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An interview with Dean Leon Anderson on *Class 15*

Richard Raskin

Do you recall how you first got the idea of telling this particular story?

I completed a short film called *Ribbon*, and knew I wanted to make another drama short, but I reflected on how much *Ribbon* had cost me to make with multiple locations and lots of actors. I decided my next short film would be shot in a day, with only two or three actors, and in one location, so I would be able to cover the entire budget myself. I thought about some of the best scenes I had seen in movies between two or three characters where tensions were high. The first scene that came to mind was in *The Believer* (2001) where the journalist interviews Danny Balint about being a K.K.K member in a café. The second was the opening scene of Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011) whereby we witness a married couple divorcing in a family court. Both scenes to me were memorable, and seemed possible to shoot in a day with little money and less than a handful of actors. I thought more about my own experiences of having tension in a room, and remembered a parents evening when my English teacher asked my mother bluntly that I should drop her course, and focus on my other two college subjects. This was something I did not want to do, and my mother felt the same way, so there was a lot of tension there. Thankfully I stuck to my English course and passed, but I carried that evening around with me for a long time after, and felt this would be an interesting story on film. Once I wrote the first draft, I read online that the company B3 Media was looking for strong short scripts to fund, and I applied and was selected on to their Talent Lab scheme.

You mention in your production journal that advice from Ken Dancyger and Marc Boothe helped you to improve the script. Can you tell specifically what changes you made in response to their suggestions?

As I had already written the script under the assumption I would shoot it in a day, there was not much backstory to these three characters. It was initially only set in a classroom. As I was in a new position of having some funding for the short, Ken and Marc encouraged me to write a new scene with a backstory for the mother and daughter. The first three minutes of the film is the backstory I worked on with them, set 10 years before what I had already written. Both Ken and Marc also have great knowledge of films, and I was encouraged to watch a list of movies before I wrote a new draft. The films on the list that had the most influence on my new draft were *The Class* (2008), *In A Better World* (2010) *Incendies* (2010) and *Carnage* (2011)

Why did you choose Class 15 as the title?

As the short film was initially set in only one location, I wanted to make a reference to it in the title. I also thought about how old Alicia, the student might be, and it was 15 or 16 years old, based on the context of their parents evening discussion. Class 15 seemed like a good title. I'm currently writing a feature length film based on this short, and the term Class 15 now has a slightly different meaning. It's now more to do with a temporary alternative classroom that students go to if they are behaving poorly in class. Or as students would put it "where the troublemakers go".

Main roles are perfectly filled by the actors you chose: Sharon Duncan-Brewster as Zahra, Sophia Hall as Alicia, Anthony Houghton as Mr Campbell and Neil Reidman as Winston. Can you tell me about these casting decisions?

I was aware of Sharon's great acting talent, as I had seen both series of the UK Channel 4 drama *Top Boy*. I had written the script with her voice and presence in mind, so it was only right that I pursue her once the script was ready, and hope that she was interested and available. I saw Sophia Hall in a short film called *Glamour Life* (Dir. Ben Peters, 2013) and felt she had the right qualities needed to pull off such a fierce, streetwise and popular young student that I had written. I also auditioned 10 other girls for her role, but Sophia nailed her audition too. I auditioned two actors at the same time, as so many people applied for the teacher and student roles, and Sophia and Anthony (whom played Mr. Campbell) had such great chemistry in the audition. The words I had written suddenly came to life with these two actors; I offered them the roles the next day. I was stuck with finding someone who could play Winston, and thankfully, a fellow film director Dean Charles had recently worked with Neil on his feature film and recommended him.

I understand that it was difficult to find a suitable location for the shoot. Can you tell a little about that challenge?

While writing a new draft during the Talent Lab scheme, I began to look for a suitable classroom for the shoot. I wanted to avoid having production designers, as I still had a small budget despite some funding from the scheme. My ideal

location would be a secondary school classroom already decorated that we could just go into, put a few school posters up and just shoot. I thought this would be a very easy task, but most schools turned me down. Schools ignored me, ask for more money, or did not have the staff to manage a film shoot. Other schools wanted to have final approval on my script before they would agree. This meant likely taking out profanity and some content I'd written. I had spent a lot of time on the script at that point, so I would not agree to those terms. The perfect location took weeks to find, but the breakthrough came when I found a website called Schools Plus, which hires out classrooms during school holidays. The guy that booked us at Schools Plus was also a part-time actor, so we did not have to explain what we intended to shoot, and the daily rate was reasonable.

Is there anything you can tell me about the ways in which you chose to direct your actors – both the adults and the children?

I try as much as I can to rehearse actors prior to getting on set. The rehearsal time is the best time to discuss the character's motivation, how actors should deliver their lines, and what ideas they may want to include. There is just no time to have these discussions on set. By the time you have set up the lights, camera, and the actors have had their clothes and makeup done, it seems like three hours has already gone by. You need to work fast, so having that time to work it all out in advance is important. If actors want to try their lines another way, I'll get my version shot first, then I'll let them experiment a bit more. I also do a quick rehearsal of the scene on set, so the actors can get used to their environment and the cinematographer can test his or her camera. This was the first time working with children, but both actors had experience on film sets before, so they took direction well. Apart from telling them not to look into the camera occasionally, they were very professional.

Was Class 15 intended to be a 'proof of concept' film from the start? If so, did thinking of the film in those terms mean dealing with the storytelling or the production in any ways that differed from what you would have done if it simply made as a short film with no feature film project as a follow-up?

No, Class 15 did not start out as a 'proof of concept' short towards a feature length film. As Marc and Ken encouraged me to think more about the characters' backstories, I had more ideas about how the characters all came together, and what would happen after the parents evening, so I began to keep notes. I was also aware of such films as Half Nelson (2006) and Whiplash (2014) getting funding after a short 'proof of concept' short was made to help investors visualise the feature better, so that motivated me. Had it been a short film alone, perhaps the last scene would be less open ended. The film also ends from the perspective of the teacher, not the mother, whom we opened the film with. This was intentional, as the feature will be a multi-layered character film. With such strong characters, I wanted to tell each of their stories over a feature length film, instead of focusing on one protagonist, so the short alludes to that idea.

Do you think there are any fundamental differences between short film and feature film storytelling?

This has been my first full feature script, and I have approached writing it in the same way I did the short film, so there hasn't been too many differences. A feature film story allows you to expand on the characters more, which a short doesn't always allow time for. Short films can be great for experimenting with certain stories and seeing what works. I haven't attempted to make the feature script more commercial to fit in with "Hollywood" stories though. I feel it has the same tone as the short.

I'm sure that some of the people writing about Class 15 for this journal will discuss the social implications of the story. It would be very interesting to know how you yourself might describe those implications. Would you be willing to give that a shot?

That's an interesting subject, and a little difficult to say from my point of view. Unlike my previous short film Ribbon, which was a social commentary on teenage knife crime in London, Class 15, though fictional, is more of a personal film. It's not a reflection of families and London schools in general. Some may see Alicia's bad behaviour as a result of being raised in a single parent family and assume a lot of young kids in London are this way. Others are more judgmental towards Mr. Campbell's attitude towards students of colour. I don't see either character as particularly bad, and there is vulnerability to all three main characters. I look forward to making the feature film so I can explain why.

Is there anything you would like to tell about the ways in which Class 15 has been received at festivals and in any other relevant contexts?

So far the short has been received positively. It's still early in its festival run, so I'm eager to screen it in other countries, and gauge more reactions to the characters and story. I'm too attached to my short films. I write, direct, produce and edit my shorts, so I essentially live with them for so long, it's difficult to see what others see from the outside until I attend festivals and discuss it. I had a conversation with a former teacher after a screening. He spoke positively about it and said he had worked at many tough schools in London, and Sophia's performance brought back a lot of memories.

Is there anything else you would like to add about the making of or the meanings of this film?

It was a challenge at one stage to write a new draft during the talent lab scheme. One of the things Marc Boothe said to me was "The best short films are ones that are personal to the director's own experience". This really helped enable me to sit down, reflect and rewrite. I now pass on that valuable advice to others interested in writing for the screen. You don't need to look very far; ideas can be right on your doorstep.

30 March 2017