



Residency Diary:

The MFA in Film Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts

by Ian Rand, '15 Film

Author's note: An MFA in Film (or any other artistic discipline) was never The Goal. It wasn't even A GOAL (not even Bucket Listed!). I work in marketing for the non-profit arts sector, and was pretty sure that the only profession that would pay less - if ANYTHING at all - would be film. Recently confirmed, it's almost a certainty. Death, taxes, and cinema verite.

An aspiring screenwriter, I'd been dancing and talking (lots of talking) my way around many projects for quite some time. In fact, the only thing I couldn't quite seem to get around to was writing. "I wish I could just go someplace and write," I tossed out, sighing to several friends. "On a writer's retreat, with lots of other writers," I continued. Long story short, careful where you toss those sighs, as mine landed me smack in the middle of the first-of-its-kind low-residency MFA in Film program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier, VT. WHAT? And that's just how this journey began.

Travel Day / Saturday, October 26

Not a lot of travel options. I need to leave from my sister's home in Avon, Connecticut and arrive in Montpelier, Vermont between 2-5pm this afternoon. And so...

/8:45 am

Settling in for my five-hour ride, I wonder how many great adventures have begun just this way: young(ish) man boards bus in the wee hours of a chilly morn. Fueled by excitement and anxiety in equal measure, he sets off on an entirely new and unfamiliar path...

/3:05 pm

Arrive an hour late. As it turns out, bus travel is neither exact science nor art. I am deposited on Main Street with all my baggage (pun intended). The day has turned cold, overcast, and misty, and I arrive at the Dewey Hall dormitory feeling like I've stepped into something out of Agatha Christie. Other students trickle in. We meet each other one by one. There are sixteen of us in all. Even our number feels Christie-esque.

Day One / Sunday, October 27

/7:30 am Breakfast

I had a great night's sleep tucked away in my dorm platform-twin, stylishly decked out in my niece Samantha's turquoise polka dot camp sheets and red blanket (thank you, Sammy). I have to mention how nice it is to wake up to a full breakfast spread — all prepared at some ungodly hour by someone else! We're talking eggs, waffles, bacon, sausage, fruit, smoothies, coffee, juice, you name it. Someone got up very, very early to

make sure I had it! Things are looking good.

Today is devoted in large part to orientation in one form or another—campus orientation, IT orientation, library orientation. Everyone getting to know each other, and the VCFA staff couldn't be friendlier.

Day Two / Monday, October 28

Student presentations (A through M) begin today. Fortunately I'm an "R", and therefore able to digest a hearty breakfast. I'll say it... I'm pretty nervous about my presentation tomorrow. Have been for months. Here's a tip: Googling your fellow students beforehand will do nothing to calm a nervous presenter. Today, however, I'm simply glad to be an "R".

/9:00 a.m. Student Presentations

Damn! I am in some talented company. I'm actually blown away by most of what I've seen this morning. My stomach turns as I think about my own presentation tomorrow? I consider renaming it "Who Let the Slacker In?"

/1:00 p.m. Lecture: "T. Marie Dudman Presents and Discusses Her Work"

So cool... Tammy's created a trilogy of time-based pixel paintings, inspired by the works of J.M.W. Turner, Claude Monet, and Edouard Manet. I love Tammy!

/3:00 p.m. Faculty Round Table Part 2: "Perspiration"

Not sure what this is going to be about, but I've applied some extra antiperspirant just in case. Turns out, it's not gonna help. Making a film is hard work, but distribution is a bear! Who knew?

/7:00 p.m. Screening: *The Iran Job*

It's been a great day all around. After the first round of presentations I've really begun to bond with my fellow students and get a sense of what they've been up to and are all about. I'm also getting to know the faculty a bit more personally. Tonight is the first of the five screenings of our faculty's (and special guests') recent films. A quintessential Vermont art house cinema (on Main Street, of course), the Savoy Theater serves artisanal popped corn with a ladle of melted real butter, salt, and yeast! I have died and gone to movie theatre heaven. I relax, confident that I won't have to pick a

no-texting-you're-not-in-your-living-room-jerk fight at the Savoy! Did I mention how much I loved the film? Or that we had just spent a good chunk of the afternoon discussing all the challenges Till Schauder faced making said film? With Till Schauder?



Day Three / Tuesday, October 29

/6:40 a.m. Good morning, Montpelier!

It is 19 F. Brrr... This is the day that really marked a turning point in the residency and solidified the VCFA experience for me. Of course, it was also a great personal triumph (on several levels), so that didn't hurt!

/9:00 a.m. Student Presentations

OK, time to man up! Some quick calculations place me presenting second to last... I'm not really able to concentrate on the other presentations, as I keep running mine through my head again and again. See the problem is everyone else has films to show, a body of work... Some are even battling diseases! Sure enough, I

follow the guy who is both a veteran and bone marrow transplant recipient!! He also spent time documenting the soldier's experience in Afghanistan (which he just screened for us). SHIT! I relax, realizing yet again that just being myself is going to be enough. More than enough, actually. It's who I am meant to be, and it's why I am here.



Day Four / Wednesday, October 30

/7:30 a.m. Breakfast

Begin to ponder the difficulty of reacclimatizing myself to the real world. Or more specifically, my reality of not having smoothies, eggs, bacon, sausage, and French toast waiting for me when I wake up in my apartment in Miami Beach.

/8:30 a.m. Student meetings with faculty

Today's the chance to meet one-on-one with three faculty members of our choice for 20 minutes each. This is our opportunity to sell ourselves, pitch our projects, and choose our semester mentors. Admittedly, 20 minutes feels a bit rushed. Factor in four flights of stairs situated on either side of the College Hall & Chapel building, in which the opposing sides of the lower two floors are only accessible via crossover through the upper two floors (these crazy old—reportedly—haunted by ghosts on both the fourth floor and basement—former New England war hospitals!), and you've got yourself a real speed-dating challenge. Time to find yourself a mentor... Go! Oh wait, and don't forget that Comcast is

broadcasting live from the third floor chapel this week so the fourth floor crossover is your only access from one side of the building to the other (Why wouldn't it be?)... NOW GO!

/9:10 a.m. Nina Davenport - It's decided!

LOVE, LOVE, LOVE Nina, and I am certain that any chance I have of living a creative life hinges on working with her this semester.

/9:30 a.m. Brandon Cole

(Arrive five minutes late and slightly out of breath, having forgotten all about that tricky crossover situation) Hmm. The strangest thing, but I think I've changed my mind. I came to VCFA to finish writing a television series, and Brandon is the man to help me hit that goal. That's my final decision!

/9:50 a.m. T. Marie Dudman

(Having lost track of time with Brandon, I ran back up the stairs, arriving 7 minutes late for our twenty minute date, disoriented and sweating) WOW... Tammy really "gets me" as an artist. WHAT? (#whoamithismorning) In me, Tammy sees great resources of untapped potential. We bond over that. I call her T.Ma, and we kiss on both cheeks as I depart, knowing for certain we will be working together this semester.

/11:10 a.m. Laura Colella

SHIT... Now what do I do?

/12:00 p.m. Dewey Hall Lunch

The dining hall is abuzz with residual excitement from our morning meetings. Conversation is pretty much limited to two subjects: morning meetings and mentor selection.

/1:30 p.m. Field Trip: Nature Break

At this point, I think we all are desperate for a bit of time outside a classroom, lecture hall, or theatre, and we are all looking forward to this field trip. We divide up, pile into cars, and follow each other to the Morse Farm Maple Sugarworks, which does not disappoint in living up to its name. Group photo is the first order of business, and then I make a beeline to the soft serve counter to try the maple creamie I've heard so much

about, along with a cup of hot apple cider to ward off the chill, and a cider doughnut to ward off any calories I might burn on our upcoming nature walk. Laura asks that we all head off to the nature trails for a one hour, silent walking meditation. I had few small issues: namely heading into the woods on my own, the chill in the air, and being silent for an hour. I tackled the challenge to the best of my ability, which meant pairing up with new friend who seemed to know his way around the woods (hiking shoes, outdoor type clothing, and lots of pockets which probably contained things to handle any woods-related emergencies). We chatted amiably for the duration of the walk. Turns out I chose wisely, and received a crash course/master class in what roots can save your life.

/3:30 p.m. Writing Workshop: "From Silence to Sound"

At just about this point I begin to realize how comfortable I've become with faculty, staff, and my classmates alike. This realization is immediately followed by the feeling that this week is racing by and how much I'm going to really miss everyone. Deep breath. The week is not over yet. Stay present and do your best to savor each moment!

/7:00 p.m. Screening: *Breakfast with Curtis*

Day 5 / Thursday, October 31

It's Halloween on a spooky Vermont campus, but my Agatha Christie fetish has fallen by the wayside. Today is all about ADVISOR SELECTION. We find out who we will be working with by email at 12:15pm, and breakfast chat tends to focus on nothing else.

/10:00 a.m. Lecture: "Turning the Camera on Yourself"

Wow! I knew that Nina and I were destined to work together, and this just cements the deal. I love Nina's presentation, her inspiration, and her work and personality just seem to resonate with me. Forget about the fact that I never aspired to be a documentary filmmaker. Something about Nina just makes me think, "Why not?" That seems to be a recurring theme for me this week, along with "Why settle?" It's quite exhilarating!

/12:00 p.m.

An email from Stephen arrives early, and sure enough

I'm working with Nina! I'm thrilled, and yet part of me feels like I should be working with Brandon, and another part longs for Tammy. I'm a little crazy that way, always have been, but I'm really excited to be working with Nina, so I begin to self-soothe.

/3:30 p.m. Lecture: "Dan Schrecker on Visual Effects - Friend or Foe?"

WOW! So this guy Dan Schrecker finally shows up. Turns out he's been tied up on some special effects-heavy

"Noah" film and hasn't been able to join us in his role as a faculty member for the full residency. We're all busy Dan, but we found the time! Boy, did I change my tune. He's the visual effects man behind Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* and Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*, two films that blew me away. While I never really gave too much thought to the effects behind these films, it was incredible to see how Natalie Portman sprouted her wings in the final scene.

And I just saw the trailer for this *Noah* film I'd been



hearing so much about. I couldn't even believe what I saw. I watched it open mouthed again and again. It's that Noah, and the trailer itself is biblical. I cannot wait!

Day 6 / Friday, November 1

Wow! Where has this week gone? I'm filled with conflicting emotions about leaving tomorrow. How to bottle the creative energy and excitement? I also want today to be about spending some quality time (eating) with my new friends.

Day 7 / Saturday, November 2

It's time to finalize semester study plans. Mine's a little all over the place. I really want to finish writing my TV series and Nina wants me making short, funny, documentary films (Tammy had suggested a one-man show and Brandon just wants me to stop talking and keep writing). But Nina's the boss, so we compromise, which means I will be making short, funny, documentary films. In addition, I will work on my series, watch an endless list of Nina's recommended films, and thoroughly digest all 818 pages of *The Filmmakers Handbook* (2013 Edition / A Comprehensive Guide for the Digital Age). Nina studied FILM at Harvard and is determined to school me in her craft. I know I'm in great hands.

/1:30 p.m. Group Reflection

It's hard to say goodbye, and harder still to reflect on the past week while still in the thick of it. Here's what I know: I am both physically and mentally exhausted, while simultaneously creatively excited, stimulated, and invigorated. Reflect on that! I make super-hasty goodbyes, worried that my emotions might get the best

of me, and my buddy Robert runs me down the big hill to catch a bus back to the real world. It's a cold and grey Vermont afternoon, and it starts to rain. The bus is 45 minutes late. Why wouldn't it be?

Closing thoughts: While it was never my intention to chase this MFA, I'm now certain this path will lead me to unexpected places. You don't know what you don't know, and you haven't been where you haven't been, yet. In just one short week an amazing thing has happened. Transformation. My world grew a bit larger, and I have begun to see myself more expansively. I arrived at VCFA an aspiring (and anxious) writer, and departed a working (and far less anxious) artist! How great is that?



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