

Thea St.Omer

Hard and Holy: an independent filmmaker reflects on her failed attempt at making a first feature narrative film

*This essay has the immediacy of the journal entry that it originally was, written New Year's Eve, 2011. Thea revised the entry as a letter to select individuals who supported her efforts to make *Vodka in a Glass*, noting in that version that it was not for everyone, and finally settled on the version below, hoping eventually to publish it in *Filmmaker Magazine*. The bio note at the end is the one she added to the essay.*

—Nancy Keefe Rhodes, *Ed.*

It is the eve of December 31st, 2011 and, after a lovely early dinner of fresh crabs and cucumber salad with my family (and our trip, just some hours prior to see David Fincher's *Girl With a Dragon Tattoo*—awesome ending!), I sit here, preparing to output *Vodka in a Glass*. I promised myself that I would finish the film by this year's end, and how it has been a race against time. The clock on my laptop reads 7:06 PM as I jot this. It will be done soon. Thank God, the universe, or some higher power for that promise of closure; if not for it I could easily welcome the New Year editing the film still—as I have been for months, incessantly. I won't. I'm about to export the file.

I honestly feel that I have given this film all that I have, and then some—and alas, it has come full circle now. Strange that it is what it is—and what I originally deemed it to be, “but an exercise.” Deep down, while I told myself I had no expectations, I had one—that it be my first-feature narrative film, but it is merely a short now, just shy of 40 minutes (cut down from the roughly 20-30 hours of original footage). I'm told we only have one chance to make a first feature narrative, and as I reflect, I am still virgin. May the making of this short serve as a necessary stepping-stone for the making of another film... one day.

While it is not my intended first feature, it is, nevertheless, something of heart, blood, and sinew. I do feel figuratively, as I suppose I have with all my previously completed film “exercises,” that something has been born. The labor of this film proved more intense, however, than any I had previously experienced—certainly not always a bed of rose petals nor a blanket of their thorns, but somewhere between. My heart has been broken and uplifted; my spirits have sunk and have soared. I've cried at this... I've basked in this... I've fought for this... I would do it all again, only some things I would do differently.

One thing I've learned this year, or rather one thing my failed attempt at making this film has confirmed, is that I'm not very good at making films—but I try very hard. Perhaps I try too hard. I'm beginning to wonder. The film got worse, I think, with myriad cuts, before it began to get better.

Boris Frumin (one of my most precious mentors from graduate film school) once advised me, after I confessed several drafts ago to having yet another cut of the film, "*Dear Thea, please don't get lost in the editing room.*" I responded that it was too late, that I had already been lost, and found, and lost, and found, and then lost only to be found somewhere.

I wish there was a necessary correlation between how hard one works on a film, and how good that film is, but I've come to realize there isn't. I don't know how many more seemingly random bus trips, alone, to the outermost parts of the city I can take. I don't know how many more seemingly random walks, alone, around my neighborhood, dressed incognito, in the very late night or wee morning hours I can steal. . . . And yet, I so much enjoyed them! They were not random: while editing my mind was occupied always, such that it was a distraction for me to speak in any meaningful way to people, except in matters related to this film. All pretenses aside, I hardly heard them, and didn't really know what to say, so I welcomed the solitude. And most of my attempts to communicate outside of it were jokes! Disjointed and disconnected, I felt so deeply distracted as I rattled on ridiculously.

During pre-production, people expressed sadness that they called out to me on the streets, that I looked right at them and simply ignored them. To this day, I don't know if they believe me when I say that I honestly didn't see them. While immersed in editing, forever ascertaining different cuts in my mind, I've met people, seemingly enthusiastically, who I don't really see—the energy stemmed, inexplicably, from something within me that they had nothing to do with—only to not recognize them, or worse, to introduce myself to them again a week or two later.

Indeed, I've been very high (figuratively) and equally low at times in this venture. But I can say this: I tried my best at this *failed attempt at a first feature*—this "exercise," if you will. I made mistakes, but I own up to them now in an effort that I might make fewer ones next time around—and I do hope God (or something significant) willing, to be able to make another film one day. I just have to recover first from this one. I feel cut now with this labor, raw, exposed,

wide opened, and bleeding still. And, I feel profoundly uncertain about myself now, as a filmmaker.

But, one thing is for sure; I couldn't have done it without each and every person who contributed. Deep gratitude and heartfelt thanks to all who worked without pay; to all who shared their time, energy and talents, to all who offered words of support or encouragement, to all who lent a location, prop or piece of equipment, to all who availed themselves to shoot, re-shoot and then shoot some more, to all who viewed the many significant cuts of this film as it shriveled down to its present 39 minutes from its original cut of two and a half hours, and commented carefully, thoroughly, tastefully and thoughtfully time and time again. Thank you to all the figurative donors in this (not so immaculate) conception.

It's about to be born!

Years ago, while still a graduate film student, I had the good fortune of taking Spike Lee's directing class. I found him refreshingly frank, brutally honest and direct. "[Independent] filmmaking is some hard shit," he once told our class. "When it boils down to it, it's just some really hard shit." Hard, yes—with this recent endeavor I've come to *know* that first-hand. But might I wager further, that it is also rather *holy*?



Thea St.Omer is an alumna of NYU's Graduate Film Program and the recipient of individual artist fellowships from the Jerome Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, and New York Foundation for the Arts. As of today, *Vodka in a Glass*, her failed attempt at a first feature narrative, and now a short film, has been rejected from Sundance, Berlin, and the Santa Barbara International film festivals.