

Reflections on "Group" Film Project by David Sutcliffe

At some point during my first Radical Aliveness workshop with Ann Bradney, I knew I wanted to film it. I was moved, affected, changed, and amazed at what I was seeing. Each individual work process was a beautiful story of struggle, healing, and transformation. Ann was an artist, a master, with a unique set of skills I had never seen before. I thought, "the world needs to see this."

I had wanted to make films since I first got involved in theatre while at the University of Toronto. My first film was a documentary about my Grandmother. I never finished it. Likewise, I wrote several scripts that I could never bring all the way to completion. This left me with a lingering doubt about my ability to start and finishing something. I had a lot of fear.

Yet, I knew I had gifts as a director and producer. I had directed several plays in college and it had come easy to me. The shows were good, they had a strong vision, were well executed, and I worked well with actors. I also had a very strong intuitive sense that directing/producing was what I was meant to do.

But I was also pursuing acting and I was good at that too. I was young and handsome and there were a lot of voices telling me I could make it in film and TV. That possibility was attractive to me. I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be desired by women. I wanted to

have people look at me and admire me. I wanted the unique attention only actors get. I wanted to be famous. SPECIAL.

I also had a strong creative drive to delve deep into characters. I wanted to be free, alive, explosive. And I had real gifts. I knew I was a better director/producer than I was an actor, but I also knew that that career could wait. If I wanted to make it as an actor, it had to be now, while I was young. And so that was path I took.

Though I can see the wisdom and necessity of this decision, it sometimes haunts me; in part because I know it came from a place of fear. I had doubts about my intelligence and creativity. I couldn't believe that I had real creative gifts, even though there was a strong impulse to create coming from deep inside. Acting was a safer choice. It was more directly connected to what I had been doing: sports. Sports is performance. You are on stage, being seen. You have practiced (rehearsed) for this moment but there is always improvisation and creativity. It's alive. I liked that about acting, and I related to it. I can see why I choose acting and I can see the value in what I learned from it, what I went through, what it forced me to confront about myself; but I sometimes wonder where I'd be if I had pursued directing/producing from the beginning.

My first 7 years of professional acting were spent waiting tables and bartending. I could not get hired. I was afraid. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't feel I was good-looking enough or "cool" enough. I was auditioning mostly for TV commercials and

small parts in silly movies or TV shows. I didn't fit in. It never felt right. It was a lot of failure and rejection.

I took solace in connection with other out-of-work, struggling actors. I loved being a part of that community. It was so different than the sports teams I was used to. Actors drank and smoked and took drugs and talked about cinema and books. And the type of girls I met were different--wilder, sexier. I felt the romance of it all, and a letting go of the limitations of my "jock" mask into a bigger, more exciting world.

When success finally came, it came quickly. After 7 years of struggling, I finally broke through at 28, landing a role in a pilot for CBS. By the time I was 31, I had two network TV series leads under my belt and the promise of many more. I had made it.

But the truth was I felt overwhelmed. And unhappy. My ego was feeling good but a deeper part of me was unsatisfied. I remember shooting an episode of "Friends", the most popular show on TV at the time, and the model for where my managers and agents wanted my career to go. It was surreal to be on that iconic set, working with world famous actors who were making \$750,000/week. It was also fun. But I remember having the distinct thought, "I don't want this." The thought scared me. One voice in my head said, "If that's not what you want then what are you doing here?" The other voice said, "there's something wrong with you if you don't want this."

I didn't want that. But what did I want? I began to have a very clear vision of heading a production company whose focus would be to attract, support, and develop creative talent. I felt I could create an environment that artists wanted to work in, and that I could help support their visions. I felt like I could provide them with the support they needed because I knew the support I wanted and wasn't getting as an actor.

I also knew that I wanted to create something myself. I wanted to express MY vision, not serve somebody else's.

Over the next few years I tried writing film scripts. I optioned a series of novels. I was trying to get myself going as a producer/director, but despite the work and energy I put into it, nothing was working.

Around that time, Ann started coming to LA and doing workshops regularly, preparing for a full time move to LA. I attended most of these workshops and continued to be inspired by the work. I brought up the idea of filming it with my friend Michael, who was a graduate of Core Energetics East. We had bonded through the Core work. We talked about it all the time, were constantly breaking it down, trying to understand it, trying to understand Ann and how she worked. We approached Ann about filming a workshop, and after some reluctance, she finally agreed.

We filmed a weekend workshop on Mother Day's weekend, 2008. We invited 14 participants, mostly friends of the community who had been working with Ann. We shot with a small crew of 3 camera operators and one sound recorder. The workshop was deep and powerful. Ann and the group seemed unaffected by the cameras, or at least uninhibited. The footage looked great, the essence of the work was captured beautifully on film. People looked alive and vulnerable and powerful and present. It worked.

I dug into the footage, my first time editing. It took me a while to find my way but I ultimately came up with a trailer and a few clips that I was very proud of. It instilled me with confidence in my vision.

I began showing the clips to my agents and manager. While they expressed an appreciation for it, I could feel their doubts about its commercial potential. Slowly I began to realize that if this was going to happen I was going to have to do it myself.

I had substantial savings from my years of acting work sitting in an investment account. It was enough to fund the shooting of a one-week Radical Aliveness retreat. I decided to use that money to shoot the project and figure out the rest out later. It was a huge risk for me, but I felt like it was the type of risk I needed to take if I was ever going to fulfill my dream of heading a production company and being a creative artist. I needed to make something. I knew it had to be personal. I knew it had to be an expression of my passion.

Putting together and executing the shooting of the project felt effortless. It wasn't, of course, but I was so happy and in my flow while doing it, it felt effortless. I loved the process of it all: finding the location, assembling the group with Ann, hiring the crew, deciding on the cameras to use, the best way to record sound, etc. All of it was all fun and exciting to me.

At this point I had done a lot of work with Ann. I was in my first year of her training program. I was inspired by her Radical Aliveness process and her passion for inspiring leadership. I wanted to bring that to the shooting of the project. It knew that would involve a letting go, a surrendering to whatever wanted to happen, a giving over to where this thing wanted to go and trusting that.

During the filming of the project I felt like I was able to do that. It actually surprised me how easily it came. I was relaxed. In the room, the group exploded. The work was deep and powerful and intense. People were taking huge risks, letting themselves be seen in so many vulnerable ways. It was incredible. I felt proud that I was able to play my part in holding that; that Ann and the group felt safe enough to go all the way in front of the cameras. I was moved by the trust they were giving me, and 3 years later it still brings tears to my eyes.

I knew I had something huge and powerful and beautiful and strange and unique. For the first four or five months I just played with the footage, experimenting. The first efforts were some of the best pieces I put together. I worked quickly and easily and the result were beautiful.

And then something happened. I started to become aware of some problems. Some of the footage was distractingly shaky. Sometimes the sound was unclear and thin. We had a low level hum in some of the flip camera footage. I also realized I didn't have enough specific commentary in the interviews from Ann or the group and that was going to make telling stories difficult. These issues started to consume me. They were all I could think about. "I fucked up." "I didn't do it right." "It wasn't going to work." "I was going to be seen as a failure". These thoughts were with me for the next few years as I struggled to finish the project.

Part of the reason I shot the project independently, using my own money, and without a clear idea of what it was going to be exactly, was that I knew it would create the leverage I needed to work through whatever blocks had been stopping me from finishing things in the past. I had bet too much on this project not to finish it. Ann and the group had put themselves on the line, bared their souls for me. I was giving up lucrative acting work to the disappointment of my agents. Abandoning Group was simply not an option. I had to finish it.

I am a classic rigid character structure, defined by my achievement, longing for recognition, validation, love. I have enormous self doubt about my worth, my attractiveness, my value, my lovability. Most of my life I've felt lonely, isolated, separate. Acting gave me recognition, but it ultimately left me unsatisfied (and resentful) because it was my mask that was being recognized. I was handsome, funny, a nice guy. But my essence and creativity was not being seen--not by the world; but mostly, not by myself. I was afraid to really put myself out there, really let all of me be seen--my doubts, my fears, my insecurities, my contradictions, my longings, my dreams, my passion. I refused to be human. I had to be special, and so the project had to be special. And special meant perfect.

I was in a bind. I could not create the "perfect" project with the footage I had, and yet I could not abandoned what I had started. For more than a year I felt like I was going crazy. I developed insomnia, I struggled with depression, and I became more and more reclusive. The project became a burden, an albatross around my neck. People were asking how it was going, when would it be finished? I would put on a brave, optimistic face, but underneath I was terrified, frozen. I had no idea how to get out this place.

During this time several producers offered partnership. They were interested in the project, were intrigued by the footage, saw the potential. This was flattering and gave me some validation but I was never able to move forward with any of them. There was something powerful inside me that would not let go. I had something to finish here and I

could not hand it over to someone else. This was my mountain to climb, my journey to complete.

I kept going. Slowly things began to come into focus. Ultimately I made a decision to create a web-series. This gave me freedom. I no longer had to consider a television network's sensibilities. I could create the project in my vision, and it could be anything it wanted to be. This was the first big breakthrough.

I then made a decision to fund the project through the micro-funding website Kickstarter. This was another huge step. I was asking people for money. It felt so vulnerable and scary to me. I was terrified of what people would think of me. But it forced me to put myself and the project out in the world in a direct way, and forced me to confront my fears about other people's judgments, real or perceived. It also created the additional leverage I needed to finish. People had pledged money to me, I could not let them down.

I reached out for help, both emotionally and creatively. Yes, there was an aspect of this journey that was about me and me only, but that did not mean I could not get the help and support I needed while on this journey. I learned to ask for help and receive it--I had to if I was ever going to finish. To do that I had to let people see me in all of my emotional and creative messiness, my struggle, and in the places where I didn't know. When I was finally able to do this, something inside me let down. I was no longer alone in the same

way. Support was there when I needed it. I didn't even have to know the kind of help I needed. It was enough to simply know that I needed and then to pick up the phone.

It's easy for me to see the beauty in the humanity in others, yet I rarely give that to myself. I'm starting to. As this project nears completion, and as I come to terms with its limitations, its imperfections, its quirks and eccentricities, I am starting to see, once again, the beauty in all of it.

What I feel in every frame of the project is a powerful intention to give something to the world. The group, Ann, the crew, and myself, all came together to give life to this project. It is a collective creation, bigger than any of us. And it cannot be measured by film criticism, values of good and bad. It is alive, and thus it is beautiful.

I'm also starting to see the beauty in my own story. Nothing about this has been easy. I've made mistakes all along the way. I've gone through intense periods of self doubt and self loathing. I've faced many of my demons, and all along the way was somehow able to hold onto something, some deep part of me that KNOWS.

I recently read a quote from a research scientist who said that the key to their work was an ability to tolerate long periods of uncertainty, confusion, not knowing. More than anything, this is what I learned from Group. Yes, I have creative gifts, yes I can hold space for groups of creative people, yes I can see something from start to finish; but more

than anything I've learned that everything is messy, nothing travels in a straight line, and that only in retrospect can you see the perfection of the path.