

BABSON

Unruly Penguins, Uncooperative Cats, and Other Alumni Adventures in Filmmaking

by John Crawford

at the MOVIES

STEPHEN LIGHTHILL '61 KNEW that the Altamont Speedway concert would be a mess.

The 1969 event, headlined by The Rolling Stones, was supposed to be a Woodstock for the West Coast, but it was marred by poor planning and ominous signs. The venue was changed twice, the stage still was being built as the concert began, and because the event was free, 300,000 people showed up. As the day went on, that crowd grew restless and violent.

Add to this harrowing mix the Hells Angels motorcycle gang, which was hired to provide security. Lighthill was part of a crew filming that day, and the gang wasn't happy with him or his camera. That forced Lighthill to surreptitiously take pictures. He pointed the camera one way, but looked the other, so he didn't appear to be filming what was in front of the lens. "The Angels told me they were going to kill me if I took pictures of them," Lighthill says.

Four people ultimately died at Altamont, including a young man stabbed by a Hells Angel member. The tragic concert served to close out the idealism of the 1960s, and the sobering footage Lighthill and others captured became the landmark documentary *Gimme Shelter*. "I've lived to tell the tale," Lighthill says.

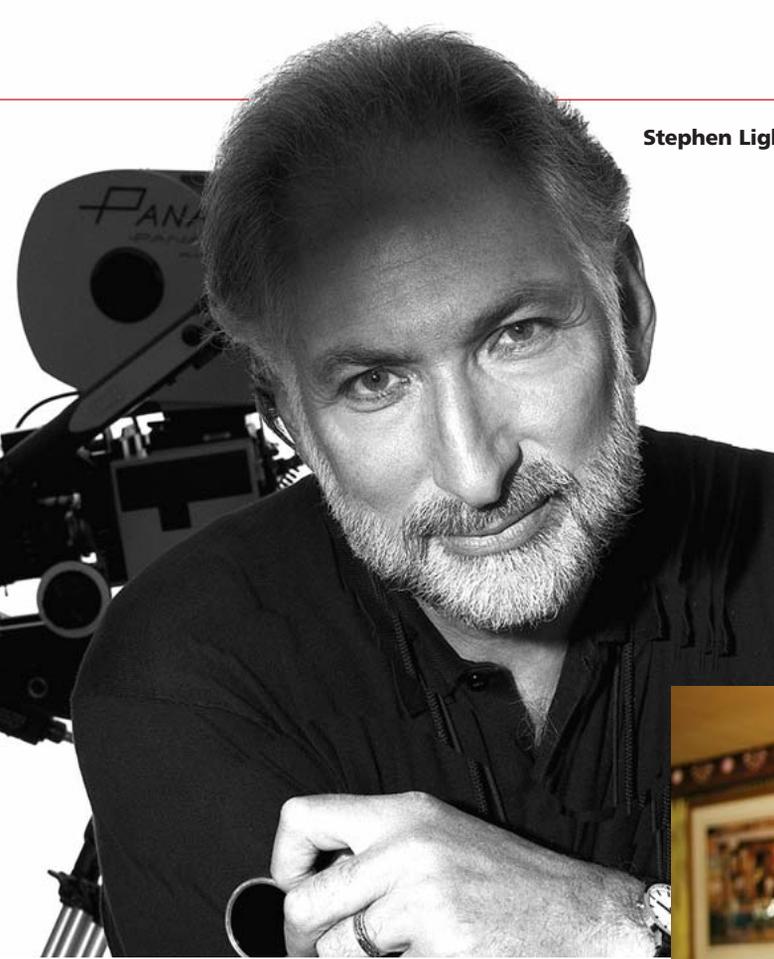
A cinematographer for four decades, Lighthill has worked on numerous documentaries, TV shows, and independent feature films. Like any cinematographer, he possesses a good eye, but he also brings something else with him to a movie set: his Babson education. "I love to say I have a degree in accounting," says the Burbank, Calif., resident, who is also a senior filmmaker in residence, cinematography at the American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles. "It terrifies the producers."

Lighthill is one of a number of Babson alumni who work in movies, both behind and in front of the camera. The most famous of these is writer and director Stephen Gaghan '88, who won an Oscar for his script for *Traffic*, and who garnered another Academy Award nomination for his *Syriana* screenplay.

Others aren't quite so well-known, but they toil away on making movie magic happen, tinkering with scripts, struggling with personal projects, and acting in movies as extras, their time on screen passing

STEVE CRAFTMASTERFILE

Stephen Lighthill '61



DOUGLAS KIRKLAND/KODAK

action. “I wanted to give people the feeling of being there,” he says. “I saw all the major events of the day.”

Lighthill was cinematographer for hundreds of documentaries, including two, *Seeing Red* and *Berkeley in the Sixties*, that were nominated for Academy Awards. “I made a lot of good films that helped inform people about the world around them,” he says. He later became involved with TV shows such as *Vietnam War Story*, *Earth 2*, and *Nash Bridges*. Shooting a series can take eight or nine months, and Lighthill enjoyed the long immersion into story and character. He also liked that his job was to keep the series’ look consistent, because while a show’s season may have many directors, it has only one cinematographer.

in blink-and-you-miss-them moments. These alumni believe in cinema and the worlds it can create on screen, but they know its hard reality, too. Movies may be art, but money and marketing play a large role in their creation. “Film-making is very much a business,” says director and producer Robert Radler '74. “It’s as much a business as anything else.”

To Be a Storyteller

Movies didn’t have to be Lighthill’s calling. It could have been beer. His father owned a wholesale beer business, and a decent career waited for Lighthill there. Instead, he discovered that he wanted to be a storyteller. At Babson, he wrote for the school newspaper, and while he initially went to graduate school for journalism, his interests soon turned to filmmaking.

For about 10 years, he worked for CBS News and was involved with the early days of *60 Minutes*. When he started with the network in 1967, a shift was happening in news coverage, which typically had occurred from a distance. If cameramen were covering a demonstration, for instance, they might set up on a hotel room balcony instead of in the street. That wasn’t Lighthill’s style. He modified his equipment, making it lighter and portable, and with a trusty pair of running shoes, he made sure to be in the center of the



Robert Radler '74

DEBE ARLOOK

“You have a lot of responsibility,” he says. “You’re part of the continuity of the show.”

Like Lighthill, Radler discovered as a young man that he wanted to be a storyteller. He made a series of films while at Babson and spent many nights at the house of a beloved film professor, who screened movies using a projector.

Radler made promotional movies early in his career. They were for all kinds of products, from disc brakes to goggles, and while Radler was grateful for the work, he felt stifled. One fateful day in his Needham office, he had an epiphany. In one room, he shot a Kitty Litter commercial, and the cats weren’t cooperating. In another room, military officials watched a film he made about spy satellites, and they weren’t pleased.

Surrounded by unruly cats and unhappy generals and admirals, Radler thought about his career and decided that a change was needed. “I’m not having fun,” he said. “What do I really want?”

He moved to Los Angeles in 1981 and a wide-ranging career followed. He made music videos with his wife Kitty for

artists such as Jackson Browne and Crosby, Stills, and Nash, directed episodes of TV shows such as *V.I.P.* and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, and directed action movies such as *Best of the Best* and its sequel. “I love directing features, but it’s like going to war for the director,” Radler says. On a big movie set, a crew of a 100 and potentially thousands of extras are waiting on a director, and every hour, he’s asked “hundreds of questions.” If he doesn’t answer properly, he can lose the crew’s confidence. “Nothing goes the way it’s supposed to,” Radler says.

Through the years, Radler has experienced some memorable, not to mention crazy, situations on and off the set. While filming *Best of the Best*, for instance, he shot a scene involving 5,000 extras in an auditorium. At the end of the shoot, the extras were paid, but they weren’t satisfied with the amount and let their displeasure be known. “They rioted,” says Radler, who now lives in Thousand Oaks, Calif., and teaches film classes at UCLA.

During *Best of the Best 2*, Radler directed Wayne Newton. The two became friendly, and Newton invited the director to his mansion, known as the Casa de Shenandoah. Newton’s spread contains, among the horses, cars, and memorabilia, a personal zoo, and when Newton showed it to Radler, one of the penguins bit the director.

For *Turn It Up!*, a documentary about the electric guitar, Radler interviews many guitar heroes, including B.B. King. The blues legend can be a tough person to land an interview with, and Radler wanted to be prepared for their chat. He read the guitarist’s autobiography, and the first thing Radler asked King was about a humorous, off-color story in the book. King laughed hard, then shooed away his handlers. Put in a relaxed mood by Radler’s opening question, King gave a long, insightful interview. “He was having fun,” Radler says. “It was spectacular. I was buzzing afterward.”

Labors of Love

Turn It Up! is one of the personal projects Radler is working on nowadays. Another is *SS United States: Lady in Waiting*, a documentary to raise awareness of the once mighty luxury liner, launched in 1952, that now sits docked and abandoned in Philadelphia.

Radler was exhilarated by the SS United States when he first saw it as a 6-year-old. “It looked like it was going 60 mph just sitting there,” he remembers. Big, bold, and beautiful,



Karen Webb, MBA '92

the ship was made in America, and like the Empire State Building or Statue of Liberty, seemed to represent the country itself. “It was us,” he says.

Lady in Waiting was a labor of love for Radler, for while the ship makes for an inspiring subject, that alone wasn’t enough to make the film a reality. For better or worse, filmmaking isn’t just about taking a camera and shooting whatever notions come to mind. “It’s one thing to have a great idea,” Radler says. “It’s another to raise the money.”

That’s a process that can make Karen Webb, MBA '92, feel as if she’s “banging her head against the wall.” Webb is the president and owner of Pinch Hit Productions, a Hopkinton, Mass., film production company. To make its short film *Green Grass*, a look at illegal immigration, the company solicited donations, held a raffle, negotiated the loan of filmmaking equipment at a deep discount, and recruited crew members, looking to gain experience, to work on the movie for free. “This is grassroots filmmaking,” Webb says.

The company currently is coproducing *The Joy of Sax*, a documentary examining the positive energy that Boston Red Sox fans generate and whether that power can be harnessed to affect the team’s performance. “It’s home field advantage to the extreme,” Webb says. Unfortunately, the movie is still a long way from seeing the light of day. All filming is completed, but an editor needs to be hired and licensing fees must be paid to Major League Baseball. Add it all up, and the producers require about \$50,000.

Raising that won’t be easy in a tough economic environment. Webb is thankful she has marketing and business experience. Creativity, by itself, isn’t enough. “It doesn’t pay the bills and get films made,” she says. “You’ve got to have people skills.”

Besides producing movies, Webb has penned a dozen screenplays. She started writing after her mother died, the loss making Webb think about dreams yet unfulfilled. “It was a wake-up call,” she says. Her scripts have earned awards, and her production company has made a few of them, including *Green Grass*, into films. A script for a full-length feature, *Seven Day Auction*, has gotten interest from Hollywood, and Webb landed an agent to sell her other screenplays.

She knows, however, that writing scripts and creating short films usually doesn’t make one rich. “You do it because you love it,” says Webb, who earns a living through her marketing firm, Pinch Hit Marketing. “There is no guarantee at all.”

In the Background

On the other side of the camera, actress Fiona Horrigan '89 also knows about the importance of marketing and people skills. When seeking roles, she tries to be aggressive but not annoyingly so. "You have to be a little like a good car salesman," says the Fort Lee, N.J., resident.

Horrigan was in the Babson Players, but she didn't catch the acting bug until years later. Looking for something to do in the evening, she took an acting class, and suddenly, something clicked. Her life changed. Horrigan took another class, acted in community theater, and eventually enrolled at New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts. That meant moving from her home in Germany and quitting her job as brand manager at Procter & Gamble. "I dropped everything," she says. "It was time to rewind and start over."

Horrigan leads a varied and busy life. She acts in small parts in TV shows and independent movies, does voice-overs for commercials, plays the lead in student films, appears in print ads, and once or twice a week, works as an extra on feature films. On the weekends, Horrigan acts in murder mystery dinner theaters where people celebrate birthdays and bar mitzvahs by solving stabbings and shootings. "There is no better way to celebrate a birthday than having a dead body," Horrigan quips.

With so many different kinds of jobs, and with many scheduled at the last minute, Horrigan must keep her calendar flexible. "[It's] not conducive to a social life," she says. But her acting career has brought her many amazing experiences, like running on a Cape Cod beach in the snow while appearing in a short film, or wearing "lots of feathers" playing an Atlantic City, N.J., showgirl in a music video, or playing an overly perky woman in an Onion News Network fake story titled "FDA Approves Depressant Drug for the Annoyingly Cheerful."

Like Horrigan, actor Paul Jones, MBA '81, was also in the Babson Players, playing Harry the Horse in *Guys and Dolls*. It was the first show he had done since high school, and it reignited his passion for acting. "It was a tremendous adrenaline rush," says the Wellesley resident. Today, he appears in corporate videos, commercials, and films. His "day job" is owner of the Marlow Group, an executive search firm, and because he's self-employed, that allows him the flexibility to take on acting roles as they come up.

Jones plays professional-looking men of a certain age.



Fiona Horrigan '89

COURTESY OF FIONA HORRIGAN '89

"I'm somewhere between 40 and death," he says. "You never give your real age." Jones appears in speaking parts and as a nonspeaking extra, which is commonly referred to as "background work," in many films shot in New England.

He was a senior executive in *The Proposal* and a security guard riding a Segway in *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*. In *Knight and Day*, a Tom Cruise flick due out this year, he drove a car across the Zakim Bridge, and in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, he was a passerby during the motorcycle chase scene. In *The Invention of Lying*, he was a stand-in for Christopher Guest, which meant that, when the star was in his trailer, Jones took his place so that the crew could adjust lighting and camera angles.

Ironically, when he's part of a movie shoot, Jones tries to keep his back to the camera. That way, the filmmakers can potentially use him again to play something different. So, watching *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, he admits, "I got used to seeing my bald spot on camera."

Compared with the stress experienced by a director such as Radler, an extra's time on set is often tedious. "The days are very long," Jones says. "Your best training to work in the movies is basic training in the military." Extras arrive early and "wait around hours for something to happen." Jones' first paid on-camera work was in the miniseries *The Kennedys of Massachusetts*, and during a cemetery shoot, the filmmakers waited all day for rain so the scene would be appropriately gloomy.

Extras also are far removed from the limelight. "You don't approach stars unless they approach you," Jones says. "You're there to work. You're not there to get souvenirs." Then there's the unflattering way the camera can portray you. "It's true the camera adds 20 pounds," Jones says.

Despite the downsides for those on either side of the camera, though, filmmaking remains a place where magic is made. It's worth the pressure and the boredom, the fundraising and the role seeking, the screenplays never read and the background work never seen. "It's still amazing to be on a big movie set," Horrigan says. "It's wonderful to watch."



MORE ON THE WEB

Babson students in the Filmmakers Club run a film festival, share ideas, and make movies. To read about them, visit The Babson Connection at

www.babson.edu/alumni, go to Get Resources, and click on

Alumni Communications.