

Mark K Sullivan  
Producer and Director – *Cleveland In My Dreams*

Director's Statement

*Cleveland In My Dreams* was made because I wanted to make a feature film and the suggestion was meeting with some skepticism among the friends that I intended to enlist as crew. So I decided to make a short film for practice. Originally, I had in mind a 5 to 15 minute short. One evening I was reading *Enough Rope*, the collection of short stories in which the original story appears. I read *Cleveland* and right then I knew that this was the right short film.



I still had in mind a 15 minute short and I naively thought it could be filmed in a weekend but we kept deciding to illustrate more and more points of the story that I originally envisioned as clumsy repetition of the original exposition.

It almost seemed that the project took on a life of it's own as it grew inexorably to the half-hour length it has today. I resisted this mightily. I felt that the story, essentially one giant shaggy dog joke, only supported a 20 minute film at the most and that, besides, a half hour is an awkward length: too long for a short yet too short for a feature. But the film resisted and every time I shortened it, something else happened and it got longer again.

I soon realized that my idea of shooting it in a weekend was not practical. Since this project was to be the practice for a feature someday, I tried to do everything the way I would for a longer film. I made out a detailed production schedule and shopped it around among the cast and crew, making changes until everybody could live with it. We kept tightly to this eleven day schedule and only ran one day over because we had to re-shoot the car interiors. My original plan was to mount the car on a trailer and tow it down the road with the actors performing inside. There was just too much noise and vibration for this idea and the footage was unusable. Reluctantly, I decided to use a green screen and insert the moving roadside in post-production. I was aware of the difficulty of cleanly keying Mini-DV, which is one reason I came up with the trailer scheme in the first place. The chroma key worked out better than we had any right to expect, especially since I neglected to test the keying at the shoot when we could have still adjusted the lighting. There is some spill and pixelation evident even in the finished film, although audiences do not generally notice it.

My biggest personal challenge on the project was balancing our limited resources against my desire for perfection in all things. I had to bear in mind that we had a limited budget and that the crew and actors were working in their spare time and that they all had to get

up the next morning and go to work. I had to learn to recognize "good enough" and accept it. I couldn't push everyone all night long to get that perfect take. Balanced against that, I had to make sure we had the material I would need when I got to post-production. My inexperience with editing actually was helpful here. I did not know, at the time we were shooting, just how much I would be able to repair in post. Had I known then, I might have settled for even less in production and, perhaps, the finished project would have suffered.

Using my long-time friends as crew was a big help in this regard. They had no experience with film production (and neither did I) so I couldn't necessarily depend on them to get perfect recordings, but I knew I could depend on them to tell me if anything was wrong. Being able to absolutely rely on the crew meant I could focus on watching the scene unfold on the monitor and be thinking about how it would fit with the rest of the footage in post. I haven't known Jeff as long as the others, but he does have professional experience behind a video camera, so I was comfortable depending on him.

Working with actors was, of course, a completely new experience for me. With the exception of Dave, the principal cast all had extensive stage experience. I was afraid this would work against me and that they would have a tendency to overact, as if trying to reach the audience in the back of the hall. This turned out to be far from the case. Rodney and Todd were able to underplay their roles, letting their internal state of mind be, at least in part, synthesized in the viewer's mind. Chet and Carolyn had very small roles and I didn't really spend much time with them. However, they seemingly effortlessly delivered performances far beyond my expectations. Sonya had the smallest role of all but when given direction, she responded instantly. I remember on one occasion, I asked her to "be more flirtatious" with Hackett, the next take was the keeper. To those of us on the set, Dave's anxiety about performing for the first time comes through in the final cut. But this really works well as it makes sense for his character.

Our budget limited us to shooting Mini-DV. There were really no other options. So I was aware that I was going to have to accept a less-than-perfect picture. The small image sensors used in these cameras yield much greater depth of field, at a given lens opening, than a 35mm camera. This is important not only to achieve a film "look" but also to isolate the action in three dimensions in order to help the audience concentrate on what I want them to see. In particular, there are two rack-focus shots that would have worked much better with less depth of field. To partially overcome this limitation, I instructed Jeff to shoot wide open at all times. He could use the ND filter to adjust the exposure, but the rest of it had to be accomplished by changing the shutter speed and by having Jerry light to the desired exposure. In the green-screen shots, I defocused the camera when shooting the background footage. This gives the look of a shallower DOF and de-emphasizes the background.

I was stunned when I saw the picture projected on the big screen at the premiere. Except for the aspect ratio, I honestly would have thought it was film; and a relatively new print, at that. In fact, I still am not sure I understand how this was possible. I think the rest of the crew shared my astonishment. I hope we can do it again!

My other strategy to compensate for the limitations of Mini-DV was to make sure we had the highest possible sound quality. For this reason, we recorded all dialog double-system using a 24 bit A/D converter and a notebook computer. The sound had to be resynchronized in post, a step that would not have been required if I had used camera sound, but I was willing to spend the extra time required and I think it paid off. I believe the soundtrack of *Cleveland* is quite a bit above average for a low-budget video production and I think this almost invisibly raises the overall quality of the movie. Adam did most of the sound recording and you can hear a pin drop in his recordings. I forgot to have him record "room tone" at each shoot but the background is so quiet that, when I started editing the dialog, I only needed room tone in a couple of places and was able to get what I needed from the natural pauses in the dialog. In fact, there are a couple of places in the film where I should perhaps have added some additional background noise in post as the natural breaks in the recorded dialog are almost too quiet.

Industry wisdom is that you should not edit a movie that you directed. The theory is that it is too difficult to be objective. The director was at the shoot. He has a preconception of what is in the footage. He may think a scene communicates its idea to the viewer when, in fact, he is making this judgment within the context of having extra information in his head that the viewer will not have. The other argument is that the director may be reluctant to throw away hard-earned performances. I edited *Cleveland* myself. I did take a break, nearly two months, between shooting and editing on the theory that I would forget some of my preconceptions. In retrospect, I made one mistake. I kept the rough assembly that I had put together as we shot. Even at the time, from my experience as a computer programmer, I knew it was a mistake. But I was afraid I'd run out of time if I started from scratch. My biggest problem was not that I remembered what we shot, but that I didn't remember alternate takes very well. I kept sort of assuming that the take used in the rough cut was the best one and forgetting that I had the option to look through the other takes of a shot. From years of culling my own still photographs, I have developed the ability to be absolutely ruthless with my own work. So I don't think I had trouble giving up hard-won footage. However, I did occasionally have trouble deciding if I was being either too obvious, insulting the intelligence of the audience, or too subtle and risking losing them. When this happened, I would collect a couple of people and screen the scene in question. Then I'd grill them about their understanding of the scene. I learned you have to keep some friends and acquaintances in reserve for this. You can't tell the plot to everyone you know and you sure can't let them all see the rough cut. In the end, I am happy with the final product. I cannot see myself either directing or editing a movie without doing both. Probably, I should try using an independent editor at least once. Who knows how the movie would have turned out if I had?

The music posed a similar problem. I originally imagined that we would hire someone to compose original music for the film. As the "hiring" of the crew went on, I began to realize that our hiring budget (people were paid with shares in ownership of the movie) was being stretched thin and that I was probably going to have to come up with more cash for a composer. I was also interested, personally, in the challenge of composing. In the end, friends convinced me to try it. So, I bought a handful of books on film scoring.

As I read through these, I felt that they were oriented to someone who was already a composer. So I bought books about music theory and composition. I eventually convinced myself that I could score the film, but that I was not going to have time to do it and complete post in July. I finally compromised by licensing a loop library to score the film. The loop approach was very successful for me but, of course, it's not the same as having a completely original score. There is a very good chance that some other film somewhere uses some of the same riffs and themes. Even though I didn't do very much original composing, the reading I did on harmony and composition was not in any way wasted. It was a big help to me even with the relatively simple process of scoring with loops. I didn't credit myself for the music for two reasons. First, I decided early on that I would only give everyone a single credit. On our small project, everyone wore many hats and my own roles of producer, director, editor, and composer were simply to be expected. Second, since I used packaged riffs and themes, I don't feel comfortable calling myself a "composer". When I do refer to this role, I say I "scored" the production.

Before beginning production, I had thought of this phase of filmmaking as an evil necessity. I saw it as the step required to get the material that I would use to tell the story when I began to edit it. What I discovered is that production is the fun part. The 12 days of shooting *Cleveland* are just about the most fun I've ever had. Editing was tedious, but very enjoyable as a learning experience. Of course seeing the reaction of the premiere audience made it all worthwhile. I think everyone who worked on the project will agree with me.