

2013 Arts Award Outcome Report Mary Davis' short film: *Elizabeth*

In the fall of 2013, the Arts Scholars grant made it possible for me to purchase my own camera, two lenses, and an audio recorder. This year I served as Vice President of The Filmmakers Society at UVA, and I applied for the grant specifically to help make the film we were working on that semester. Our concept for the semester production last fall was to create a three-act horror film, with each act featuring a female protagonist and set in central Virginia during a different time period. Along with my co-director, Madison Lee, I took on Part One of the film, which was to be set during the American Civil War. The screenplay went through numerous revisions but, as stated in my proposal, it remained centered around “a working-class, young bride named Lizzie Rowland whose husband leaves to join the Confederacy shortly after she becomes pregnant. Left all alone in the house, Lizzie loses the child and, consequentially, her mind.”

My faculty mentor was my Cinematography professor, Kevin Everson. I asked him, because I knew that he could offer technical support, artistic advice, and honest feedback. He is also always there for his students, so I could call him any time I needed help. Kevin did not have any hands-on involvement with pre-production or shooting, but he looked at my raw footage and the different edits along the way. Indirectly, Kevin was also my mentor in that his class consistently gave me ideas and technical knowledge for making cinema.

The first version of the script actually developed very swiftly. We worked with a team of members of the Filmmakers Society, and it was really enjoyable to bounce ideas off of each other to create the story we wanted to tell. Casting was a task that ultimately fell on my shoulders, because I know many of the actors at UVA. Amy Barrick was my first choice for the midwife, Alice, and we were lucky enough to get her. After talking to a few actresses about the part of Lizzie, Madison and I decided that for the type of on-the-fly filming that we would be doing, it was easiest if I played Lizzie. This was my first mistake, because I often felt overwhelmed with acting and directing simultaneously. As a result, I think my acting in the film suffered—particularly my dialect. I still enjoyed the process greatly as an actor, however, and learned a lot about acting for the camera. Finally, casting Joseph proved to be unexpectedly challenging. I was determined to find someone that truly looked the part, because one of my goals from the start was to make sure that the film did not look like clean-cut UVA students playing dress-up. We ended up casting a non-actor, a friend named John. After filming all of his scenes except the final scene, however, John had to drop out of the project. This was our first major roadblock. Madison and I spent hours tossing out ideas for a new ending, and I think we ultimately made the best choice. Originally, Joseph was actually going to return from the war, mangled and injured. Lizzie was not going to recognize him and, having hallucinated that Joseph had already returned safe and sound, she was going to think he was an intruder and stab him. Because we were not able to film this scene, we ended with a Killed in Action Letter (based actual letters) revealing that Joseph was dead all while Lizzie thought he was home. We were concerned about conveying this ending clearly, but I feel that we found a way to make it clear and powerful, as long as people can read the handwriting of the letter.

After writing the script and casting actors, one of the best parts of this adventure was finding locations, costumes, and props. I love old, weathered things, so I relished in this opportunity. Finding the locations was the first major breakthrough. I happened to walk into an antique store looking for some props, when I started talking to the storeowner, Diane Wilson. She was a film teacher and former employee of Twentieth Century Fox, so she was very interested in helping me. She also knew so many people in Charlottesville, including a couple and a farm owner who both own *amazing*, refurbished 19th century log cabins on their property. This is how I got connected with Duke Merrick and the McNeelys to film at their cabins, both 15-30 minutes from grounds. The costumes were almost entirely rented from Live Arts theatre on the Downtown Mall, except for a few things bought from Goodwill. It was necessary to have a Confederate uniform, but I didn't have it in my budget to buy a very authentic costume online and I could not find anything convincing at Live Arts or in vintage stores. So, I decided to contact re-enactment groups, and after emailing around a bit, the first man to respond coincidentally had everything I needed *and* lived across the street from me. Steve Davis was generous enough to lend us everything needed for an infantry private uniform—jacket, trousers, suspenders, a belt with holster, a canteen, a kepi, and even his rifle. Not to mention, he shared much of his knowledge about Confederate soldiers with us. Finally, the props were found mostly in thrift stores in Charlottesville, but a few things my family owned.

As the semester progressed, our team members from Filmmakers Society became less committed to filming, so every shoot Madison and I would need to scramble to find crewmembers. We would often drive out to one of the cabins with just Madison, one or two crewmembers, one of the other actors depending on the scene, and me. We had a production schedule, but we were very far behind schedule by around Thanksgiving time. At that point in the semester, Filmmakers Society members had almost entirely dropped off and Madison and I would just go and shoot when we were available, and having my own equipment was essential for this kind of 'guerilla' filmmaking. Although it was always exhilarating and fun, filming this way was very stressful at times. If I were to do it again, I would have made a more concrete schedule and had crewmembers sign up at the beginning of the process to hold them accountable.

In terms of setting up the shots, we had a general storyboard for each scene. We discussed which scenes we would like to have a very stagnant, almost painting-like composition and which should be more frenetic and obscure. Many of the shots were found in the spur of the moment, though. For instance, we decided to get that shot of Lizzie carrying firewood in the snow as we were about to leave the cabin for the day, and it ended up being one of my favorite parts of the movie. We decided early on to use almost exclusively natural light, so while this proved difficult for some of our scenes, setting up the shots was much easier.

One of the biggest challenges that I faced in production and post-production was with sound, because I'm still learning many of the technical aspects of creating sound. Luckily the cabins were in very remote locations, so there was not much of a concern about picking up airplanes or cars whizzing by. Recording sound is always tricky, though, and some of the dialogue was recorded at too low of a volume. I also wish that we had gathered more environmental audio. We tried to get 'room tone' in each location, but we could have recorded many more environmental sounds that would help flesh out the scenes and add suspense. In editing, I would say I spent 85% of my time

editing sound alone. We were fortunate enough to have the score composed by Mike Mitchell, a friend who I met while working on a play earlier in the semester. The music and ambient sound was almost entirely created by him, and he was also able to help me with some of the technical aspects of sound mixing. We met a few times when I was just starting the rough cut, so I could give him an idea of what I wanted. A few weeks later, he gave me twelve wonderful tracks, and I ended up using about five of them.

Despite the fact that I'm not quite computer-savvy enough yet, I discovered how much I love editing through this process. As an actor and filmmaker, I'm very interested in expression through motion, and I like that editing requires a great sense of rhythm and movement. An editor can completely manipulate the gestures, formal qualities, and therefore, the tone, of the film. Color-correcting is an entire beast of its own, too. I really enjoy this part of editing, because it's all about creating a palette as a painter would. I decided to give the film a very muted, blue and grey palette. I would like to continue learning about editing and color correcting, and hopefully buy some of my own software before leaving college.

As stated in my proposal, our goal was to make a truly frightening psychodrama while paying homage to the rich history of Central Virginia. I was initially drawn to the idea because of my fascination with Appalachian culture and the Civil War era, and I thought that these things lent themselves very well to the suspense/thriller genre. There is something very creepy about living in such an isolated area, and there is a rich tradition of superstition and ghost stories from this region. I liked the idea of the central character being this completely isolated young woman on a mountain, just trying to survive. It's funny, though, because upon more research, I realized how much of a vibrant social life there was in this region and time. I tried to hint at this in the initial scene with Alice and Lizzie, emphasizing that Lizzie was reclusive by nature and/or choice. Secondly, it was very important to me to illustrate Lizzie's daily chores and activities. Though it becomes clear that she is psychologically fragile, she is also a survivor and extremely persevering. Finally, I wanted to evoke a sense of the way that both Christianity and non-Christian superstitions were a part of life—the bible reading, the Appalachian lullaby, and Joseph's prediction about the weather, for examples. I hope that these moments came up organically and contributed to the atmosphere and tone of the film.

Overall, making this film was a tremendous learning experience. It is by far the longest, most elaborate film that I have made on my own. I discovered a lot about my style as a filmmaker and that I would like to continue to make films that are psychological but also very immersed in a specific culture. Thank you so much for the generous support.

“Elizabeth” can be found on my Vimeo account at
<https://vimeo.com/94847211>