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Burden

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Burden

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Burden
A Short Film by Alexa Wolf – Artist’s Statement

“So many winters, hundreds and hundreds of winters, and a gray man...walking from settlement to settlement...staring in through windows at the firelight and a joy and a burning life he would never be able to touch, never even be able to feel...”

- *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman

It is humbling to remember the beginning. A vague memory of a subplot in Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods*, with no clear reason as to why it chose that moment, almost precisely a year ago, to return to my conscious thoughts. Yet the work of actually stumbling, falling, and dragging myself through to the completion of my film left the final product seemingly as far gone from its origins as to render them no longer relatable. Upon returning to the pages of *American Gods* again though, it is striking (although I knew it all along) that we tell very few stories in many, many ways, and Gaiman’s words may still ring true at the heart of *Burden*.

The story started out with the feeling of a place – a winter town somewhere in the old industrial North, pleasant on first glance, but rotting from the inside out. As I scoured the Hudson Valley for locations, and began locking them in, I wrote draft after draft of a story about events. These events were precisely forced together, like complex clockwork, into a phony noir in which there was no longer room to squeeze a character of any depth, or until the whole thing would explode under it’s own pressure and I would have to begin again. Which I did, completely, more than five times over less than five months. My process became almost retroactive, as I continued to lock locations, wonderful places like the historical district of Coxsackie and the old Burden Iron Works in Troy (for which the film was named), I was forced to write new stories with old places. Although exceedingly frustrating at the time, the locations shaped the piece, alive with their own intensity and history, and the experience of discovering them and their people became intimately entwined in aspects of the final story.

This last draft was a last ditch effort, a frightened attempt as the shooting dates in early January drew terribly close, to take what I had, and make it about people – about relationships we all understand, and yet in some way that was new and personal. I had gotten back to the heart of the problem. And, finally, I managed it. It wasn’t perfect, in fact it wasn’t finessed at all, but I had discovered a story about a man’s love for a girl and his estrangement from his father – a human story, regardless of what would happen in it. Details from my own life, and the trials of those close to me fell into the mix, and I was able to let the locations shape the events. I was open to explore, delving into the culture of watching and the problems of observation and obsession. Both Lux, the anti-hero of *Burden*, and his father have to learn to move forward with their lives, away from obsessions and grudges that have long since forgotten them, and from a place forgotten by the world.

The actual shooting of the film, though done half at night and in perpetual cold, was the real reward of the process. Watching months of work unfold in a clockwork symphony of people, places, logistics, and equipment, was overwhelmingly rewarding, and the images of that gritty winter tale, captured so appropriately on super 16mm film, were justification enough for the time and money and learning that they represent. Editing became the next arena of discovery – a surefire lesson in what works and does not, after the fact. The final film was never the point, though it is testament to the extraordinary work and generosity of everyone who contributed to its completion. When you make a film, you let it eat a piece of your soul, and that experience is unforgettable.