Outburst

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OUTBURST

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts degree in Film Production

School of Film and Animation
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

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# Table of Contents

Abstract 2
Introduction 3
Pre-Production 5
Production 16
Post-Production 22
Audience Reaction 29
Conclusion 30
Appendix
  Screenshots 31
  Proposal 39
  Shooting Script 45
  Design Booklet 59
Abstract

*Outburst* is the story of 17-year-old Tommy, a young musician who views life differently: from the seat of a wheelchair. He is working with his best friend, Joey, to come up with a winning entry for a songwriting contest. They are a complementary ensemble, as Joey has the greatest skill with the guitar and Tommy’s abilities are stronger as a lyricist. With a lot of work left on the song, and only four days to the competition, Joey’s new girlfriend drives a wedge in their friendship and musical partnership.

Tommy tries to accommodate Kristin’s entry into their social circle, but Joey’s actions to accommodate Kristin bring their music writing endeavor to a stand-still. When they end up getting so off-track that they get in trouble with the police, Tommy hits his breaking point. Joey responds in-kind, with cutting words targeting his friend.

With advice from Tommy’s stern but loving mother, Tommy begins to see his own faults in his attitude, and learns to show grace not only to Joey, but also to himself. When time for the concert comes, Tommy finally chooses to forgive Joey, and they are able to play their new song together for the audience.
Introduction

Setting out to create a thesis film, a capstone representing the culmination of creative and educational studies, is no easy task. The idea is often impressed upon students that a thesis film quite often represents the final creative work of their life with complete creative control. Leaving the safety of academia, there are bosses, collaborators, financiers, etc. with whom you must bend or break to share creative vision.

I started conceptualizing a thesis film based on my interests and previous works. In my program, I have completed films that exist primarily in fantasy or science fiction, with camera tricks, special effects, and far-out ideas. But as I considered all my ideas, I was left back at this idea that this is the last film I may ever have complete creative control over. I started thinking about what I would say as an artist’s statement. What is important to me? I was left imagining myself as a storyteller. The fact is, I have one specific place to point to for my gift of storytelling, and that is my father.

From as young as I can remember, I can hear the booming voice of my father talking to any stranger who might happen to stand next to him for 30 seconds, telling stories of things his kids had done or trips the family had gone on. As teenagers, this tended to be a nightmare for my sisters and I who longed for a bit more privacy. But in essence, this simple act of storytelling I observed at a young age is what has driven me to constantly learn how better to tell stories.

My dad has had an interesting life. He was born with a genetic disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, which causes severely brittle bones. He himself has broken well over 40 bones in his life, and has used a wheelchair since at least age five. The effect of disability in family life is something that I wholly do not recognize, because its impact is so close to me that I
just don’t know any other way for a family to operate. This became my motivation for my film, to give a glimpse into a life that may not be normal for much of the population, and prove that every important part of life experience is the same, regardless of disability.

The second influence of my dad comes from his music. He is not the greatest musician, but when he picks up a guitar he plays and sings from the heart. This instilled in me from a young age a deep passion for music, which I knew would need to be present in a film representing my own creative thoughts. Tying this love for music to a main character who uses a wheelchair helps me to maintain an interesting and complex character with disabilities, something that is sorely underrepresented in our industry.

At this point, I was basically left envisioning my lead character as my father at the age of seventeen. I got to know him better in a way, but soon arrived at an obvious conclusion that my father is just too kind of a person to replicate for a movie. In real life, he is nice beyond belief, and that creates certain story problems in keeping things interesting. I wanted supportive people around my main character, because people aren’t often intentionally rude or mean to a person with disabilities, so I concluded I needed my main character to have a severe attitude himself.

So here I arrived at my main character, who I have continued to develop in the year since this all began. One final thing I stole from my dad Tom? My character would be named Tommy.
Pre-Production

As I’ve never written or directed a drama anchored in the real world, I had to take most of my crazy ideas for filmmaking and bring them down to earth. This brings some of the sparkle of the process out of the equation for me, as I’ve always relied on tropes, flair, and imagination to bring impact and ‘fun’. This time around, I would have to have a simple story, well-designed characters, and just do the small things really well.

Influences

The first inspiration for plot within the film is from one of the opening scenes from Free Willy (Figure 1). When I was young and saw the film in theaters, the impact from seeing the whale in the lighting for the first time, immediately followed by the main character getting in huge trouble with the police had a huge impact on me. The idea of having my main character get in trouble with the law was one of my earliest plot elements, and still exists in a somewhat smaller portion at the half-way point of the film.

*Figure 1 - Free Willy (1993) Simon Wincer*
As my story developed, I started to head in a direction that uses a lot of organic, diegetic music. As I feel it is one of the strongest representations of this type of sub-genre, I found myself looking closely at the movie *Once* (Figure 2). Its calming approach to music segments, production design, and color became specific launching points through which I could discover all of those tonal elements for my own film.

![Image](image-url)  
*Figure 2 - Once (2007) John Carney*

**Iterations**

After my thesis proposal was accepted, I felt very good about the future of my film. My advisor, Frank Deese, was confident that I was headed in a good direction, only voicing concern about my story seeming too ‘preachy’ or having an obvious agenda to educate able-bodied audience to the realities of disability. One of my other committee members at the time, Peter Kiwitt, had much greater concerns. Peter constantly reinforces in his classes that stories need a
plot question, a character question, and a theme statement. I can still remember distinctly Peter informing me that my story had no plot question, no character question, and its theme statement was more of a theme question.

After the meeting with Peter, I was destroyed. Two hours earlier I was confident that I had everything together and was headed in a good direction, then suddenly I felt like I had nothing. Summer had started, and I took several weeks to step away from all of it and reflect. When I came back and started slowly reworking plot elements, I came to realize Peter was right about all the issues. I began restructuring plot elements, deleting parts, creating new parts. I would change what the central conflict was, then watch the effects of that ripple through plots and characters.

I realized that as much as I did want to introduce and educate an able-bodied audience to the realities of disability, I needed to make all of that secondary to having a good, realistic story and characters. What I needed was a story that worked with or without the wheelchair and all the qualifications and caveats that might bring to the story. Upon stripping the disability from the story, I could create a quality story between two best friends. Once I had this core, I reintroduced the wheelchair and arrived at a complexity and beauty I could finally respect and appreciate.

Just a few weeks before the fall semester began, I presented this new plot outline and character descriptions to my advisor Frank Deese, who agreed I had made fantastic headway forming the structure and complexity of the story. I was ready to jump into the nitty gritty of pre-production.
Recruiting Crew

Before I even proposed my thesis, I assembled several of my key crew members. Devin Fay was entering his thesis year as a cinematographer, had shot my previous workshop film, and we had been working side by side on several previous sets. Devin was seeking films to shoot for his thesis, and with our rapport and somewhat streamlined communication, he was an obvious choice for me as Director of Photography. Next was Josh Banach, a highly sought after sound designer and recordist, who was also entering his thesis year. All my previous works at RIT had been made with Shelby Wilson, who had now graduated. I thought it was a long shot to start working with Josh during his last year of projects here, but once I pitched him the story, he agreed to sign on.

I knew I wanted someone with a great vision but also a strong commitment as a production designer. Production designers can be hard to come by at RIT, but become painfully important during the process. Mimi Ace is a photography major whom I taught in the production processes class the year prior, and she truly excelled in production design. She agreed to help me out, and time after time brought such creativity to the table and kept working without needed to be pushed along. As a producer, Francesco D’Amanda was still very inexperienced, but he had a drive to learn and agreed to lift the weight of producing once production began, so that I would do most of the heavy lifting in pre-production but not be overwhelmed one we began shooting.

My ace in the hole was my assistant director. In the fall of 2015, I was the cinematographer for Matt Ansini’s MFA thesis, “Sketchy”. Matt had a young, inexperienced freshman named Camille Howard, who from the day I met her has never ceased to impress me.
She brings a calmness, confidence, and control to sets she is running that would put any director at ease. One of my best early decisions in the process after Devin and Josh was bringing on Camille to run my set as a true assistant director.

With this essential crew enlisted, I was able to wait until the fall to do the rest of my recruiting. These less critical but still essential roles were filled mostly by sophomores who came from the Production Processes and Dramatic Structure courses that I was a graduate assistant for.

Casting

Without a doubt, casting was the most tedious part of my pre-production. I had four lead roles to cast, two of which were based on people very close to me: Tommy, who was the lead; Joey, Tommy’s best friend; Kristin, Joey’s new girlfriend; and Lois, Tommy’s mom. The most difficult aspect was that I had created a lead character who used a wheelchair, but wasn’t bound to it, and could sing and play guitar. This list of attributes, alongside the common desires of finding someone who knows how to act, looks the right part, works well with me, and is available… I knew I was in for one hell of a search.

I held an open audition, which I have had some success and failure with in the past. I sent out notifications for the audition across a few of the local facebook groups, as well as craigslist. I also reached out to several local disability advocate groups, to see if I could get more people to audition for Tommy. In the end, I held two auditions that were poorly attended. I had a good prospect for Joey in Peter Edwards, who himself is a very accomplished director and recent graduate of R.I.T. Best of all, Pete was already a very good guitar player.
Kristin was more difficult to cast. I had several young women audition, a few of which would have been fine, but none of whom quite had the subtlety of kind innocence and youthful exuberance all wrapped up in someone with acting ability. In the end, based on a craigslist listing, I found Amanda Scott. She ended up offering that perfect mix of things in her personality, look, and performance to fill out the role.

For the mother role, based on my own grandmother at a young age, I started envisioning a powerful local actress by the name of Liz Cameron, who I had seen play various characters in other School of Film and Animation films. I don’t think I had ever seen her in a ‘maternal’ role, but I had seen her presence, skill, and adaptability, and I had a hunch that she would completely understand what is needed for this part. I never held auditions for the mother role, but I couldn’t immediately ask Liz if she would play the part, because I knew I couldn’t be picky with casting of Tommy, and I wanted them to look related so I wouldn’t have to add any more complications accepting the idea of adoption. Since I was open to Tommy being any race, I had to wait to cast Liz until I knew Tommy would be similar looks and a similar race. In the end, I cast a Tommy who very much looked related to Liz, and her casting worked perfectly. I offered Liz more money than any of my other actors, in respect to her experience and to make sure she knew I would take her seriously.

Tommy was the most difficult to cast. In the end, I spent about two months searching and reaching out to individuals and groups for someone to fill the role. Personally, I am so disheartened by Hollywood’s acceptance to ignore a character’s identity when casting an actor. Studios often choose able-bodied, lighter skinned, cisgender actors to portray minority populations. I considered for a moment casting someone able-bodied for Tommy, and the idea
made the whole project feel futile to a point where I knew I had no choice. I would have to make sacrifices in other parts of my search to make it happen.

I was finally contacted by Sam Cohen, another recent graduate of R.I.T., who was interested in the part. He didn’t have a background in acting, but he had a good stage presence from his hobby in stand-up comedy. He played very little guitar, but it wasn’t foreign to him. The only problem with Sam was that he now lived in Connecticut, and I wouldn’t cast him without paying for all his travel for the three weekends of filming. More importantly, he fulfilled in real life all the ability requirements that I was looking for, so I casted him and never looked back.

**Locations**

Locations were mostly painless for me, in spite of the fact that I’m not overly familiar with the Rochester area. I set my list of locations early in my outlining process, so that I could hunt for locations even while my story was changing. I had access to a friend’s house that I knew was sorely NOT handicap accessible, which was important for one of my scenes. The most difficult parts in the process for me was finding a space for the kids to be spray painting and the performance space for the climax of the film. In search of these, I had met with the Finger Lakes Film Commission representative Karl Goldsmith. He was able to provide many ideas on possibilities, although the realities of booking the locations still fell on me to complete.

For the spray paint location, we scouted a wall in town known as the Legal Wall. The location was amazing, although poorly lit in a more abandoned part of downtown we had some security concerns about. I delegated procuring the location to my producer Francesco, but after several weeks he came back to me with the news that the location just was not willing to
cooperate. Literally the night before the scheduled shoot, we procured permission of a local liquor store to shoot in their back parking lot. We didn’t have time to get proper permits, but I was able to have a conversation with local law enforcement. We were impersonating police, and had our own set of police lights, and while asking forgiveness instead of permission with permits is a fair risk, impersonating police without their permission ahead of time was not a situation I wanted to put myself and my crew in. Again, Karl Goldsmith helped me make all of my arrangements with the Rochester Police Department, who were extremely helpful.

Most stages we looked at for our ending scenes were booked, didn’t work for us, or were not practical for us to rent. Finally I found the Bread and Water Theatre, a local non-profit theatre company who was available for our date. At a price for $300 for the day, it single handedly consumed my entire projected location budget, but it worked out very well for us.

I have to acknowledge Evan Lowenstein and the Rochester Public Market and their generous help and attitude. I figured it would be the most difficult location for me to book, and it ended up being one of the easiest and most welcoming.

**Equipment**

Truth be told, I am a gearhead. I read reviews, analyze footage, check technical specifications all day long. One of my previous job titles in broadcasting was an engineer, after all. My goal from the beginning of this film was to be oblivious to the technical side of the project. I would describe to Devin the look and tone I’m looking for, and he would make all of the technical choices after that.

We started doing camera tests week one of the fall semester, with our plan being to shoot on the AJA Cion with the Cooke lenses and a little additional filtering in front of the lens
to bloom highlights for a more ‘filmic’ look. We had previously shot on the Cion, and found it to be a finicky camera that has great results if you perform every part of exposing it perfectly. It also has a very sterile look, which is why we were choosing lenses full of character with additional filtering. In this way the optics created a specific cinematic look to counter balance the camera that has a very anesthetic, video look. We were happy enough with the camera tests, but soon two new pieces of information forced us to reevaluate everything. The first being that within the highly competitive reservation system at our equipment cage, other productions were defensively reserving equipment ahead of time and we had little chance of getting the Cooke lenses for our entire production. At the risk of ruining our look for the whole film, we couldn’t rely on the Cion without the Cookes to give us the effect we wanted.

Enter in the second piece of news, that Sony was loaning their newer FS7 camera to the school for the coming year. The FS7 has a bit more character to it, and it shoots in the new Slog 3 color space that shoots in a very colorless look, but provides significant options in post production. After brief discussion with Devin, we decided to forego the Cion in favor of the Sony FS7.

In the end, equipment represented another hard hit to the budget. Of our three weekends, the FS7 was quickly reserved for the first and third weekend. I was able to rent the identical camera from Mark Foggetti, Devin’s thesis advisor, at a rate of $200 per weekend. Next, Devin requested that our second weekend, which was full of exteriors, would have a generator to run power from. This is an understandable request from his part, so I reached out to Mike Drago at Gearhead Rentals, who set us up with a smaller whisper generator for $150.
The whisper part of the rental is important because a generator can easily ruin all on-set sound, but it is slightly better with a generator designed to stay quieter.

**Production Design**

Mimi Ace’s performance as production designer was flawless. Included in the appendices is her original look book, which shows the depth and detail with which she approached everything on screen. I gave her some simple instructions, character descriptions, tone inside different locations. I also encouraged her to consider the film *Once* as a source for inspiration. With precise and timely communication on both our parts, we narrowed in on each character and location’s ‘look’, and then she was able to effortlessly make the vision turn into reality.

My biggest concern is always problems the day of, but we prepared by having thorough conversations about what ‘days’ in the story we were on for which scenes. There were a few days Mimi could not be on set, but she had sent plastic bags full of clothes, perfectly organized by character and scene so that there was never confusion.

**Budget and the Crowdfunding World**

When pitching my thesis, I created a budget that was essentially a worst-case scenario. It included lots of location fees, SAG-AFTRA costs, and other expenses that would be common for a less-discerning filmmaker. I knew the budget I proposed was something I would never be able to afford personally, but my hope was the $2,000-$3,000 I could personally put toward the project would be enough to support the film if we could pinch pennies throughout the project.

As you can see a common theme in my pre-production, extra and over budget expenses ended up being a grim reality of my film. I realized with maybe a month before filming, that I
would run out of money half way through the project. I needed to do something I didn’t want to do: ask people for money.

I generally avoid crowdfunding. I think there is an over-reliance on crowdfunding in independent filmmaking, and except for in special circumstances the support of crowdfunding is unreliable. A market oversaturation occurs when every film hopes to be crowdfunded and can’t find other, more commercially viable sources of capital.

With all of this in consideration, I realized that my graduate thesis film was an easy target for a special occasion for me to actually ask for crowdfunding. Further, it wasn’t as if I didn’t know exactly how much money I was short, and it wasn’t as if I wasn’t putting any of my own money down for the film. So I launched my crowdfunding campaign through Indiegogo, which from my research was the best option for an independent filmmaker at my level.

I set a lofty goal of $3,000, matching the amount of money I personally was putting into the film. In the end, I only raised about $600, and then my final stop-gap fell into place. My very supportive parents put forth another $1,500, which brought me to just over $2,000. This was my approximation of the least amount of money I could put forth and still get the film made. Certain other expenses, such as my composer, I could kick down the road until I came up with more money in the spring.
Production

Directing actors

My biggest responsibility on set, which no one else could help me with, was directing actors. Hence, I put a lot of pressure on myself for this and it always causes me anxiety. I’ve taken both Directing courses at R.I.T., and there was always this list of expectations of how to work with your actors. Some of them I understood, like telling an actor to say a line a certain way ensures they say it that way but probably won’t put the proper emotion behind it. The first stage of directing though, according to the courses, is to simply offer the actor a motivating verb.

I’ve tried this off and on in projects, and I simply find it not to be my forte in starting to direct actors. Sometimes, while refining a performance for a different take, I offer a simple verb and can achieve my desired results. My strength, though, lies in telling stories to my actors. So before most of my scenes, I simply talk to my actors and tell them imaginary stories about their characters, set up scenarios and tell them what I imagine them doing in that scenario. I also tell them about their character’s past. When it comes to Tommy and Lois, I told Sam and Liz stories and information about the people their roles are based on.

Sam was very up front with me not to treat him with kid gloves. As a non-actor, he could be unsure of the approach he would take, and he wanted me to pressure him to achieve that. I ended up staying fairly light in my direction of him, so as not to confuse or overwhelm him. After all, I had created a story where he had a much more simple and direct emotional arc than many of the other roles around him.
I must admit, I played a very mean trick on Amanda. Her very first day on set was shooting the scene she first meets Tommy. And so, I made a point to not introduce them ahead of time. I kept things subtly uncomfortable and awkward on set, and when we set out to shoot this scene, the actors barely knew each other except by name. There was little comfort between them as actors, and you see zero comfort between them as characters on screen. After that scene was complete, I tried to better integrate Amanda into conversation on set and better introduce her to Sam and the rest of the cast and crew.

Liz perhaps represents my greatest mistake as a director during production. The first day of shooting involved shooting both of the bedroom scenes between her and Sam. When Liz arrived and I started prepping her, I tried to give specific motivation verbs. What Liz gave me in her performance was all right, but lacked depth in the character’s mindset and appeared a bit simple. When we broke for lunch between scenes, I started telling Liz more about my Grandmother that her character is based on. She was a strong and stern woman, who behind many complicated layers of beliefs and relationships is entirely motivated out of love. Liz apparently hadn’t realized in the first place that her character was based on a real person, and this explanation and exploration of her character developed as we progressed into the second bedroom scene. During this second scene, I knew we had arrived where we needed to be.

This turned into a larger problem when the day was over and I watched the footage at home. I was left with two different versions of Lois; the overly fawning and careful caretaker from our first scene, and the stern but loving mother in the second scene. The difference in performances was stark, and I was concerned. In the script, Liz had one scene between these two, and the two scenes have a fair amount of time between them onscreen. When we
approached this middle scene at the police station, I had a conversation with Liz to explain to her my error in directing her, and that to overcome this error we would need this performance to bridge the other two scenes. In essence, I needed to see in her the conversion from the adorning mother to the realistic, crass, and loving mother. She understood the goal, and through discussion and experimentation, I think we were able to solve the problem completely.

When it came to Joey, I made a significant confession to Pete that I hadn’t shared with anyone else: Pete’s character is modeled, in part, after myself. I described to Pete my friendship with my own father, the importance of our relationship, my own comfort level with his disability, and about how there are moments in my life that I feel like I have let him down, much like Joey lets Tommy down in not preparing for their competition. Pete ate up all of this information and took some time to process through it. On the day we filmed their fight scene, Pete asked me, “Am I crying during this?”. I explained to him that I think he is pure anger here, and that when he walks away from this, he would go into the house, throw something, and fume for a few minutes before realizing what he has just done, and only at that moment would he start to cry and fall apart completely.

This is the moment I saw the pay-off of my story-telling style of direction.

Our last shot of the day was on Pete’s close-up, in the rain, with some clunky lines and full anger. Pete glowered through the scene. The crew was dead silent each time we cut, a stark change from the normal light chatter and positivity between takes. Everyone on set could feel that Pete arrived at this very different place in his performance, and gave this moment reverence. We did 5 or 6 takes, partially because of line problems, and the last two were perfect. After we wrapped for the day, I found out later Pete had to actually go inside, continue
to be angry for a few minutes, and then see his emotional pressure through to tears. Before he left the set that day, Pete, who again is a strong director in his own right, complimented me for pushing his acting to a place and a level he had never been to before. I cannot think of a greater compliment to receive as a director.

**Rewrites During Production**

A few of the problems I faced once we were in production were large enough the only way to solve them was significant rewrites. Sam without a doubt was the right option to play Tommy, but his musical skills when we began filming were less than I had hoped. The practicing in the bedroom scenes left me feeling that he would never really sound like a polished musician at any level, especially when we were filming his big performance in two weeks.

At this point, the script called for Tommy to perform at the show by himself, after Joey and Tommy make peace backstage. I had been advised that once they make peace, everything else in the movie is extraneous. Listening to Sam sing and play guitar, I knew I needed to simplify things for him or else his ‘performance’ would not be taken seriously. Pete, being a skillful guitarist, opened an avenue for me to solve two problems at once.

I shifted their backstage resolution to the performance itself. It is something I should have considered earlier, because it provides an opportunity to show their mutual forgiveness instead of explaining it all through dialogue. Joey now joins Tommy to perform their song together at the end, and in doing so I was able to shift the guitar playing to the capable Pete, and spend my two weeks of production coaching Sam to a better vocal place. At this point, my background of vocal music performance from my first two years of undergraduate school
suddenly became immensely important, as I was able to personally work with Sam to prepare him for the musical climax of the film.

**Set Life**

My primary factor for choosing R.I.T. for my graduate school experience was the size of the program and the variety of specializing craft track students within the undergraduate student pool. My undergraduate experience was working with very small crews, and my interim professional life I often worked by myself or with a single assistant. My goal in all of my graduate school films was to run a large-scale crew to achieve a level of focused specialization, learn greater trust and delegation, and operate in a controlled, professional procedure and tempo.

I made it clear to my assistant director Camille that this is how I wanted my sets to operate. As she is relatively inexperienced, I did need to take time to explain to her all the details of how a smoothly running set should be. Most of the time, I think we really did maintain a well-oiled set operation, and I was proud of the professionalism everyone showed.

An aspect of this professionalism is that we made good time on set. This year, SOFA officially implemented rules forcing student films to follow union rules for film sets, with the basic daily limitation of twelve hours of work per day. Camille and I carefully planned our days, with Camille looking for details of each day on set that needed done, and my own experience offering accurate approximations for shooting time for different scenes, based on the script, set up time, and special equipment needs. We organized a schedule to shoot six ten-hour days over the course of three weekends. Shooting a ten hour day meant we were making good use of our
time each day, but I still had two hours of space to go over time without violating the school’s rules. I am pleased to say everything ran smooth enough we never went over time.

One axiom of filmmaking is the hurry-up-and-wait effect. Everyone needs to do their job as quickly and accurately as possible, and then you are guaranteed to end up waiting around for the next task. Part of me recruiting a large number of students as crew is that I am assured to have several people who need instruction to do their jobs. In fact, I encourage students who have the drive to work and the want to learn to come onto my set. My process slows somewhat, but the act of having this ‘teaching set’ is also important to me as a personal mindset and for my own future as a professor.

When students are then in this cycle of hurry, wait, hurry, wait, hurry, sometimes they expect too much of themselves when it is time to hurry again. On different occasions, I saw a loss of control as we all rolled up our sleeves to do a complicated setup change. An important lesson I then enforced comes from U.S. Special Forces training, originally taught to me from the movie Shooter: slow is smooth, smooth is fast. When people try to work faster than they are able, they make mistakes, work inefficiently, and generally slow down the entire operation. When I felt we started losing control like this, I would have every person on set stop what they are doing and I would remind them of this fact. Instantly, calmness would spread over the crew and people would start to focus on completing one task at a time. If there is one thing I think my crew learned on my set, it is the fact that to work as fast as possible, you must work slowly.

Beyond this professionalism, we also had a great time. We had several crew who could only come for one or two days out of the six, and while they enjoyed themselves, the core crew grew close friendships.
Post-Production

Rough Screening

Undergraduate thesis films are required to screen a rough-cut in December. As a graduate, I have no such requirement placed on myself by the program, but I decided I had nothing to lose by showing at the rough screening. I had four weeks between wrapping production at the screening, so I knew I needed to work as quickly as I could.

On my previous workshop films, I had intentionally sought out an editor as a way to learn to give up a piece of control and learn how to communicate with another editorial voice in the post-production process. As much as I am thankful for that experience, I became acutely aware that I am a faster editor than most of my peers at R.I.T. So to get a rough cut together in time for screenings, I chose to be my own editor.

With my comfort level with the script, and knowledge of the footage and coverage we had captured, I was able to assemble an assembly edit of the film in an impressive nine hours. For comparison, I usually consider as a rough estimate three hours of editing work for every minute on screen. To assemble what then was a fifteen and a half minute film in nine hours shocked even me.

I was decently happy with the rough-cut I assembled for screenings. I was able to get through three or four edit revisions before screenings, with some initial feedback from other crew members and my advisor, Frank Deese. I became extremely nervous for my screening itself, have no idea if my own vision for the project would be correctly received by the audience.
I was put mostly at ease during the film itself, as I got to hear the audience laughing at certain moments in the film. For me, the laughter showed a good level of engagement with the characters and world of the story, and I knew whatever feedback I received would be for the best of my film, and that I hadn’t missed the mark completely.

Some of the feedback I disagreed with, including comments about Tommy being a character people didn’t like, and the relationship between Tommy and his mother. Other comments about moments that didn’t work, including the climax of the film, I was able to easily see and agree with. The fact is, the climax of the film just kind of happened, without good tension building up to the moment, or a strong enough question about what the outcome actually will be.

The most actionable comment from the screening was regarding a scene before the climax where Joey tries and fails to make amends with Tommy. It was the last scene I had written for the film, only a week before we began shooting. Immediately after the rough screening, I met with my advisory committee to check-in for my progress in the film. We agreed that that scene didn’t work, and that the climax scene was too short.

We had thoughts for many different solutions, the simplest being to simply remove the park scene, and work through existing footage to add tension to the climax of the film. I made slight adjustments to the performance scene, and then completely omitted the park scene. I sent this version to my assistant director Camille and my script supervisor Reuben VanHoeve, without giving them information on any of the specific changes. When they both offered me feedback, neither of them even noticed the scene was gone. The fact that these two people
who knew my story really well hadn’t noticed the change gave me real assurance that removing
the scene was the right choice.

**Editing**

Walking away from rough screenings, I was able to get myself into a comfortable groove
of editing and reflecting. This concept is generally tied to writing; that writing is rewriting. Once
the words are on the page, the real development comes from altering them one piece at a
time. While I’ve always struggled to execute this process properly as a writer, I found it worked
brilliantly for me as an editor.

Each time I sat down to edit, I would only work for maybe one to four hours. I would
then export the entire film, which immediately was uploaded to Google Drive, and easily
distributed to those who I sought feedback from. I could step away from the film for a week or
two, wait for more critical feedback or for my brain to further process certain moments. I could
dive back in for a few hours of work, export again, and seek more feedback. This cycle went on
for several months, and allowed me to focus in on things that my film needed but did not have.
I was able to assemble a list of camera shots and added lines of dialogue to fill holes either in
my story or in the visual pacing of the film.

In the end, I was able to take a sixteen minute film from rough screenings, and reduce it
to a fourteen and a half minute piece. This achievement was done by both compressing and
stretching time. Several moments of the film including the performance scene in the end and
the mother’s sage advice during the second bedroom scene, needed to be significantly
extended to work. To compensate, I had to shave a lot of time out from every other scene in
the film. I felt I had finally finished when I reached a place where each scene felt as short as it could be, giving a proper time commitment to the content involved.

**Pick-Ups**

Using placeholders during the editing process, I was able to pre-visualize the exact shots I needed to gather. Getting these shots required me again spending money to bring my lead actor, Sam, to Rochester from Connecticut, so I needed to know everything I needed to I could gather it all in one weekend.

Devin and I went out with Sam to gather our six shots, a very different experience from the large crew in principal photography. Within a few hours, between three different locations, we had exactly what we needed to complete the film. With the new footage in place, it was only a few more revisions before I had arrived at picture lock and was able to forward everything to my post production team.

The final step was shooting an opening to the film. I wanted something interesting, organic, and beautiful. I also wanted Devin to shoot the sequence without my watching over his shoulder, telling him what to do. I encouraged him to just go and get footage he was proud of and turn that in to me. What seemed like a simple idea turned into a significant delay for getting an opening to the film. Between Devin’s busy schedule and freak weather occurrences that would never match out opening scene, it took Devin over a month past our expected completion time to get me the footage.

**Color**

One of the last additions to the team was a colorist. Devin and I both have a certain amount of experience with color, and so originally we had assumed we would sort of share the
duties of getting the film’s color to an aesthetic place we desired. At the fall screenings in December, we saw several pieces shot or colored by Clancy Morgan, that had such a beautiful, artistic color. We immediately wanted Clancy on our team.

Clancy is in high demand for all of the reasons we wanted him, and so getting him to agree took a little negotiation. He would only have time to do my film if I was able to get it to him early enough, and so I needed to have picture lock done early enough. I got everything to him in time, and we communicated well as we worked on the color.

The biggest mistake I had made in setting the look of the film, was in always describing the film as “warm.” Mimi Ace filled my sets and costumes with warmth, and lots of red clothing. Devin Fay kept the lighting and white balances in a warm, orange-y tone. So when Clancy gave me his first pass of the film with a “warm” feel to it, I suddenly realized I had lost all other colors, left with an orange mono-chrome film that seemed like it was on another planet. I quickly had to redefine and clarify with Clancy my desires for the film, and in the end he kept the film warm while backing off the warmth in highlights, so that the images still had a more natural presence.

The most frustrating scene to color was also the last one we finished. The first scene in the bedroom is also the first one we shot as a crew. Being day-for-night, we blacked out all of the windows and used an HMI light to simulate moonlight coming in from outside. For this first scene, that light was not properly aimed, and it gave off a strange green spike of color. We controlled the light better for the second bedroom scene, though we still had to fix that green color spike (Figure 3). Once we finally agreed on how to fix the scene, Clancy had finished the color correction of the film with plenty of time to spare.
Sound

After picture lock, I was able to also get all of the sound files to Josh. He had quite a job ahead of him, since his recorder, the sound devices 664, recorded eight tracks of audio through most of production. Often several of these channels might have been empty, so Josh had substantial up-front work in simply cleaning out and organizing so many channels of audio.

Before shooting the pick-ups, Josh and I also went through all the audio in detail, and felt confident that we had clean enough audio in each of our scenes. If we needed automated dialogue replacement, or ADR, to fix bad audio in any scenes, we really needed to know and arrange the session while Sam was in Rochester for the reshoots. Confident we had clean audio, we just needed to set up a session for added lines.

In reviewing the edits of the film, my advisor Frank Deese had some suggestions that adding lines to certain parts of the film would smooth over transitions or clarify errors. I needed
to write all of the added dialogue before Sam came into town, but we were able to get everything we needed.

Josh was able to do all of the cleanup and add in several pieces of important sound effects to elevate sections of the film. Several transitions were improved thanks to footsteps and ambiences, and several quiet moments of the film were filled out with thoughtful effects, instead of just being left empty or filled with score.

**Music**

From the beginning, I knew music would be important. I have a close relationship with composer David Mitchell, who is a professional based in Los Angeles. I expected him to be doing interesting, extensive scoring throughout the film. Step by step through the process, the film kept gradually shifting from a little bit of music on screen and a lot of score, to tons of music within the film and very little score.

While screenwriting, I knew I had reached a larger level of music within the film. When I started editing, the music performed in the film more and more started working as easy and clean transitions between scenes. I was left with only the beginning, end, and a few specific points inside the film that would require music.

In the end, working with David was a great experience as always. David didn’t want to fully dive in to scoring until the opening of the film was complete, so that delay in completion pushed David’s work right up to the last minute. David and I finally had our spotting session, and identified five clear spots where we wanted to elevate scenes with score. With not a ton of time left, David was able to churn through creating the score with ample time left for revisions and mixing.
Audience Reaction

Due to my nervousness, when my film was next to screen I stood in the back of the auditorium to watch the audience more than my movie. It was a good choice. The audience was clearly engaged throughout the film, laughing at all the appropriate moments and quietly captivated by the drama.

After the film screened, I read my prepared artist statement which clued the audience in to my views as a filmmaker and my inspirations for this film. I also encouraged the audience and other filmmakers present to be aware that the representation of minorities matters. We have a responsibility to have characters who are different to tell our stories, and to do so we must cast authentic minority groups, such as the disabled, within our projects. My artist’s statement must have struck a chord with much of the audience, as I was approached by many people afterward telling me that my artist’s statement was as powerful as my film.

During the question and answer, all of the feedback was very positive. Malcolm Spaull, the chair of the School of Film and Animation, commended me for fixing the climax of the film in the concert hall. Several audience members commended me on my directing of the actors and control of tone in the film. Many people loved the comedic timing. I was asked how much of the character of Tommy was what I wrote versus what Sam Cohen brought to the table, and I explained that in essence, I had written Sam. I had Sam hold back in his performances, since he is a non-actor, meanwhile surrounding him with a truly great supporting cast. Finally, one student thanked me for the impact I have had on the lives and educations of so many students, and that I will be missed. I was and still am humbled.
Conclusion

I still watch my film and see every mistake and missed opportunity, but at some point the filmmaker must hand their work to the audience, to have them do what they will with it. After a year of constant work, I have handed my film to the audience, and they love it. My film can stand on its own and proudly represents my abilities as a filmmaker.
Screenshots

OTBURST

A Benjamin Strack Film
Screenshots
Screenshots

Written and Directed by
Benjamin Strack
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MFA degree in the School of Film and Animation, Rochester Institute of Technology

Copyright 2017 Benjamin Strack
Barrier-Free
(Working Title)

By Benjamin Strack

A Live-Action Short Fiction

Approved for Submission by

__________________________________________________________
Frank Deese, Thesis Chair
**Logline:** For a young boy to be treated with respect, he must convince himself and those around him to embrace the struggle and stop making things easy.

**Treatment:** TOMMY (16), is an outsider on the streets of an urban city. We see him sitting on the sidewalk, busking for money. He plays the harmonica. After gathering some funds, he reaches around the wall behind him and drags out his wheelchair. He climbs in and heads off down the street.

Tommy meets up with three of his friends. None of them have disabilities. Tommy is much more pleasant and funny than the rest of them, but they’re all family. They’re meeting at a hot dog cart, and Tommy doesn’t quite have enough money from busking to buy the hot dog. The hot dog vendor smiles at him and give him a hot dog anyway. The friends small talk, and then head out at dusk to cause mischief.

The four of them are out at night tagging a wall in the city. They start throwing rocks through the windows at the entrance to the building. To move into the building, the friends gather around Tommy’s wheelchair and carry him up the stairs in front.

As they continue spray painting inside the building, red and blue lights start flashing and a police cruiser pulls up. Everyone runs, except Tommy, who wheels away as fast as he can. The officers on foot quickly catch up to him. They stop him but seem willing to let him go, until he tells them to go fuck themselves and runs over one of their feet with his wheelchair. They lift him up and place him in the cruiser, and place his wheelchair in their trunk.

Tommy is delivered home to his mother, LOIS (44). Their house is full of expensive wheelchair ramps, extra wheelchairs, specialty tables and accessibility equipment. His mother wears scrubs, and is very thankful for the police officers bringing Tommy home. Lois yells at Tommy, because he is now facing several misdemeanor charges, but Tommy laughs it off with a joke and a smile.

Tommy arrives at the after-school music program, the same building he was breaking into the night before. The building is not handicapped accessible. Tommy gets out of his wheelchair and scoots up the steps on his butt, dragging the wheelchair behind him. This is a painfully long scene to watch, and everyone collectively breathes a sigh of relief when Tommy gets to the top safely.

Inside, Tommy meets Art. Art is a musician and teacher, willing to let Tommy help around the place. If Tommy can make things right with Art, Art will speak on Tommy’s behalf at his court hearing. This could go a long way to getting Tommy’s charges dropped. Tommy starts by doing mundane tasks around the place.

A few days later, and Art asks Tommy to help by giving lessons to one of the kids, Joey. Tommy accepts, and with some humor, he gets along great with the kid. We get to hear them play some music.

Tommy wheels past the hot dog vendor on the side of the street. The hot dog vendor asks if he’d like a hot dog, but Tommy says no thanks because he doesn’t have any money.
At night, Lois continues trying to baby Tommy and make his life easier as if he had no disability. Tommy begrudgingly goes with it.

At the end of a night, Art and Tommy are hanging out at the studio with their instruments, and end up having a little jam session. Tommy feels bad that his actions hurt Joey.

It's finally Tommy’s day in court, and he buying a hot dog from the vendor when he runs into his three old friends. They are very thankful he never turned them in, and ask if Tommy wants to go hang out. They try to get Tommy to get extra sympathy hot dogs from the vendor. Tommy refuses, and continues to his house.

As soon as he enters, Lois launches a barrage of questions about why he is hanging out with his old friends again. Tommy barely has a chance to explain himself. Lois has done everything she can to take care of him since he got sick as a toddler. We see him truly get angry for the first time, but they storm out to head to court without a word.

Tommy arrives in court. He remains silent as different people talk about him. Art finally gives a moving speech about the impact Tommy has had on the place.

Tommy finally speaks on his own behalf, presenting a much rougher version of himself than we’re used to. He tells the judge to just find him guilty because he deserves what is coming to him.

Art and Lois interrogate Tommy while the judge is deliberating. Tommy barely has a chance to explain himself. We see him truly get angry for the first time. He screams at his mother for treating him like he is still diseased, for not accepting him as he is. She cries. He explains that to him, the greatest part of his community service isn’t the music with the kids, it’s climbing the stairs in and out of the building every day. He embraces the struggle. Lois apologizes for trying to fix his disability so that they could pretend it didn’t exist. They embrace.

The judge comes back out and says he’s trying to reconcile the man on paper and as Tommy has self-described himself, with the man who all of these people speak so highly of. The judge finds him guilty.

The next day at the after-school program, we get one last chance to watch Tommy make his way up the stairs into the building. Tommy greets Art, and they mention that his sentence is to serve 100 hours of community service for the after-school program. Tommy gets to work tutoring the kids.

**Rationale:** After running through many ideas of films that interest me, films that have audience appeal, films that would be easier undertakings, I arrived at this idea based on the character of my own father, the influence of my wife, and my own views on life. My premise is that life needs struggle. My main character arises from imagining my own father as a young boy. He always looks to what next instead of overthinking how things could be better. The fact that he is in a wheelchair defines him to others, but he never, ever uses it as an excuse. This attitude would not occur overnight. So I’m creating a
story for how a young disabled boy would come to this realization at the same time he is moving through all of the normal change and rebellion of that age.

Finally, as I live my own life and struggle through obstacles, I often wish I had the optimism in here to see past what is directly in front of us, and imagine a bold future. If through this story I can help myself and others accept our life for what it is right now without feeling sorry for ourselves, and still imagine the biggest, brightest dreams we can, I think I will accomplish something great with this film.

**Vision:** Tommy should be raw, sarcastic comedy. The nature of this film revolves around some very serious drama, and to prevent the film from being a depressing, over dramatic journey, I want our characters to keep things light and funny whenever possible.

I want to see Tommy’s disability in a visceral way. I want the audience to uncomfortably watch Tommy struggle just to get up or down stairs with his wheelchair. Most people aren’t familiar with people in wheelchairs, or how to interact with them, and I hope that people can walk out of this film with some new idea of their world.

**Responsibilities and Support:** Devin Fay will be taking on the responsibilities as Director of Photography, which will count toward his own thesis work. Josh Banach has agreed to do the on-set and post sound for the film, though this is beyond the two projects he is proposing for his thesis. Francesco D’Amanda will be helping me to produce. Other support comes from relationships I have made on previous sets, including many undergraduates with whom I trust to work hard and be professional. My wife Jennifer will support me in life and with catering on set. David Mitchell will return as my composer, with whom I have a great working relationship.
Basic Timeline:

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Deadlines:
8/22 - On Draft three, polishing  
8/27 - All gear reserved, Most crew finalized  
9/9 - Location Scouts Complete - File permits within 1 week  
9/16 - Auditions begin  
9/23 - Shot lists/Storyboards complete  
9/30 - Casting Complete, send out offers  
10/5-10/19 - Rehearsals  
10/22-11/13 - Principal Photography  
12/8 - Rough Cut due for Screenings (if possible)  
January 2017 - Fine Cut Editing, determine need for pick-ups  
February 2017 - Possible Indoor Pickups  
February 2017 - Detailed dialogue with Sound Designer and Composer  
3/3 - Picture Lock  
March 2017 - Color Correction  
April 2017 - Last Chance Exterior Pickups  
4/28 - Composer Score Due  
5/5 - Final Sound Mix Due  
5/12 - Final Thesis Due for Screenings  
5/14 - Graduate Thesis Screenings
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Outburst

Written By

Benjamin Strack

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FADE IN:

1. EXT. STREET - DAY

Simple GUITAR MUSIC plays. Young hands on an old guitar manipulate the strings. We see the face of a TOMMY(16) half singing-half humming along.

We see him sitting on the sidewalk at the corner of a building, with just a bit of foot traffic passing by. A hat sits open in front of him with a bit of money in it.

An OLD MAN drops some pocket change in the hat as he walks by. Tommy leans forward and looks in it, SIGHS. He grabs a soft case, with labels on it reading BACK OFF and TOMMY's, and puts his guitar away. He then reaches around the wall he sits against to grab his WHEELCHAIR. He opens it and pulls himself up into it.

As Tommy hangs the guitar case onto the back of the chair, a BUSINESS MAN in a suit drops a ten dollar bill in the hat. As Tommy looks down at it, he looks at the back of the head of the man walking away.

    TOMMY
    Mister!

The man glances over his shoulder at Tommy, gives a wave, then continues walking.

Tommy grabs his hat, keeps the ten dollar bill in his hand, and takes off after the man.

    TOMMY
    Mister, you didn't even hear me play!

    BUSINESS MAN
    (without turning around)
    It's okay, kid.

Tommy catches up to the man, holding out the ten dollar bill. The man starts jogging to get away.

    TOMMY
    Keep your damn pity money!

Tommy chases the man, running away down the street.

OPENING CREDITS

2. EXT. PLAYGROUND BENCH - DAY
Tommy wheels up to JOEY(17) who is sitting on a park bench playing guitar. Joey smiles at seeing Tommy, and Tommy starts humming and ooing along to Joey's music. A little bit of improvised collaboration before Joey finishes off the song. As they finish, Tommy throws the ten dollar bill in Joey's hat.

    TOMMY
    More wheelchair money? How'd you do otherwise?

    JOEY
    Eh, couple bucks. You?

    TOMMY
    Same. We gonna finish the new song tonight?

    JOEY
    Ehhh, I kinda got some other things going on.

    TOMMY
    Alright.

Joey starts packing up his own guitar.

    JOEY
    We'll be fine. If it comes to it, we can whip out one of our other songs.

Joey's guitar is away, and he walks up next to Tommy.

    JOEY
    Want a push?

    TOMMY
    Sure!

Joey grabs a hold, and Tommy starts turning his wheels over in his hands. We see Joey is actually on a skateboard being dragged behind Tommy, but Joey does finally start helping.

3. INT. TOMMY'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Tommy sits on his bed with his guitar and a notepad and pencil. He plays a sequence of chords and is auditioning different lyrics to go along with it.

There is a KNOCK at the door.
Tommy's mother LOIS(50) brings in reheated spaghetti dinner in for Tommy. She wears her hair back in a ponytail and is still in scrubs from working all day.

   LOIS
   Hey there. I know you're hard at work, but you gotta eat!
   
   TOMMY
   Yep.

Lois sits the plate down next to Tommy, who keeps making notes in his pad.

   LOIS
   Aren't you and Joey rehearsing tonight?
   
   TOMMY
   He has something else going on. We'll be at it all night tomorrow.
   
   LOIS
   I bet you two will come up with something really great.

Tommy finally stops to reach for his plate and starts to eat. With his mouth full, he throws out a-

   TOMMY
   Thanks, mom.

-to dismiss her so he can get back to work.

4. INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

Tommy is out of his wheelchair and scooting up the few steps into Joey's kitchen. Joey waits in the kitchen for Tommy.

Tommy finishes climbing inside and gets back into his chair.

   JOEY
   I'm thinking of changing up the bridge for the new song.
   
   TOMMY
   Lets fit my new lyrics in first, and see where we're at.
   
   JOEY
   Uh, before we practice...

There is a KNOCK at the door.
KRISTIN(16) stands on the other side of the storm door, and smiles as Joey approaches.

    JOEY
    I invited my, uh, friend Kristin over.

    KRISTIN
    Hey.

Joey opens the door and invites her in.

    JOEY
    Hey Kristin. You remember Tommy, right?

Tommy and Kristin awkwardly smile at each other. Kristin gives Tommy a little wave.

    KRISTIN
    Of course. How's it going?

    TOMMY
    (short)
    Good.

    KRISTIN
    Good! Joey was talking about grabbing ice cream at the exchange?

    TOMMY
    Oh he was, was he?

    JOEY
    We have plenty of time to practice!

    TOMMY
    (resigned)
    Alright.

5. EXT. PUBLIC MARKET - DAY

Joey leads Kristin and then Tommy toward a crowd at the market, with different vendors and a couple food trucks.

Joey reaches for Kristin's hand and looks to Tommy.

    JOEY
    Let's go!

They make their way through the crowd as Tommy approaches the sea of people. The path Joey and Kristin found is definitely not wide enough for a wheelchair. Tommy moves forward
anyway.

TOMMY
Excuse me. Excuse me! Sorry.

We see Tommy's face surrounded by butts as he moves through, largely ignored.

TOMMY
Hey, hi, hellooo! Thanks.

Levi's, capris, and a few dresses form a cage. Tommy keeps moving through the crowd, slowly. A DUDE steps backwards, almost falling into Tommy's lap.

DUDE
Whoa!

The cacophony builds with CHATTER and LAUGHTER as Tommy must shout louder and louder through the crowd.

TOMMY
Hey assholes, how about paying attention for once!

Everyone stops.

With this, Tommy finally has the attention of a good portion of the crowd around him. They stare at him, a little shocked.

TOMMY
Excuse me.

Tommy finishes moving through the crowd, much easier that before.

6. EXT. PUBLIC MARKET - MOMENTS LATER

Tommy, Joey, and Kristin sit eating their ice cream cones, Joey and Kristin sitting on a low-slung brick wall.

Joey and Kristin are giggling as Joey laughs at the melting ice cream dripping on Kristin's hand.

Tommy sits there fuming, ignoring the other two.

7. INT. JOEY'S BASEMENT - NIGHT

Tommy sits in his chair tuning his guitar. Kristin is in the background laying on a broken-down couch, sketching. Joey sits between them on his amp. Joey is restless, Tommy is frustrated.
Joey is explaining some chords to Tommy but watching for Kristin's reaction the whole time.

    JOEY
    Mystery girl, come on over.
    Mystery girl, won't you sit next to me?

Joey gives a smirk to Kristin. She rolls her eyes. Tommy glares at Joey.

    TOMMY
    Right. And that's why we leave the lyrics to me.

    JOEY
    Sure.

Joey gives Kristin a wink.

    TOMMY
    You're taking it so much faster now, and I don't think it works with the message anymore.

Joey is finally turning his attention back to Tommy.

    JOEY
    If we slow it down more, it won't have that punch the people want. What do you think, Kristin?

Kristin puts down her pencil and notepad.

    KRISTIN
    Leave me out of this. I think you two could fight for an eternity about nothing.

    JOEY
    No, maybe she's right, why don't we get out of here for a bit.

Joey starts to put away his guitar. Tommy starts shaking his head.

    TOMMY
    We really just-

    JOEY
    I got an idea.

8. EXT. INDUSTRIAL MURAL - NIGHT
Joey, Tommy, and Kristin stand in an abandoned parking lot. It is a quiet night: few people, no cars. Joey is carrying a beatup backpack.

Joey zips open the bag and starts handing our cans of spray paint.

**JOEY**
Let's leave our mark on this city.

Joey shakes a can of spray paint and hands it over to Kristin.

**JOEY**
For the artist...

**TOMMY**
This is crazy.

Joey shrugs and finds part of the wall to paint.

They each start spray painting different parts of the wall under the bridge.

They laugh and have fun, and Joey is making a heart with **JOEY + KRISTIN** inside. Tommy finally starts spraying **EARTH WITHOUT ART IS 'EH'**.

Kristin is still staring at the wall in front of her thinking. She finally looks over at the other two.

**KRISTIN**
Guys, we're supposed to be contributing to the mural...

Police lights start flashing across the painted wall.

**JOEY**
That's our cue!

Joey drops the spray can and motions for them all to run.

**KRISTIN**
I got Tommy.

Kristin grabs Tommy's wheelchair and starts pushing - hard. Tommy grabs hold of his wheels to brake himself.

**TOMMY**
Hey!

**KRISTIN**
What's wrong?
TOMMY
How about asking if you can push!

KRISTIN
You're choosing right now to teach me a lesson?!

Tommy puts on his brakes and leans forward to wait. Kristin tries shoving him along a few more times.

Tommy doesn't move, but stares her down as she walks around in front of him.

KRISTIN
Fine.

Kristin turns around and runs to catch up to Joey.

OFFICER #1
Stop!

Tommy calming faces the approaching officers with his hands in his lap.

EXT. INDUSTRIAL MURAL - MOMENTS LATER

Officer #1 writes notes in his notepad standing next to Tommy. Officer #2 returns from behind the building where Joey and Kristin disappeared.

OFFICER #1
Alright now, why don't you just head on home.

Tommy is slack-jawed.

TOMMY
Are you kidding me?

OFFICER #2
Come on, kid. We're doing you a favor.

Tommy moves toward officer #2 and runs over his foot.

TOMMY
Why don't you go screw yourself.

It takes the officers a second to react to the sudden outburst.

OFFICER #2
Have it your way!
They each catch Tommy and start dragging him and his wheelchair back toward their cruiser while he struggles.

10. INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Tommy sits alone at a table in a conference room. A can of soda sits in front of him, but he doesn't drink. The door opens, and Lois walks in in a fury.

    LOIS
    What in the hell were you thinking?

    TOMMY
    It's not a huge deal.

    LOIS
    Not a huge deal? You assaulted one of them!

    TOMMY
    Well, maybe if they didn't baby me, I'd respect them.

Lois sits down in a chair next to Tommy, somewhat calmer.

    LOIS
    And I assume Joey was there with you?

    TOMMY
    Like I told the officers, I have no idea who else was there.

Lois knows he is lying, but moves on.

    LOIS
    Fine. They've agreed not to press charges, and you're an even bigger fool if you think you're getting out of school tomorrow.

11. EXT - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Tommy angrily knocks on the storm door outside Joey's kitchen.

    TOMMY
    What the hell was that last night?

    JOEY
    I didn't know what to do, so I ran!
TOMMY
Seems to be your new M. O.,
worrying about yourself.

JOEY
Can we just skip the fight and go
practice?

TOMMY
Screw you. I'm doing the
competition alone.

Joey doesn't know how to react.

JOEY
Maybe I will too.

Tommy starts to wheel away.

JOEY
There goes Tommy. Always gotta be
special.

Tommy turns around at 'special'.

TOMMY
What the fuck do you mean by that?

JOEY
(poorly impersonating
Tommy)
Well, I don't know if you noticed,
but I'm handicapped. I don't know
if you noticed me at all in fact.
But don't notice me too much, I
want you to feel sorry for me but
don't really feel sorry for me!

TOMMY
Is that how it is?

JOEY
Oh, I think you know. It's easy to
call someone self-centered when you
think the whole world revolves
around your wheelchair.

Silence falls between them.

TOMMY
We're done.

Tommy turns around and wheels away.
FINE!

Tommy doesn't even turn to respond.

12. INT. TOMMY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Tommy's chair sits empty next to his bed. Tommy sits on the bed with his guitar, and a notebook and pencil are in front of him. A few random papers with lyrics and chords scatter the bed.

Tommy starts playing a song.

TOMMY
(singing)
And all you hypocrite assholes can all go and screw yourselves...

He stops to tweak something in the notebook.

There is a KNOCK at the door, Lois peaks her head in.

LOIS
What are you working on? Sounds different.

TOMMY
I'm just trying to come up with something new for tomorrow night.

LOIS
I thought Joey had a new song you guys were going with?

TOMMY
No. I'm going to play alone.

LOIS
Did something happen between you two-

TOMMY
It doesn't matter.

Lois crosses the room and sits in Tommy's wheelchair, leaning in toward him.

LOIS
Tommy. It's one thing to be an angry young man, just don't grow up to be a bitter old one.

Tommy puts down his guitar.
LOIS
You're throwing away everything
that, just a week ago, was pretty
important to you. Just think about
it first.

Lois pats Tommy on the shoulder before she turns and leaves
the room. As she closes the door, Tommy starts to play his
angry chord progression again.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Tommy sits in front of his hat on the street playing his
angry music. Joey approaches as Tommy finishes the song.

Joey looks in Tommy's hat.

JOEY
You should get the wheelchair out.
You'd be doing better.

TOMMY
You really are a gigantic asshole.

JOEY
Yeah. (beat) I am really sorry
about everything I said yesterday.

Tommy starts packing his guitar.

TOMMY
Sure you are. Anything else?

JOEY
And... I'm really hoping we can
still play the show together
tonight. We're a duo!

TOMMY
Why on earth would I still play a
show with you tonight? You're still
only apologizing to help yourself.

JOEY
Come on, we've been looking forward
to this for so long!

TOMMY
No. I'm- I'm doing this thing
alone. I don't even want to see you
there.
JOEY
Alright. Whatever, man.

Joey calmly walks away, defeated.

14. INT. BACKSTAGE - EVENING

Tommy struggles to hop up a particularly big single step backstage of the theater. People come and go, working backstage, but are oblivious to Tommy. He finally hops up and moves toward the curtain.

Tommy watches the audience and a performer through a small gap in the curtain.

15. INT. AUDITORIUM - LATER

On the stage, Tommy wheels out with his guitar. He approaches the microphone.

TOMMY
Hey everyone. I'm Tommy.

The room is fairly quiet. Tommy's anger builds as he's trapped in the head.

TOMMY
I hope you'll vote for me because my song is great, and not because of the wheelchair.

Tommy takes a deep breath, and starts to play his angry chord progression. Before he even starts to sing, he looks to the back of the audience.

Joey and Kristin make their way in through the back to sit next to Lois.

Tommy's strumming slowly slows down and then the chord just hangs for a moment.

TOMMY
Actually, I want to play you something that I can't do alone. My friend Joey here wrote the music, so it's only right that he plays it.

Joey looks uncomfortable, but gets up and moves to the stage. A stagehand comes out with a chair so he can sit next to Tommy.
JOEY
You sure about this?

TOMMY
We're a duo!
(beat)
Slow, remember?

Joey starts playing the slower version of his original chord progression. Tommy finally show's off his own lyrics to "The Old Flattop", a song about his guitar.

It's a nice song, not a billboard top 100, but it has a lot of heart.

We see Lois and Kristin oozing with pride.

INT. LOBBY - LATER

Some UNKNOWN WINNER finishes getting their picture taken with the GOLDEN PICK award. Lois and Kristin are waiting for Joey and Tommy as they exit from a sidedoor. Lois moves in first for a hug.

LOIS
There's always next year.

Joey looks uncomfortable and scratches the back of his neck.

JOEY
Didn't want me here, huh?

Tommy looks from Joey to Kristin and back.

TOMMY
You're still a gigantic asshole.

Tommy leads the four of them out of the lobby. Now the crowd sees him and makes room. Tommy receive more than a few thumbs up and high fives as they exit the theater.

FADE OUT.

The End
WARDROBE: **TOMMY**

Standoffish, muted, very casual as if to not draw attention to himself
Darker, muted, simple colors—gray, black, brown, navy, maroon
Darker wash jeans, flannel/plaid shirt, more grungey graphic shirts, simple patterns like stripes or colorblocked.

darker than this maroon though ^^^
WARDROBE: **KRI\-\-STIN**
Teenage girl, wants to look cute to impress Joey but cool in a “I don’t care, but I do” sort of way, slightly hipster, coffee + music lover, probably is still figuring out what makeup looks good.
Browns, whites, tans, and pops of reds and pinks in patterns/accessories.
Comfortable, slouchy tops and sweaters, high-waisted shorts + tights / leggings, boots.
High-waisted skinny jeans, crop tops, and long cardigans
Floral prints, distressed jeans, knit sweaters and cardigans, long pendant necklaces, white shirts and black leggings/tights.
WARDROBE: JOEY
Approachable, likable, comfortable but nice
Lighter, brighter colors— lots of light blues, soft grays, pops of yellow and orange.
Lighter wash jeans, light gray jeans, light brown/khaki pants
Simple graphic shirts, white shirts, jean button downs, brighter sweaters/hoodies/jackets
WARDROBE: **POLICE**

Black pants, black long sleeved button down
Black belt, black tie, name tag, patches on sleeves?
walkie talkie, flashlight
SET DEC: **TOMMY’S ROOM**

The bed is perfect. Band poster / collage all over room, maybe movie posters, stickers, snarky posters

<<< does not have to be this intense at all
not covering entire wall from top to bottom, more sparse
and less “heavy metal” looking
SET DEC: **JOEY’S BASEMENT**
Boxes, plastic containers, basement storage essentials scattered in background. Small, cleaner area where they play music—filled with thrift-store, broken-down furniture, old lamps, decorated with fun band/movie posters.

**NEED**
- a couch + small chair maybe?? (we can buy these for $10-$15 at any thrift store)
- posters, small decorations
- probably an old lamp, if they don’t have one (can get one for cheap at thrift store)
- will see what kind of posters I can find