speakers designed by my father, consumerism, and easy-listening TV shows had all succeeded in swallowing any need for a community. It seemed that community was replaced with comfort. I don’t think I would want to see a concert about Versailles. Everybody would have to wear a big white wig to create a sense of identity. White wig versus White Castle? Sorry, that was terrible. My Tourette’s just struck again. Did you know that many jazz drummers have Tourette’s syndrome? There is even a community of jazz drummers with Tourette’s who gather every year to play together. That must sound like hip-hop. I am an amateur drummer, and my Tourette’s is mild: just bad jokes.

To finish with the Dave Chappelle concert: The only way I could understand the meaning of the block party was from my own frame of reference. I only had my background, and Dave’s peers were part of a community. Not a community compared with another community, but a community compared with an absence of
Selfishly thinking of my son, I asked Cory, Dave's music supervisor, "Why can't you guys go to sleep now, so that you can wake up at a normal hour tomorrow?" He responded, "You don't stop the vibe, Michel. You don't stop the vibe. That's why."

Damn it, what is "the vibe"? A collective mood? Intellectual exchange? Laughter? My excellent friend and director of photography Jean-Louis Bompoint plays the vibes, but he learned it from Lionel Hampton. It's not the same, and I know I am not even funny anymore. The answer came to me on a different occasion in Dave's hometown with the same people, in addition to Mos Def and Dave's mother. I had just screened The Science of Sleep for them, and we were having dinner. Long after dessert, we were hanging and hanging and hanging at the table (I just restrained a small Tousse's stroke with the word hanging). Not much was said. I was trying to feel the vibe. I had all my technological equipment ready to detect any type of vibration that my five senses might miss. Nothing. Two hours later, like the Big Bang, it came from nothing, out of nowhere: an idea. An idea to do a comedy tour in jails all over the United States. Everyone began throwing concepts and ideas onto the table to enrich the project: "Laughter is close to sex, which is dramatically lacking in an incarceration environment!" "We have our core audience, right there..." I even dared a joke: "The hecklers would be set free" (in stand-up clubs, hecklers are escorted outside by security people). Once more, it took Dave repeating my sentence to get any laughs. That night I understood what Cory had meant by "the vibe," and why I have never managed to make a hip-hop video: I was never there at the right time. Maybe the vibe is this invisible and sacred way people from a community communicate, while the language itself is mostly used to confuse the outsider. If so, then my brother and I would belong to the Mumble, a dangerous Versailles gang that assaults its rivals with obscure and incomprehensible concepts.

I guess knowing that I had not experienced the feeling of belonging to a group outside of my family made me tolerant—the main quality required to shoot a documentary. The advantages of this perspective became clear as I started to interview Dave and all his friends. I became acutely aware of what could transpire from being part of a community. As for my fear and complex about cultural inadequacy, I can proudly say that I passed the test. African Americans, including those who were part of the Brooklyn community, loved the film. Once I was even invited to an all-black fraternity at MIT to talk about it. They had all assumed I was black. To top it all off, I met Spike Lee once, and he let me know how happy he was that I had taken on the project. I think that by being careful I avoided the dangers of simplifications, obvious shortcuts, and manipulative imagery associations that can make a documentary dishonest.
worse, I was later accused of ripping off a Nickelodeon show I had never seen. See, when you are a director and you put something out into the world, your ego is eaten by every sauce (that’s a French expression): Some people will speak volumes of praise, while others will write mean stuff. I just canceled my Google Alert today.

So that was the triangle: community, self-made entertainment, and cheap remakes. And Dave Chappelle? So I guess that’s a square. Only, like my girlfriends, he abandoned me, but that was not as painful, thank God. So back to the triangle. I was left on my own, about to direct a movie with many racial jokes, and the Spikes’ spike again was poking my spine.

But I don’t mind being scared when I shoot. In fact, it’s a perfectly natural state of mind for me while working. So I went out on my own. I mean with a lot of people, but not Dave, and I shot Be Kind Rewind in the city of Passaic, New Jersey. As the writer-director, I discovered something extremely convenient: I could create a world that could fit my utopia. Of course, then it was not a utopia anymore, but a functioning system. Sure, this world was not a true reality, but still it was there and it let my system exist and be successful.

I believe in systems. Well, not the big and vague entity that seems to run the world against everyone. The system to which I am referring is more like an ensemble of imagined rules that allow a participant to achieve a certain outcome. The rules let people focus on a single moment, while simultaneously ensuring that all the efforts produced add up to the desired result. I found the same exact principal in a book on mathematical language: “One has just to adopt a procedure that possesses inner characteristics once for all established, and each time one applies it, one doesn’t have to bother themselves: the procedure moves forward on its own” (Why the World Is Mathematical, John D. Barrow).

I create new systems for most of my videos. For shooting a video entirely with Lego blocks for the White Stripes without the use of CGI, I had to come up with a completely new form of organization with the team of animators. I create these systems so that regardless of the success or failure of the finished product, I know that I have at least tried to create something new. If someone invents a system that works, they often encounter strong resistance from most people because people assume that if the system is really all that great then it must already exist. It’s really too bad. On this topic, my good friend and producer Steve Golin mentioned on one of the bonus tracks of the Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind DVD, “Michel just doesn’t like convention. They have been making movies for over a hundred years, and a lot of the ways they do things is because they work... You don’t realize how smart those ways are until you try to do it another way and you realize those things are done for a reason.” I couldn’t disagree more, Steve. There are a million reasons why people don’t try new systems: They like safety; admitting the new system is better would mean admitting they have been using an obsolete one; some might find themselves unemployed with the new system; a system must be created by aged and obscure and intelligent entities, not by the guy
next to you: they are jealous because they didn’t think of it; people are lazy; they think they will waste their time because ultimately they will have to redo the work using the proper method; nostalgia; they feel like guinea pigs.

And furthermore.

Once, my mom had an addiction problem with an over-the-counter drug. Something with codeine, I think. She could get it at any pharmacy, and they are all over the place in Paris. Nothing could stop her, even to the point where her life was endangered. So I Xeroxed her picture and went to the main pharmacy next to her place. “This is my mother, you can’t sell her any more of the codeine stuff,” I demanded. “I am sorry, it is an over-the-counter medication. It’s illegal for me to refuse to sell it to her,” the lady answered. Visibly upset, I said, “Then she will die, and you will be personally responsible for that.” As I began to leave, the pharmacist stopped me and said, “OK. I know who your mother is and I will not sell her any more of this drug.” It worked. Even better: Now engaged with my mother’s difficulties, the pharmacist took the system even further. Mom was prescribed a monthly supply of sleeping pills but would consume the whole box the first week. So now, instead of giving my mother her entire prescription at once, the pharmacist gave her one pill a day in an envelope and two for the weekend. We had created a system that worked, and my mother was safe, at least for a while. It was, however, just a building block, one that would need much more work to create something that could last. But nevertheless, it was an unexpected and successful foundation.

During the filming of Be Kind Rewind, my systems compulsion did not exist only in the story—it began to sneak into the very way I executed the production. I wanted to involve as many people living in Passaic as possible. Passaic is a very ethnically diverse community: 82.5 percent Hispanic and Latino and 13.8 percent African American, according to the Passaic County Planning Board. There are residents from virtually every Central American and Caribbean country and a thriving Polish community. I didn’t want the production to simply be an intrusion into those people’s lives. I wanted them to participate in the experience and bring their individual personalities to the story. Moreover, I had even hoped to premiere the movie in Passaic, so they could see and resonate with themselves onscreen, like in my Louxor dream. (Unfortunately, we had to premiere the film in Clifton, the next town over, because Passaic had no theater.) I had seen this phenomenon while premiering Dave Chapelle’s Black Party in his hometown. The excitement and pride were reflected in the eyes of the Ohio marching band that made the trip to Brooklyn.

The problem was that each sector of a film crew belongs to a union that did not exactly “appreciate” this inclusion. My union, the Director’s Guild, provides me with excellent health care but forbids me from shooting under a certain budget. Similarly, the Screen Actors Guild forbids productions from hiring any non-SAG actors, unless there are at least fifty union actors already hired. But yet again, my utopian Tourette’s came up with systems to avoid this. For the reenactments of Fats Waller’s life, we needed small dance numbers. I didn’t want to have a choreographer or professional dancers because it had to be amateurish and fresh—qualities often forgotten with professionals. So we went around the main street of Passaic and got sixty kids to join our “improvised dance club.” SAG could stop us from hiring nonunion actors, but they couldn’t stop us from hiring dancers.

Twice a week, we would gather our new dancers in an old ballroom. One would think that the combination of sixty kids from the projects, an old ballroom, and choreography instruction would be chaos. Thankfully, this could not have been further from the truth. I did a quick interview with each kid (or adult) to make a rough selection. I asked them each to describe their favorite relative (I generally prefer when people don’t talk about themselves) and do a little improvised dance number. We chose most of the people that auditioned. I remember not hiring the only professional dancer. She was already polluting the others with her preconceived ideas of what dance should look like: precise, affected.

Back to our ballroom. I randomly divided the ensemble into seven groups of eight people. I let the groups form naturally, allowing friends to be together if they felt better that way. After all, even I don’t want to be separated from my friends at weddings. In each group, I spotted the one who could count a bar (1-2-3-4) of music. This person would be the leader of each group. I didn’t do this so the leader could boss around the others. But rather, it was a way to ensure that the group would receive the best instruction from a peer. No real hierarchy was established, just like the guy who drives the car for his friends, nothing more. After we had established groups, we all watched some dance footage on a TV and talked about simple movements. The leader would then make sure his group learned it. I swear, in half an hour I had the sixty kids working quietly in the same room. No chaos. When people are given a chance to achieve something fun, they don’t need the hassle of authority to stay focused. They always rise to the occasion, which is the easiest way to get the best of people: no management required.

In a couple of weeks, we created all the numbers we needed for the story. We were ready to shoot them just as we started production. The kids performed with a graceful clumsiness and tons of enthusiasm, especially when Mos Def or Jack Black was around. There were giant trumpet players formed by small kids on the shoulder of big guys who were dressed as giant pairs of pants, horn players bursting out of giant trumpets, which were in turn held up by other trumpet players emerging from bigger horns, etc. We had kids with musical notes attached to their heads walking up and down a music sheet coming out of Fats’s piano. It was just a terrific spectacle.
5 A First Failed Attempt

So, next I had to prove that my system would work in the real world. With Rafi Adlan, my friend and collaborator, I picked Passaic as our testing ground. We were given a location by the mayor, who had been very pleased with the shooting of *Be Kind Rewind*. We printed a couple hundred flyers at Kinko’s and went through the embarrassing process of getting people to come to our first meeting.

The first protocol I imagined required four sessions of ninety minutes each. The first meeting would lead the group through the selection of the genre, title, and short storyline of the movie. During the second meeting, the group would refine the story and systematically turn each sentence into a scene. That was the system: If you have a story that makes sense when you read it and you take each sentence separately to transform it into a scene, you’ll be able to tell the story with the camera, which is roughly what a movie is about.

The only problem is that there never was a second meeting. Even though we had twenty-nine people present at the first meeting who seemed happy and engaged (they even ate all the snacks we had brought), nine lost interest when they realized that this was not a real movie, seven were discouraged by the bad weather, and another eight we never heard from again. So in the end we were left with only five survivors who showed interest in actually doing the project.

The whole experience made me depressed, so I canceled the Passaic project. The five willing people, including Mr. Kenny Page, a street-sweeper-truck driver, were still complaining long after I let them down. But I was wrong thinking that the set of *Be Kind Rewind* was the reality of the world. This world that had been created, and the kids and cast watching their film, was not a reality, but an in-between. I had ignored the influence of the other actors, like Jack Black, who had added a bit of artificial magic to the experience, not to mention a solid reason to consistently attend the shoot. And of course there was the promise of being projected on the big screen. My system seemed to work only because it was held together by the big attractive filmmaking machine. Despite my best attempts, my utopia was still a utopia.
On the day of their appointment, each group of five to fifteen friends would arrive fifteen minutes in advance so they could check out all the sets before heading to the workshops. The gallery staff would greet them and give them an extremely brief introduction to explain that the whole exhibit was self-explanatory and therefore it was absolutely crucial to read the instructions. The participants would receive a clipboard with the following instructions:

**THE "BE KIND REWIND FILM CLUB" AT DEITCH PROJECTS**

Welcome to the Be Kind Rewind Film Club. This exhibition allows anyone to create their own little film—or whatever they want to call it—in two hours, by following a simple protocol and using a selection of small sets that simulate both interiors and exteriors and offer the possibility to shoot a wide range of narratives. The camera is provided by the exhibition and will be returned after the film is finished and watched.

*Here are a few quick tips:*

- Please make sure that one group member reads OUT LOUD all of the instructions on the wall, as they are all part of the artist's intention and are essential to your experience of the piece.

- Remember that all the sets are completely interactive and designed for versatility. Groups are encouraged to configure each set in accordance with their narrative. For example, the office can be arranged to look like a doctor's office, a police office, or just a generic office.

- Preconceived movie ideas are strictly not allowed. Be spontaneous.

- Respect the time limits.

- Remember that imperfection is your ally. The mini-films are meant to be "spontaneous."

- Everyone (including those who are "shy") is urged to talk.

The group would then proceed to Workshop One, where one of the group members would read aloud the following text:

**WELCOME TO WORKSHOP ONE**

Your group will assemble at this station and have 45 minutes to decide on a collective strategy.

- You have the following production resources at your disposal: a prop photo board, set list, accessories/costumes list, and Switchboards A & B. You can also use the large whiteboard, paper, and pens.

- During this time, your group will confer and ultimately troubleshoot your ideas. You must follow the steps/directives located on Switchboard A. The buttons on Switchboard A are to be pushed when each task is completed.

- The group must collectively appoint a cameraperson, who will be in charge of leading the discussion, manipulating the switches, locating sets, and confirming completed tasks, as well as directing the camerawork during the shoot.

- At the end of the 45-minute period, your group should have established the following ideas: genre, title, and storyline.

- The various elements in your narrative will be decided by a democratic vote.

- The same process will be used for all decisions. When deciding on a genre, title, and story, the cameraperson will field suggestions from the group and write them on the board. When all of the group's suggestions have been proposed, the group will vote on each suggestion. Each group member may vote as many times as they like. *Note: A good idea would be to pick two titles, genres, etc. and combine them to create a more imaginative film.*

- All group members are expected to contribute suggestions, and quiet members should be encouraged to talk.

- Upon completing Workshop One, your group will proceed to Workshop Two.

- Please proceed to Switchboard A to begin your tasks.

*Time limit: 45 minutes.*

**At Switchboard A, the group would be presented with the following set of instructions:**

**SWITCHBOARD A**

1. Look at Sets of Switchboard B
Pressing each button on Switchboard B will illuminate a red lightbulb above the corresponding set to help you locate the various sets.

82 Choose Cameraperson
As a group, vote on who should be the cameraperson. The cameraperson is responsible for the camera and leading the group during discussion and shooting. *Note: It is crucial that the cameraperson be vocal, assertive, and confident. However, they must never appear in front of the camera. After voting, everyone except the cameraperson should sit down. CHOOSE WISELY!

83 Propose Genre
Propose various genres. The cameraperson will put each suggested genre on the board. When all of the suggestions have been written, choose one by voting. Remember that you can combine multiple genres. Each member can vote as many times as they would like. *Note: Although any genre is acceptable, groups are also encouraged to use personal experiences as inspiration for their narratives.

84 Propose Title
Everyone is invited to propose a title. The cameraperson should write the titles on the board. The group should then vote on which title they prefer. It's OK if the group likes multiple titles; remember that you can combine titles as well.

85 Choose Title
Once you have voted on a title as a group, the cameraperson must erase the board.

86 Propose Various Storylines
The cameraperson should lead the group through a discussion to decide their storyline. All the ideas are put on the board. Vote on which ideas to keep. *Note: Your storyline must be between 8 and 12 sentences. Focus on creating the overall structure rather than specific actions and details.

87 Choose Storyline
The group should take the various ideas they have chosen and turn them into a more coherent storyline. Workshop One should only be used for brainstorming and conceptualizing ideas. Please save discussion of specific details such as casting, story structure, and narrative sequence for Workshop Two.

88 Write Your Storyline
Once your group has decided on a final storyline, the cameraperson should select an assistant to write it down on the paper provided. *Note: Your storyline should be concise and clear. Make sure that anyone could understand it. Your storyline should be written as though you were pitching your movie to a friend.

89 Make Sure Your Storyline Is Complete
Ensure that your storyline is complete before moving on to Workshop Two. *Note: The storyline needs to be 8 to 12 sentences.

90 Move on to Workshop Two

Video Box Gallery
On the following pages is a selection of the video boxes created for the films made at Delich Projects.
The first workshop was situated on the balcony overlooking all the sets. This workshop consisted of fifteen chairs, a whiteboard, a set list, a prop list, and two switchboards. Switchboard A had a list of ten directives with a lightbulb and button next to each instruction. When the group accomplished one of the tasks, they would push the button and the bulb would light up. Switchboard B had the list of sets with a button next to each, which, when pressed, would illuminate a red bulb above each corresponding set in the gallery. The buttons and lightbulbs were designed to be small, playful activities that encouraged people to follow the order of operations, so that they could achieve the end product. In this case, it was important that they look at the variety of sets, so that their narrative could work within the sixteen sets.

When I first began to structure the protocol for these workshops, I was aware that I had to establish rules and restrictions in order to ensure the widest range of creative possibilities within the given time. Of course, I know this is a contradiction, but I chose rules that would inflict the least amount of damage on a group’s imagination. This balance between freedom and restriction was crucial for the system to function. For instance, it was necessary to bend the equality of the group by designating a cameraperson to be in charge and ensure that chaos did not result in precious time being wasted. I remembered when my son attempted to shoot little stories with his friends, they would often be more concerned with who was holding the camera than with starring in the film. I guess the technological aspect of the camera garnered more respect than starring. By designating who was responsible for the camera, I also figured it would guarantee that the camera would not be stolen or carelessly damaged.

Creating a system is like programming software: You have to imagine all the possible loopholes. I remembered that in the Passaic dance club, I had used a simple technical skill (counting one bar: 1-2-3-4) to help select the natural leaders who would have a positive impact on the group. The apparent advantage of being selected as the leader would be counterbalanced by the weight of extra work and responsibility, so it could somehow be regarded as a sacrifice. That way, nobody felt undermined. To help equalize the balance of power between the cameraperson and the rest of the group, I restricted the cameraperson from appearing on camera. This also created a possible escape for the group member too shy to appear in front of the camera. This role would eventually give him or her an added concern for completion, allowing the rest of the group to be more imaginative and free-form in their stream of ideas.

The next task was the selection of a genre. Asking the group to define this at such an early stage might have overly restricted the possibilities for the rest of the process, but I think it was the easiest and most efficient way to help people break the ice and talk immediately. Here I go again with the minimum damage. Generally, two-thirds of the team knew one another and one-third were strangers added on at the last minute. As soon as the group started throwing out genres, it allowed complete strangers to start making connections over common interests. This simple task had
everybody instantaneously jumping in: "Oh, I love noir, too!" Occasionally, when a group didn't show up for their time, we would go around the gallery and pull together an entire group of strangers. These groups would almost always work more efficiently than groups of people who knew one another, because no one felt comfortable enough to argue or mock other people's ideas: It was just pure collaboration. When I participated with some of my friends and the gallery staff, I realized the impact of the genre decision. I suggested documentary, which in the end was combined with horror and instructional. The documentary genre allowed us to cast at least half of the group as the film-within-the-film crew, which was helpful since we had a group of twenty-two people. For some of my crew, this decision even provided an outlet for revenge, as they were able to cast me as Disgruntled Intern #1. Tim Robbins was part of our group. He came by the exhibit one day to visit his son, who was participating with his school, so I invited him to come by later in the week when we were planning to do our own film. Tim even invited Susan Sarandon halfway through the experience when he realized how much fun we were having. We gave her a cameo.

As Workshop One progressed, sometimes the group would stray from their original genre decision, but they would refer back to this genre when they got stuck on the plot, usually when creating an ending. This created many intense endings, such as children killing all the adults of NYC or the world being turned into one giant zombie dance party.

After the genre was decided (or built from several), the title had to be picked. Our group's film was called Elliot's Middle Crisis or How to Kill a Man in 10 Days, and it was a documentary horror picture. Looking for the title was where the good fun started. By this time, the group's confidence was on the rise and social inhibition had all but vanished. It was common to hear lots of laughter coming from a group of people who had known one another for ten minutes. The title and genre(s) provided the perfect framework to let creativity burst out. Here is a sample of the discussion for the title of film #114:

"OK, now it says, 'Propose title.'"
"How to Be a Wizard."
"How to Be a Wizard and Solve Crimes Involving Monsters..."
"...Hosted by Humphrey Bogart."
"How about, Which Witch to Wack?"
"or Which Wizard Was It That Wacked the Witch?"
[General group agreement]

Then, somewhere in Workshop Two, the person who made the narrative card wrote Witch Witch Wacked the Witch and the group just went with it. I have always found that limitations and perimeters are not restricting but in fact liberating. If you don't believe me, ask your friend who speaks a foreign language to say anything in his foreign tongue. Nothing ever comes out. Same if you're asked to test the sound of a microphone. Same result, "Test,
"OK, so our title is Oxford and the Red Sparrow, so I think Oxford and the Red Sparrow are two of the world's greatest spies."
[Sounds of general group agreement]
"Maybe it's just Oxford who is a spy, and he's looking for the Red Sparrow." [Sounds of general group agreement]
"The Red Sparrow should be a key... to turn him back into a dog, because he was turned into a dog by an evil doctor."
"No, it was the evil mutator who turned him into a dog." [Sound of laughter and applause]

The round-of-hands vote had been suggested at the beginning to make sure democratic principle were respected, but as the group evolved, shortcuts were found in many ways. Generally, the agreement on decisions would become obvious naturally, as if laughter would count as a round of hands. It would still be useful in case of a disagreement, as a sort of group counseling.

test, one two, one two." I apologize for those lame examples, but they seem to suit my point. That is the exact reason why I started to build the pyramid from the top. Of course it seems absurd to select the genre first. But when this is done, it provides a ground to think of titles. Ask people to throw an imaginary film title out of the blue. The answers will be scarce. Do it again after the genre (horror) has been established and the ideas will zoom across the room. That is the basic idea behind the protocol. Once more I am not pretending to explain filmmaking. But once the title is found, it becomes immediate and fun to propose storyline ideas. As the group progressed, the tasks would require more complex ideas, and the top-down approach provided a more supportive framework as the tasks became more difficult and open-ended.

Certain unique title and genre combinations practically wrote the storyline for the group. For instance, what would be the plot of the horror noir Black Candy 5000, the documentary musical Something's Coming: Don't Look West Side Story, or the comedy thriller The '86 Mets Find the Pirates and Win the Lotto?

When choosing the storyline, the cameraperson would write the proposed ideas for the storyline on the board, while the others would check the sets and the props to find more ideas. So ideas would pile up exponentially. For example, for the spy thriller Oxford and the Red Sparrow, the conversation went something like this:
We had needed the help of teachers to bring students to Deitch to participate in the shooting. This was also the best way to try for diversity. Unfortunately, once the teachers were there, it could be hard for them to adapt to the protocol, which lessens their authority a bit and pushes them to be simple participants. There is the case of Professor T., who was clearly using the exhibition as a way to lecture his students on film. He let one of the students be the cameraperson and lead the discussion, but as soon as there was any holdup, he would always run to the front of the board. Professor T. was ultimately the cameraperson. I noticed early on that he was very concerned to maintain a low level of voices and profusely hushed during all the sessions. As soon as excitement would emerge, he would break it and ponder: “This is how they do it in real life. It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you guys in class,” he would say. He clearly instilled some doubt in the kids’ minds, as well as the idea that they should be concerned about professional standards, and he would question their story if it became ridiculous. In the workshops, he would lead the group and use each of the directives as a teaching moment. Eventually, he shot the group’s entire film himself.

After this mishap, we told all the teachers that they should not intervene in the groups in any way. “Do you really know what you’re doing?” asked the first teacher confronted by the new rule. Jordan responded affirmatively. Workshop One had already started. There was a pause, and one of his pupils said, “What’s the next thing?”

“I can’t tell you anymore, because they won’t let me lead you,” the teacher answered. At that, there was this amazing look in each of the students’ eyes, like they had just been told school was canceled forever. They all got up and started throwing out crazy ideas and finished faster than other group that came through. Their film was about a girl getting pregnant from some guy who had a lot of lovers. One of his lovers was upset he was sleeping with the pregnant girl, so she decided to get a group of friends together to kill the girl. There is a huge brawl, and the story ends with the violent girl getting arrested. The film uses incredibly coarse language, but there’s something vividly authentic about it. The students were treating the heaviest subjects so lightly— they must have been drawing from the life around them.

I had a few conversations with teachers who admitted how hard it was for them to let go of their authority, even for an afternoon. As if it were a title they’d earned the hard way and were fearing they’d lose forever.

The thirty-eighth film, Nightmare in Brooklyn, was done by our first school group, the Gotham School for the Arts. Their teacher quickly understood the nature of the project and accordingly intervened only occasionally, mainly to remind his students of the time or explain certain terms they clearly did not understand, like genre. Consequently, the kids were definitely out of hand, but in a good way: They had huge arguments over who was going to die first or die at all (even though they chose horror, no one wanted to die). They also picked a quiet cameraperson, and the group worked with less structure, but they seemed to have a built-in defense against egocentricity. For instance, a member who was full of loud sugges-
The Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Scene X</th>
<th>Scene Y</th>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>Scene 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Scene 5</td>
<td>Scene 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The creative process, at least the way I see it, is all about expansion and then compression. The expansion allows the flow of ideas to be unrestricted within fixed parameters. The compression is the selection of the ideas that will ultimately turn it into a story. This is the phase when reality hits you, but that's not to say that it becomes less creative at this point—quite the contrary. It is like giving a haircut to the project. I am sorry, my Tourette's is not funny anymore. I must have reached the terminal stage. Anyway, at this stage of the workshop, sacrifices are made to preserve the best elements, the ones that help the whole project. We say good-bye to the ones that are inhibiting the project, and eventually combine some other ones to create even better ideas.

When the group got to this point in the workshop, time had become much more crucial, so quick decision-making was naturally encouraged, if not forced. But that's for the best. In my work, I always have to balance the time spent on the decision and the overall importance of the decision itself. I found that, very often, time is more precious than the right decision. The randomness of choice can often bring quality to a project. So it's all for the best.

Another silly example to help my point: At a restaurant, if the waiter asks me whether I prefer salad or soup, I usually say, "Salad" in my mumbling and obscure accent. If the waiter answers, "Soup," I almost never correct him because the energy I would spend to do so is more important than the difference about the food. Maybe I'm just lazy. I am not saying that every decision has to be butchered—it is important to make good decisions in general, but not always. Sometimes it doesn't matter.

So, anyhow, the crew would eventually nail an eight-to-twelve-sentence storyline and get the hell out of Workshop One.

WELCOME TO WORKSHOP TWO

- This workshop provides your group with a storyline grid. The grid should be used to write each scene and allocate roles. When completed, the grid should act as a detailed map for the group. It should contain all the information necessary to complete the shoot. All group members should now take a seat except the cameraperson and the grid writer.

- Once again, the cameraperson will discuss ideas with the group. In the interest of time, one group member must be in charge of writing on the grid, while another person must fill out the necessary narrative cards.

- You are asked to pay particular attention to the grid, as failure to fill it out accordingly will result in a bad time-management strategy. Please read the description of each element before you fill in the corresponding box.

- You are advised to engage as a group and assign the necessary group members roles, etc., in the space of 45 minutes. The following will be confirmed at this point: storyline, night/day setting, set/location, action, character name, role, accessories/costume, narrative card. *Note: A well-balanced grid is a well-directed movie.

- There is a photographic display of each set on the wall. It is useful to consult the set list when developing your narrative. Feel free to utilize the photo prop board, the set list, and the craft materials available to make any props that you might need.

- Each group will now proceed to the Camera Station to pick up a camera.

Time limit: 45 minutes

USING THE GRID

- Storyline: Each of the 8 to 12 sentences of your storyline from Workshop One should be individually placed into a column box. Each sentence should represent one scene. If a particularly long sentence requires more space, you may wish to divide it into multiple boxes. When you have completed filming, your movie should essentially consist of 8 to 12 scenes. Note: The grid must be filled out HORIZONTALLY. To save time, the group should designate someone to write on the grid while the cameraperson leads the discussion.

- Day/Night: Determine the time of day for the scene.

- Set/Location: Choose the set in which the scene will take place.

- Action: This box allows you to provide a more detailed description of the action and details within the scene. The scene MUST reflect the sentence that it is illustrating. Work as a team to creatively tell the story. Remember you only have 45 minutes!

- Character Names: Determine which characters will appear in
Moving from one workshop to the next provided some fresh energy for the group. At Workshop Two, the tasks became a bit more technical. But don't worry, there is still a lot of fun ahead. In fact, that was the most fun I had when I did it with my group. One could argue that this added fun just happened to coincide with the delivery of a few cases of beer. Yes, that might be true.

So the basic idea with this workshop is that the group would translate each sentence of the storyline into a scene. With each scene separated, they begin to plan the other various details of each scene: time of day, characters, casting, action, props, and setting. At this point, the storyline has started to take the most ridiculous and hilarious turns: love affairs with tree branches, time-travel journeys to drink Crystal Pepsi, a search for Matthew McConaughey's dog, and Frank Zappa sing-alongs were all thrown into the mix. No one in the group really wanted to upset another member by rejecting an idea, so there was a lot of comprising that ultimately compiled some absurd narratives. It's a mix between an exquisite corpse and Scrabble. Once more I apologize for my images. But it felt like that, I promise.

Naturally, the tasks of Workshop Two forced the group to start making practical decisions, like how they were going to shoot certain things, like an announcement coming from a radio, the point of view of a giant, and so on, and of course who was going to play each role. Casting is usually a process where ego comes into play. To make sure the more outgoing members didn't completely dominate the group, participants could only propose roles for other people and never for themselves. I discovered that this is a very efficient way to combat egocentrism. Of course, it didn't always work out so fairly. Even in our group, people would break the rules and propose themselves for the less prominent parts. Michael Hausman, my dear friend and renowned veteran producer, insisted on being the proctologist, and Rafii wanted to be a werewolf just because he had a beard. So we all agreed. At some point, the whole group conspired to put me up front as the lead man, and I had to use all my skills in human manipulation to get me out of that trap, settling for the easy Disgruntled Intern #1. I convinced a majority that Miguel Ian Raya, our office manager, was the perfect choice to play the hit man. And he was perfect. We found out later that some groups would have some real sneaky members who would secretly ask other members to propose them for a certain role. The rules are there to make the game more efficient, but they can be bent at any time.

On some occasions, though, I found that disregard for the rules was too damaging to the experience. Once a young guy, probably a potential director, came with a full storyboard of a film he wanted to shoot with his three friends. What he did not anticipate was the fact that there were two other strangers added to his group at the last minute. He bypassed most of the first protocol in Workshop One, explaining to the rest of the group that he was saving them from the burden of this work (thank God!). This young man was ruining the entire experience for the other members of his group. This was the first time we had encountered
this situation, so Jordan and I quickly discussed our course of action and we decided to interrupt his dictatorship and ask the group to start over, reminding them that preconceived ideas were not allowed. This shows how different this activity is from actual filmmaking; in film, you have to be a dictator to run a set. You can't let everyone step all over you with countless ideas. I mean, yes, you can listen to them, but you have to be able to say no to them. Otherwise the film has no voice. I know, I am contradicting the whole text I have just written, but I tell you this is not an exercise I practice every day of my life.

On this topic, there is this good story that every filmmaker knows: John Ford was directing The Man Who Shot Liberty Valetence with John Wayne and other friends. They had all shared the cost of the film, as no producer wanted to invest in it. For the first time on the shoot, John Wayne, legitimized as a producer by his financial participation, suggested, "Why don't you play the scene this way, then run away like this with my horse?" "Very well, let's do it," the veteran said. So they shot it Wayne's way, and he went all the way to the horizon with his horse. When he came back, Ford opened the camera's mag, exposing the shot film to the sunlight, handed the roll to the actor, and said, "Here is your scene."

Well, I don't do that, but my point is that my system is purposely removed from real filmmaking. I don't want people to think I am pretending to teach how to become a filmmaker, especially the people who think I am incompetent in that domain anyway. Some of them can easily be recognized because their thumb is pointed down. No, this protocol is an activity, like an amusement park—a ride that doesn't belong to a big studio or a corporation, but the community. And here the group was the decision maker: That was the whole point of the idea. Everybody should have equal fun, and nobody should be left behind. Oh, I forgot to finish the story about the guy who wanted to direct his storyboard. He started over from scratch, to the relief of his team.

Another time, a group of filmmakers came in with a completely predesigned reproduction of Blade Runner. They didn't want to follow any of the tasks, but just to use the space as a free studio to shoot a video. After they were informed that preconceived ideas were not allowed and that they would be ruining the experience of the strangers in their group, they decided they didn't need to follow our system since they "did this for a living." They were asked to leave. No thanks.

In Workshop Two, there was a lot of hands-on work to compensate for the constraint of filling the whole grid. We had provided colored paper, Sharpies, paint, etc. Title cards had to be created. By the way, did you know that's how Hitchcock started in the film industry? He painted title cards. I am so know-ledgeable. And there is this other story, similar to the John Ford one. During the shooting of The Birds, Tippi Hedren asked the master: "Why is my character going to check the attic at this point?" "Because I asked you to," he answered. To this day, I don't understand why she goes to the attic. He should have tried to find a decent answer. I would have.

11 | Shooting

By the end of the forty-five-minute period of Workshop Two, it was rare that the grid was fully completed, but it didn't matter because the team had already tapped into the momentum and excitement of their story. With the whole plot imprinted in each cortex, they were more than ready to go into action. The group's energy was at its peak and they couldn't wait. In fact, even before the shooting, the action had already started; those who had exhausted their patience planning the story, like fidgety kids in a restaurant, found their stride in the more creative details such as prop finding/creating, narrative cards, or wardrobe. These roles were not imposed by the cameraperson but were instead self-selected. This absence of hierarchy turned out to be very efficient: People were led by their own motivation, not by the orders of a higher-up; excitement rather than obedience was the fuel. The time constraints seemed to strip away most egos, and there was no time for pride. For example, during our shoot I remember darting around all over the place: helping Rafi put in his werewolf teeth without swallowing them, stopping to watch Michael Hausman dress as a proctologist, and then going down to the basement to sing the suspenseful theme song along with Tony and Aaron while they were shooting the freshly painted opening credits.

By the end of Workshop Two, the group was completely self-structured: The cameraperson would now know how to respect the general opinion, thus bypassing the voting process; the handy ones had busied their hands; the motivating ones were already motivating; etc. The group ultimately created its own collective intuition in just a few hours.