Just Whistle

Lexington Virginia, 1972

She stands there looking down at him, flowing hair draped across the shoulders of her robe. Dark lips, provocative, feline eyes. Nighttime. The scene is draped in shadow. Minor illuminated details suggest a hotel room. He’s seated, back to the camera, slightly disheveled, looking up at her. Their exchange is sensual. He’s opening a bottle with a pocket knife. They speak about many things. A war going on. An escape situation involving others not in the room. A need for money.

*To Have and Have Not* is a film released in 1944 before the outcome of World War II is determined. Based on a book by Ernest Hemingway, the screenplay is written by William Faulkner (with help from others). The first time I watch this film is for a class requirement in a literature course I take as a college senior.

A talented movie crew, led by widely acclaimed director Howard Hawks, guides my view to the best vantage point to watch this wartime drama unfold. They rivet my attention on this scene with a minimum of props and scenery.

Sexual tension is high. And there are wry, funny lines. “I’d walk home if it wasn’t for all that water,” Humphrey Bogart, a busted and marooned charter boat captain stranded on the Caribbean island of Martinique, tells the saucy Slim, played by Lauren Bacall.

She reaches into her bra and oﬀers him a wad of bills as if that’s a lot of money. He looks at her through the smoke of his cigarette and declines the oﬀer. Then, she moves in and sits on his lap, calls him a “stinker,”and kisses him. No music, no sound eﬀects, no close-ups. She kisses him again. The set lights are tightly focused only on important things: her face and her broad, padded shoulders as she stands, walks away, then turns to face Bogart again. Now, the light paints their faces as they look at each other, meaningfully, provocatively.

“What did you do that for?” he asks.

“I’ve been wondering whether I’d like it,” she answers.

“What’s the decision?

“I don’t know yet,” she says and kisses him again.

Outrageous. A woman kissing a man—boldly, sexually. The only sounds are crickets in the distance. She goes to the door. She reminds him that he knows how to find her (when he’s ready to kiss again, or more). He doesn’t even need to call her on the phone.

“You know you don’t have to act with me. You don’t have to say anything and you don’t have to do anything. Not a thing. Maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow.”

She leaves. He sits in shadowy silhouette, illuminated by a small table lamp, cigarette in hand. He blinks, then practices his whistle.

It is perhaps the most sexually wrought scene I’ve ever seen to this day—and these people have all their clothes on. It stands out in my mind particularly because it is around this time that I begin to understand how movies are created; how critical staging and framing are. I begin to realize how many people it takes to create such a moment. I also discover how much I crave hearing other people’s stories.

Growing up in Disney’s heyday watching *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color*, I have always been drawn to produced entertainment. I gain maturity through the eyes of Hitchcock and seek to find an expressive identity with my own picture-making efforts similar to those of Andy Warhol and French film director Francois Truﬀaut. It is a little early yet for me to understand the genius of Spielberg.

But I know the best way to develop a unique identity as a filmmaker is to study the great ones and immerse myself in the process. For a year, I borrow equipment, cajole collaborators, and finance independent projects on a shoestring. Somewhere in my storage shed is a box of quirky, 16 mm short films which—even at this age—I am embarrassed to show. They are crude, many are unfinished, and some are probably blatantly derivative.

It becomes clear to me that I need to work in the film industry. But to get a job, I need a demo reel. I apply to graduate study programs in media including two in Europe, one in California, and one in my home state at the University of Georgia (UGA). I receive encouraging invitations for interviews at distinguished academies in London and Paris, as well as an offer to become a grad student at the University of Southern California. But financial constraints ultimately keep me in my own backyard.

In the fall of 1975, I enroll in the Henry W. Grady School of Journalism at the University of Georgia in Athens, an inexpensive option for an instate resident. I am not interested in any full course of study culminating in a degree. I only want a sample resume reel of my own work, along with a little guidance—and perhaps a reference or two.

Only later do I learn that if I had made financial arrangements to attend USC, I could have been in classes with loads of big names—maybe even my big-time hero, Ron Howard, “Opie” from *The Andy Griffith Show*—and an entire population of well-connected West Coasters and media professionals. Although the cost would have been staggering for an out-of-state student, there’s no knowing what could have been the reward.

Nonetheless, the following twelve months at UGA merge into an exhilarating, indulgent, eye-straining, sleep-deprived blur. Two years earlier, I completed my undergraduate studies at Washington and Lee University, a mostly men’s college situated in Lexington, Virginia. There, deep in horse country, gentlemen scholars are expected to wear jackets and ties to class. Almost always, one must drive to other campuses to enjoy the company of the opposite sex. And students at the time—with rare exception—dressed, spoke, and looked alike.

UGA is quite diﬀerent. It is huge, diverse, busy, and the weather is almost always warm. Plus, there are females everywhere. I enroll only in classes that interest me: Intro to Radio and TV, Screenwriting, Advanced TV Directing, and Advanced Cinematic Techniques. There are a few boring lectures at the Master’s level and attendance is “come when you will.” To top it all off, I do far better grade-wise than I ever did as an undergrad.

Athens, Georgia, also provides a smorgasbord of opportunity for UGA students. It has a vibrant artistic community where I quickly develop outside interests. For a while, I work in a picture-framing shop called the Georgian Gallery. I learn to handle and display expensive artwork while working in a toney old hotel that features soaring ceilings, inlaid tile flooring, and massive columns with Corinthian caps.

One day, when the owner decides to call it quits because the shop is always losing money, I offer to take over and keep it open—in spite of my full academic load. The building is continually under renovation and foot traffic is nonexistent anyway, since few college students need museum-quality preservation services. The entire picture framing and art gallery industry is a bad business decision, which takes me six months to recognize. I finally slam the doors on the gallery with a noisy, nasty event called Athens’ First Erotic Show. The place is packed. Members of the hometown new wave group, the B-52s show up. But, even after this small triumph, it is lights out on this quirky venture. It’s time for me to move on.

During my first summer at UGA, a fellow student and I leverage press passes to the athletic events associated with the 1976 Montreal Olympic Summer Games. Mark (whose last name I forget) and I drive to Detroit and then cross into Canada in a car that isn’t ours. The owner needed it moved from Georgia to Ontario and we happily volunteered. Since we have come this far, Mark and I figure we will attend a pre-Olympic basketball tournament in Hamilton, Ontario. The 1976 Games are the first to hold an Olympic Basketball Tournament for Women, and the star player is Trish Roberts, a Georgia native, who we are eager to cheer on. Pat Head Summitt is her co-captain.

Mark and I talk our way into the pre-Olympic Tournament Press Room. It is daunting, nerve-wracking, and very educational. We meet other journalists who are mostly sports writers. With our official press credentials, Mark and I are able to share work stations with scribes from American, Canadian, and European news organizations. A collegial atmosphere soon develops. Nicknames are traded and Mark and I become known as Click and Clack, the journalist hacksfrom Georgia.

An article I write pops up in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* sports section. This encourages us to contact the sports desk at two Atlanta TV stations whose editors are eager for any Olympic-related clips. We gain access to video gear and capture footage from the tournament, rushing clips of the triumphant United States women’s team to the two separate news rooms. Unfortunately, but predictably, our identical video clips air nearly at the same time on competing stations. The editors each thought they were buying exclusive coverage. When they discover they have the same clip as the other channel airing in the same slot on the same night, we are fired. It is an expensive but useful lesson. Fortunately, for the United States’ medal count, the women’s team takes the silver in Montreal. Roberts scores a total of sixty points in five matches this year and she and Summitt later make their ways to the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame.

I return to Athens in the fall of 1976, older and wiser but a bit turned oﬀ by my first broadcast experience. Settling back into the bland routine of studies at Grady seems a waste of time. My appetite for the unusual—the uncharted—is not being satisfied. For the most part, my J-School classmates are well-groomed, buttoned-down types. They are punctual, predictable in class discussions, and fawning toward instructors. I have already lived that life. And, while I am picking up gobs of valuable production skills—and being commended and meagerly compensated for my eﬀorts—I hunger for more out of life: for the uncommon but true, for the untried and unpredictable. I have stories to tell. But not according to a commercial-driven clock.

At the time of my tenure, the Department of Drama and Theatre is separate from Film Studies. Each occupies its own building in shouting distance from UGA’s Sanford Stadium. In my comings and goings from oﬀ-campus housing, I am often drawn toward the colorful crowds pushing through the doors into the theatre building as I pass by on my way to Journalism class. One day, on a lark, I enter the intriguing building. Almost instantly, I feel at home. Clusters of students congregate before and after classes. Their longish hair, quiet conversations, and intentionally disheveled looks immediately strike a chord. These are the nonconformist, aspiring creatives.

It is around this time that Steve Rees, one of my most important mentors and champions, answers the cue to enter my professional life. As a Vietnam War veteran, he spent several years in Europe handling classified transmissions during that perilous period for draft-aged American men. When I have the good fortune to meet Steve, he is UGA’s technical director and lighting designer in the theatre department and a genius at solving stage-related scenery, lighting, sound, and mechanical problems.

After one year of graduate study, I leave the Grady J-School and matriculate into UGA’s Department of Drama and Theatre. I become a fulltime student in the department after accepting a graduate assistantship, which basically pays my way. There are classes, of course, in dramatic literature and performance, but I wholeheartedly plunge and immerse myself into the world of technical theatre under the expert tutelage of Steve.

For a brief time, I try to merge my film studies with those of the theatre genre but the bureaucracy is far too steep. In 1976, the theatre department had already started expanding to incorporate screen media, in particular, cinema. I like to think I am a small splash in a wave that results in this obvious merger. Little do I know that decades later the name will be officially changed to the Department of Theatre and Film Studies.

With summer stretching out in front of me full of possibilities, I find myself whistling for no particular reason. The ensuing seduction of theatre life as an aspiring stage monkey is well underway.