

MUSTARD SEED

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Abstract

Mustard Seed is the story of a boy who witnessed the murder of his parents and sister. Although now an old man, he is forced to relive the nightmare of his past. The story is about memory, about trauma, and about how no matter how hard we may try, we can never truly bury our history.

In 1941, Heinrich Himmler noticed the psychological toll mass murder was having on his men and requested a more efficient approach to the task at hand. The result was the gas van, a vehicle reequipped as a mobile gas chamber. Victims were shut in an airtight compartment and poisoned to death with carbon monoxide while the vehicle was running. The Einsatzgruppen-mobile killing squads of Nazi Germany, were responsible for the deaths of more than 2 million people including 1.3 million Jews. They came directly to the home communities of Jews and massacred them, regularly deploying the help of civilians to carry out their mass murder operations usually by shooting, until the arrival of the gas van.

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Introduction

Mustard Seed is my third short film, and the third in a series titled *Little Whispers*, which examines the unique ability children have in using their imagination to solve their problems.

I never set out to be a filmmaker. I have always thought of myself as an actor, but more to the point, as a storyteller, wherein acting allowed me to be a proverbial spoke in a greater wheel. Yet, I also have a degree in English literature and creative writing, and have always written, if only for the personal pleasure I derived from it. However, in the summer of 2012, I impulsively submitted fifty short stories to a Montreal publishing house. They were enthusiastic about the collection, and agreed to publish it if I conceded to a small requirement: write at least fifty more. This response was everything I had hoped for, and yet it had the unfortunate effect of throwing me straight into writer's cellblock, with no key in sight. I was stuck. Luckily, my 'day job' as a professional actor was keeping me busy. I was working on a TV show in St. Johns, Newfoundland when I realized that some of my stories could easily lend themselves to a visual treatment. There were a few in particular that seemed linked- the stories I had written about children.

Ever since I can remember, I've been described as being a sensitive type. When I was a kid, I was constantly being told to "stop being so serious". Looking back, I realize this description was far more accurate than I ever gave credit. I was indeed a very serious, very sensitive kid. I was serious about what I could dream up in my head. I would spend hours hanging upside down from my bed trying to map a way out of my room just in case the world would turn upside down and I had to navigate it. The best games I played with my sisters involved intricate imaginary worlds, special quests, escape plans and impossible foes only the bravest could defeat.

The thing is, I was a lucky kid. The brushes with death, the evil wizards, the monsters and kidnappers and quicksand and erupting volcanoes and sharks I created would magically disappear when we were called for dinner. Not all children have that luxury. The nightmares they live in are real, and what they escape to when they imagine otherwise is all they've got. Sometimes, they can't escape their past. The child remains trapped within the adult, locked in a tragic moment in time.

Mustard Seed is an expression of this childhood prison of trauma, where there is no key to set one free.

Poetry After Auschwitz

Every time I set out to describe this third short film in my series, I would cringe when either I, or the person I was speaking to, would fall back on calling it a “Holocaust film.” There has been a fatigue surrounding these so-called Holocaust films, which I desperately wished to avoid. I didn’t set out to make a film about the war, per se. My short film series is about the perspectives of children who are forced to live through a traumatic event, and what they must do to cope with the situation in order to survive over a lifetime. That said, it is impossible not to address the elephant in the room- the question of fatigue surrounding the topic, a sort of post *Schindler’s List* blasé, coupled with the rather bitter and slightly disturbing whispers amongst filmmakers that all it takes to get an Oscar is to make a ‘Holocaust film’. What is the importance of continuing to tell these stories, without falling into the “oh, that same old story” trap? Can one do this without turning audiences away, or turning them off?

The fact that four generations of artists and filmmakers have ignored Theodor Adorno’s controversial statement that “There is no poetry after Auschwitz”, shows that there are still relevant stories to tell, including: *Night and Fog* (1955), *Sophie’s Choice* (1982), *Shoah* (1985), *Au revoir les enfants* (1987), *Schindler’s List* (1993), *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), *In Darkness* (2012) to the more recent, Academy Award Winning films *Ida* (2013) and *Son of Saul* (2016). Later, Adorno attempted to clarify his thoughts, as is demonstrated by this lesser known quotation from *Negative Dialectics*:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living--especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will

be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier. (Negative Dialectics, 362-363)

This quotation relates directly to my protagonist, Jan. He has been forced to move on, live on, forced into a survival that he didn't choose. We don't know much about how his life turned out, but we are shown the memory of what he has had to endure, alone, for so many years. The child witnessing a traumatic event is never able to leave it behind. When the victims cannot forget, we shouldn't be allowed to, either. However, my film is different in that it doesn't have a 'lesson to be learned' punctuation mark, unlike perhaps some other films in the genre, such as *Night and Fog*.

My film is about one man, and essentially ignores the wider context of what is happening to him and his family, or why. There are no obvious signs that the family who is being murdered is Jewish, or even that that is the reason for their murder. The context of the war is never discussed, and the film relies on an audience's knowledge of that time to put the pieces together. At the same time, it is almost as if the context is of no importance, because the experience is so highly subjective, that it is enough to experience someone else's trauma just via our basic human empathy.

The same can be said of Laszlo Nemes' Academy Award Winning Film, *Son of Saul* (2016). The film isn't about war as a whole, it is instead intensely subjective and follows one man's particular story, and even more directly, his point of view. Saul's head is framed squarely in the centre of the frame, so we are only allowed glimpses of the hell- flames, piles of corpses, screams of terror and cries- in which he resides. It is the internal vision of a man who must live in a hell that has become reality, a reality where corpses are no longer human beings, but pieces

of garbage to be dealt with. This is the infernal reality, and now normality of life, until Saul finds the body of one he thinks is his son, and once again, his life suddenly has purpose.

Both *Mustard Seed* and *Son of Saul* don't seek to explain anything, or even draw any kind of conclusions or answers to any questions. The questions surrounding the Shoah are of such magnitude that there is no way of answering them. All we can do is watch these ghosts on the screen, and force ourselves to remember their existence.

Development of the Story

As mentioned above, *Mustard Seed*, like my previous shorts *The Vow*, and *Winter* were originally one-page short stories. This is the story of *Mustard Seed* before I turned it into a script:

Mustard Seed

The farm never seemed isolated to Jan. The expanse of yellow mustard fields never brought loneliness. The flowers were there with him. Only in the old shed, now converted into a laundry, did he feel an emptiness so profound he struggled not to suffocate under its weight. This was where his family was murdered, years ago.

Jan had been hiding in the fields, hiding from his chores, when soldiers forced his mother, his father and his little brother inside. Jan watched as they locked the door and turned on the gas line. He listened to the laughter of the soldiers and the screams of his brother. He listened, as the laughter grew louder than the screams. When the screams faded, the laughter faded too, and the dull hollow sound that followed was the most terrible thing in the world. After the quiet, the soldiers quickly remembered themselves and turned their attention to the main cabin. He heard their delight when they found his fathers' liquor, and even then, at seven years old, Jan understood he would have to remain in the field for a long time. Two days passed. Two nights passed. An eternity of bee stings and ant bites, the sun burning the skin off his nose. The stink of excrement surrounded him, and he feared the soldiers would smell what he lay in. When his tears dried up, he thought he would die of thirst. And then, finally, he heard the trucks leave. He waited a few hours before raising his head, and when he peeled open his parched eyes, he was surprised the world still existed. He crawled through the whispering flowers all the way to the shed. When he unlocked the door, his eyes met his brother's dead eyes, and he knew they saw the same thing.

The story elements changed several times, but the central idea and vision always remained the same. In the story, Jan has a little brother, not sister, and his family is locked into the laundry shed and gassed, instead of in a van. The soldiers stay at the farm for days, and the boy has to remain corpse-like in the field, waiting for them to leave.

In earlier drafts of the script, I maintained the shed idea, and then incorporated laundry and the clothing of the victims, as a trigger that sends Jan down memory lane. The biggest change was what triggers his memory, and also the use of the gas van. It was my father who first told me about the use of gas vans. He is a survivor of the Holocaust, and has spent many years

researching the hows and whys of it all, trying to find an answer to something we can never understand. The idea of a gas van- a portable killing machine, was so strange and unbelievable to me, I couldn't get it out of my mind. The more research I did, the more I wanted to show this act of horror that very few people know about.

Vision

The biggest compliment I have received for my film so far was from Professor and Filmmaker Philip Hoffman. He told me that while watching my film, he felt sure that he had already seen it, but soon realized that was because I had so thoroughly and completely managed to put what I had previously described in words and images up on the screen.

This was no easy task. I had high expectations, and a very specific location and look in mind for the film. The problem was, I had dreamed this location up in my mind, and wasn't sure where I would find it. I was adamant on having a field of yellow mustard flowers, the most obvious reason being the astounding and mesmerizing beauty of the image. But there was more to it. Mustard is used as a kind of lethal gas, which I felt would subconsciously work on the most perceptive audience members. I wanted to show the juxtaposition between the beauty of the natural world, and the evil that humans can create with it. It was important for me to show a child's view of the world, through little details of living things- the ladybugs, the grasshoppers, and the flowers that continue to grow and move and live despite the horror that surrounds them. But finally, the most symbolic reason for using the mustard, and *Mustard Seed* as the title, is that it represents a tiny seed of pain that is planted in Jan when he was a boy. The seed is representative of a traumatic memory that will never go away, no matter how deep he buries it.

I must also address the two other major issues I have as a novice filmmaker: I have minimal technical knowledge, and I'm not a cinephile. This is embarrassing to admit, and the lack of these two major qualities constantly has me question myself and also makes me feel like a fraud a lot of the time. I literally don't have any comprehensive influences to draw from, so I don't have a large frame of reference or library of films or directors to give examples from. I can't name drop directors, classic shots, or styles for my cinematographers' benefit. All I have is

what I see in my head. This means I have to find different ways to communicate my vision to cinematographers and crew. In my first film, *The Vow*, I made clay figurines of my characters and filmed them in the ways I wanted to see them and then sent that file to the cinematographer. That was my way of making a shot list. For my second film, *Winter* I made a full shot list, and also a floor plan as well as a crude storyboard complete with stick figures. With *Mustard Seed*, I didn't have my location until two days before we shot, so I had to rely entirely on the shot list I compiled. In the end while on set I also used sketches to illustrate what I needed. I've attached it here in the appendix. It's quite detailed, but you will notice there isn't one mention of lens type. Ultimately, I know that my gift is to be able to visualize things very clearly in my head. I've been very lucky to be able to make those images come to life in my three short films, with three different cinematographers, using some kind of beginners luck or intuition. I'm still learning how to communicate in the best way, and will likely continue to do so until I brush up on my technical skills.

Pre-Production / Berlin

The specific vision of the film was, as previously stated, of utmost importance to me. I was going to make a period film, and beyond the physical location, I wanted the authenticity of German and Polish speaking actors, Nazi (specifically Einsatzgruppen) uniforms, as well as the either a Magirus-Deutz or Volkswagen van that was specifically of the time and could be believed to have been converted into a gas van. I hated the idea of casting actors who spoke English with German and Polish accents, or casting Canadian actors who were speaking German and Polish with English accents. The story could have lost all impact if it looked like a Hollywood film, a student film, or anything that was obviously made in rural Toronto with costumes rented from a theatre department. All of these concerns created an environment where I felt I had nothing to lose by taking a few risks to get what I wanted.

In May of 2016, my second short film, *Winter* was screening at the Cannes Film Festival as part of Telefilm Canada's Not Short on Talent program. While there, I collected a huge pile of business cards, some of which belonged to Berlin based producers. My youngest sister happens to live in Berlin, and she added the final motivation I needed. I cold-called two different production companies, sent them links to my previous shorts along with the synopsis and script of *Mustard Seed*, and to my surprise, I quickly received enthusiastic replies with the desire to meet me in person to discuss the project further.

Both production companies spent a total of four hours with me, over two different meetings, and they grilled and questioned me with rigour. In the end, both wanted to work with me and make my film. I spent a few confusing days trying to make a choice, and in the end, I accepted a company called Molly-Aida to be the co-producers on the film.

It was now the beginning of June and we were ready to start pre-production. But unfortunately, the season for mustard and canola (a crop that is in the mustard family and could easily pass for mustard itself,) had just passed. The next time mustard would bloom would be in September. I had little contact with the company for the next two months, but I started my research. I scoured all of the acting agency websites in Berlin and started to compile a list of possible cast. This was the biggest cast I've worked with so far, and it came with some complications, the least of which included casting actors who spoke two different languages. By the end of August I had compiled a list of over 35 potential cast members.

Crew

I arrived in Berlin on September 1st. Molly-Aida had already hired a bilingual production manager, and he picked me up from the airport. He quickly supplied me with a cell phone, and a bicycle, and I admit these two small things instantly made me giddy with joy. I felt I had made it to the big leagues! We went to the office where I again met with Fabian Martin Diering, and his partner Constanza Bani, the co-owners of Molly-Aida and my co-producers. There really is truth behind the idea of German work ethic. We shook hands, they welcomed me, and immediately informed me that they had scheduled several interviews for me the next day. I panicked- did they want me to talk to some kind of media? Turns out they had already scheduled a few different interviews with crew-members. This has never been my experience, but the Germans expected me to meet, interview and approve every single member of the crew- from makeup to sound, from costume to cinematographer. So the next morning, I dragged my jet lagged body off of the floor (I alternated sleeping on my sister's living room couch and cushions on the floor depending on how bright the sun was every morning and on what time her roommate would wake up). I took a screen shot of my bike ride from Neuokoln to Mitte, and hopped on my bike. I arrived at the office forty-five minutes later, drenched in sweat, and began a long day of meetings.

Making choices based on portfolios and a body of work is one thing, but the ultimate challenge is finding people who you can actually work with; people who are flexible and ready and hopefully not too precious or jaded or bitter, and (perhaps most importantly in my particular case) people who one can communicate with. Fabian was keen to find me a first A.D. who was bilingual, and he did not disappoint. I met with a young man who seemed keen and eager and willing to do the work. He had limited experience as a first A.D., which worried me, but in the end his facility with both languages, especially if it meant communicating with the actors on my

behalf, was the most important asset he had. Next up was the cinematographer. It came down to two very talented individuals, and I admit I chose on the basis of gender. I had never worked with a female cinematographer, and thought it would be a great opportunity. She also spoke French, which was a great asset because that is a language I am almost fluent in. Done!

The other main crew members that I interviewed and hired included an exceptionally talented art director, a costume designer, a makeup artist, and a sound recordist. The rest of the crew- a couple of A.D.s, runners, etc. were picked by Fabian. The cinematographer would provide their own crew.

Casting

Casting is a key element that, along with almost every other choice one makes as a director, can make or break a film. For this project, I had the task of casting people who could conceivably be related to one another in a family. Included in this family was a little boy who would grow to become an old man. I also had to cast two Nazi soldiers, and the Polish neighbor. I was determined not to fall into stereotypes, and really wanted to try to cast ‘against type’. In this case, that meant avoiding casting stereotypically “Aryan” looking soldiers, and a “Jewish” looking family. This was all part of my fight to move beyond the “Holocaust fatigue”, of audiences thinking they’ve seen it all. Beyond that, I of course needed actors who were talented and who could understand the material and what was needed. The majority of the characters have no dialogue, so the actors had to be able to convey deep emotion with their bodies. I’m an actor myself, and I feel this is an asset to me while casting and also while on set. However, this particular casting process was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. The German producers at Molly-Aida had mainly done documentaries, and they didn’t seem to understand the concept of auditions. They scheduled meetings with a slew of actors, who arrived at the production office ready to have a coffee and a chat with me in fifteen - minute increments. I was completely taken off guard, and secretly wished auditions in Canada could be so relaxed and simple, at least when I was the one auditioning. I met so many different actors, and also skyped with several for the sake of time and scheduling. Oddly enough, I chose five out of the seven cast members after chatting with them on Skype. It was frankly a bit terrifying, and I had a secret fear that perhaps in person, they would disappoint. Perhaps my life experience both working with actors and working as an actor, seemed to give me the correct instincts. In the end, both the producer and I were quite pleased with the cast as a whole.

Little Sister

Clara, the girl who plays the little sister, lived an hour outside of Berlin, so she was one of the actors who I spoke with over skype. Her parents translated for me, and I cast her because right from the get-go she was very eager to show me everything she could do. I asked her if she liked to dance and sing and she immediately broke into song. I thought here's a kid who isn't going to be shy about performing. More delicate was the conversation about the script, and more specifically, that her character and family would be getting into a van and unwittingly be gassed to death. Her parents explained to me that many of Clara's friends and classmates were Syrian refugees, and she understood the concept of war and that 'bad things happen'. I told her parents that we would tell Clara that the family in the story was being taken away, maybe to a prison somewhere, and that when they were screaming inside the van it was because they were afraid, not because they were dying of poison. This was also a conversation we had on set, and I made sure everyone on set never told Clara or let it be known that the family in the film were actually being murdered.

Old Jan

This was a tough one to cast. Although Jan is the main character in the story, he has no lines, and is also barely in the film itself. Despite this, the film takes place from his point of view, and is really his story. The actor had to be able to convey years of memory in a look, and also be sympathetic to an audience. I asked to see many actors for this role, and even reached out to a few famous actors to see if we might garner some interest. When I met Hubert Munster, I had already seen and skyped with about ten other actors, one of whom was almost ninety and

told me he wasn't sure if he would make it through filming something so harrowing but he wanted to do it because he felt it was an important story to tell. I admired his passion but I wondered if I could ever forgive myself if I hired a man who may fall ill, or even worse, on my set. I had to keep looking.

Hubert is a seasoned actor, and when we first met I was shocked to see he was almost seven feet tall. He appeared as a sort of big friendly giant type who spoke not a word of English, yet, I could see the kindness in his expressive eyes. My production manager Kristian served as interpreter on that first meeting, and we chatted for an hour about the film, the war, and how he was struck by my script because he felt it was a quiet story about a very violent time.

Mother

Kerstin Enders was the first person I interviewed for the role of the mother, and although I met many actors after her, she stayed with me. The reason was, she was absolutely emotionally impacted and affected by the script. She cried as she described what she felt it would be like to be in that character's position, and she told me of how she hadn't learned about the gas vans. More telling, she explained how all German students are required to learn about the atrocities of their country's past, but it is so drilled into them that they barely take it seriously- a genuine case of "Holocaust fatigue", if you will. It became just another subject- like mathematics or geography, and she hadn't yet had an opportunity to put herself directly and emphatically into the reality of what happened. I admit I was flattered, but more so I thought if she could show such emotion in a skype conversation, she wouldn't have a problem 'getting there' on set, on the day.

Father

Felix Defer and I skyped with each other while he was in Italy working on a play. Extremely buoyant and animated, I could tell right away that he would provide levity to a set that would ultimately have to be grounded in a heavy emotional seriousness. We discussed his favourite playwrights, and he told me stories of his grandfather who had fought in the war. I was right about his levity, but I didn't know how far it would go. While on set he got completely naked and skipped through the mustard fields for everyone's amusement. Clara's mother covered her daughter's eyes, and I remember thinking how bizarre it was that just moments before, Clara had tried on a Nazi helmet, and everyone thought it was adorable.

The Soldiers

As mentioned, I wanted to try to avoid the stereotypical look of the Aryan, blond, blue eyed Nazi soldier. I cast Andreas Berg along with another actor, and originally this other actor was to play the commanding soldier, and Andreas the more junior of the two. Unfortunately, the day after the fitting and two days before we began shooting, the actor dropped out. My production manager told me he was sick, but even then I didn't buy that excuse. At the fitting he had seemed exceptionally nervous and was sweating profusely. It was only much later, after we had wrapped, that I found out the truth. Our lovely production manager had made the grave mistake of paying this actor up front before we started shooting, and he ended up spending the money on drugs. He then proceeded to go on an all week bender and couldn't leave his house. If that isn't bad enough, my production manager still hasn't received the money back, and it all came out of his own pocket.

After that, we had to go with an emergency plan B. That was Nico Ehrenteit. The poor guy had to come in and try the first actor's costume, which was about three times too big for him. Luckily my costume designer Anne was a bit of a wizard, and she clipped this and tied that and somehow made it look like the pants he was wearing actually fit him. Nico wasn't my first choice, and I think my guilt got the better of me and I allowed him a few liberties in his performance that I regret a bit. But overall, I was happy with the result.

Marek

This role was easily the hardest to cast. It wasn't easy finding a Polish-speaking actor of a certain age in Berlin, who also had the right look and feel. Adam Venhaus was a complicated actor, who lived two hours outside of Berlin. I was afraid he looked a bit too intense, too much like a 'villain', and at first hesitated to hire him. It came down the wire, and after meeting several other potential Mareks' (one who told me he liked to act according to the weather- blue sky affected him in ways that a grey sky did not), Adam was the last man standing. Since he lived a few hours outside of town, we were forced to spend more money to accommodate him and give him travel. It was only after shooting that Adam told me he has an apartment in Berlin, and we didn't have to put him up. What can I say? The guy has a good agent.

Young Jan

This was an interesting casting process. I had seen photos of the nephew of one of the soldiers we cast (the one who disappeared with our money), and I thought the kid had a great look that was similar to Hubert's. I arranged to meet with the child at the production studio one afternoon. A little boy came to the door, and immediately I thought "There he is!" Turns out, it

wasn't him. The nephew of our no-show actor was also a no-show - maybe it runs in the family? The little boy who appeared in the office was actually the son of a man who was doing tech work for Molly-Aida. I chatted him up, asked him to pose for some photos, and we immediately hit it off because he was wearing braces and I showed him the clear braces I was sporting (sometimes it's the little things that bring people together). His father, the tech guy, didn't see a problem with it, so just like that, we had our young Jan.

Location

As mentioned earlier, location was a huge element of production, and caused the most amount of stress. We had been in touch with several farmers, with the Berlin and Brandenburg agricultural departments, and with several mustard manufacturers to discover and get some leads on possible locations. The first bad news came from the farmers. There had been a lack of rain over the summer, and the photos they sent us of their fields were of little green stalks that came up to ones ankles. I was imagining the extremely tall Hubert Munster hiding in a field of those, and was horrified at the prospect of *Mustard Seed* being turned into an absurd comedy. It was clear that wasn't going to work. My producer Fabian started sending me photos of sunflowers and wheat fields. Every day he would send me a different one, just to try to change my stubborn mind. But I couldn't let it go. I insisted we keep looking. We hired a location scout, and two days before our scheduled shoot date, we took to the roads of Brandenburg. I brought my production manager, first A.D., our production designer and our cinematographer along.

There was no time to waste, and I needed everyone to be on board to make the decision and see what could work, and what couldn't. We visited six different farms that day, and none of them worked. We ended up getting a bit lost, and turned down a long country road. It was there where we had our hallelujah moment- a sea of yellow flowers appeared on the horizon. At the end of the road, was a little farmhouse. We got out of the car, and were greeted by a charming old German man in suspenders. He took us around the property, and lo and behold- he had a shed! And not only a shed, a shed that looked out onto the fields. It was love at first sight. It wasn't exactly what I had imagined, but it was so close that I almost cried from the release of stress and excitement that my vision was potentially going to be possible. We examined the shed. It was full of bric a brac, as well as fire logs, and it was quite small and dark. None of that

bothered me, or the production designer. I enthusiastically started discussing possible shots with the cinematographer. Unfortunately, she wasn't as pleased. She stated that the flowers in the field weren't thick enough and she didn't like the look. She then said that the shed was too small. I was shocked. I immediately started discussing options to move objects, and even walls with the production designer and the farmer, who were both completely fine with it. However, the cinematographer still had doubts. With every negative thought or comment she had, I tried to come up with a solution, but she kept arguing with me, trying to urge us to keep looking. I reminded her that we were shooting in two days, and basically, this was it. We weren't going to do better than this. The field, the shed, and a kindly old farmer who would let us rip it apart and put it back together- these aren't things one throws away, especially when we're locked down and scheduled to shoot in forty-eight hours. She persisted with the argument, and we glumly jumped in the car and started the long drive home. The whole time, I was trying to convince her how it could be shot, drawing crude sketches and floor plans on the back of a cigarette pack, trying to show her it was all possible. I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere.

When we arrived back in Berlin late that evening, the first thing I did was write to Fabian. I expressed my anxiety about the cinematographer - how I could hardly imagine what a day of shooting with her would be like, if everything was going to be a battle, if every single thing was going to end in an argument. We didn't have time for any of that. To Fabian's credit, he wrote back right away saying that we had to fire her. We were going to hire the second cinematographer, Johannes, if he was still available. I was relieved, and I offered to make the call.

I've never had to fire anyone before, and I hated every second of it. She continued to argue with me on the phone about why she should still be on board. It was like breaking up with

a boyfriend. When she told me she felt I had paid more attention to the production designer, instead of her, I abruptly told her thanks for the time, sorry it didn't work out, all the best, and goodbye. I was sure I had made the right decision. Immediately, Fabian called Johannes, our plan B cinematographer. We travelled back to the location the next day together. He immediately loved it, and as we walked around I handed him my shot list, which I had spent all night working on in some kind of frenzy of fear and excitement. I didn't want to waste anymore time. I remember him laughing and saying: "You've done all the work. What do you need me for?" We had a great new cinematographer, and a dream location.

The Production Process

When we arrived on set the morning of the shoot, the crew and I were amazed by the work our brilliant production designer had accomplished. Veronica obtained the perfect vehicle to be outfitted as a gas van, and she completely transformed the shed to fit our requirements literally over night, with the help of the kind farmer who owned the land- he greeted us outfitted in suspenders adorned with Canadian maple leaves.

Our first day was the heaviest, and most complex since we could only afford to have the van for one day. This meant that practically the entire film, except for the final moments and inserts, would have to be shot on day one. The most complex shot (and I suppose not surprisingly my favourite) is the one where we follow Jan out of the shed, and into the past. I wanted this shot to be a metaphorical passage of time and travel into his memory but I also didn't want it to be an obvious flashback. I needed the audience to believe we were still in the present moment, so that we wouldn't give away the reveal of the little boy in the end.

I wanted a slow dolly out, a flash of brightness and then a slow pan to reveal the arrival of the gas van. It was a technical shot that had a lot to do with timing, and that coupled with me wanting it to be all in one take, didn't make things easier. We had a lot of bumps along the dolly track, and it was difficult for Hubert to make the movements at the correct speed, and without tripping. Also, we had a problem with the gas van. It kept breaking down. Despite all of this, we persevered and somehow got through it. There were a few other bumps in the road, one in which my 1st A.D. told me we were two hours behind, but then it turned out his watch had stopped. Between the van breaking down, Clara colouring the walls of the shed, and the actor who played the Father suddenly running naked through the fields to get a laugh, it was a stressful and full day. The photos speak for themselves- in almost every one I look like I'm going to kill someone,

but it's really just a furrowed brow of intense concentration. Luckily I had already spent some time with the actors, and despite a couple of little language hiccups (this is where my 1st A.D. was essential), everyone understood what needed to be done and what the actions were going to be.

The second day, although less of a heavy load, with fewer actors and no van, still proved challenging. While day one was sunny, with beautiful blue skies, the second morning we woke to grey and cloudy skies, with high winds. I muttered something about rain and my producer ran to the shed to hug it (touch wood). I suppose it worked, and all we had to do was worry about the matching sky- but that was, like so many other things, 'something we'd fix in post'.

We spent the morning trying to get ladybugs to scurry across mustard leaves in a beautiful way. I thought communicating with actors in a different language was difficult, but this was just silly. I'd done similar work with insects in *The Vow*, using a lizard, a praying mantis and also ladybugs, but I think the ones they have in Hollywood are better trained. I was also blessed with a bit of karmic poetry- we found a giant grasshopper in the field, just hanging out, ready for his close up. It was symbolic as it was so similar to the praying mantis and dead grasshopper I used in *The Vow*. I decided to shoot him crawling over the little sisters' dress, as another illustration of how beauty and life goes on, indifferent and despite the horror in the world.

In the afternoon we shot our young Jan watching the gas van drive away with his recently deceased family. It was Paul's first time on a set, and I put the poor kid through 17 different takes before he gave me what I wanted. I suggested to him to pluck one of the mustard flowers, and look down at it- something I could imagine a child who didn't know what to do, would do. Paul received the direction via my 1st A.D., and I'm not sure who was to blame for the misdirection, but little Paul would repeatedly just rip out giant green stalks and grin. I tried a new

tactic, and asked him to examine the flower petals, to really look at them, instead. But when I did this he did a sort of slow motion- she loves me, she loves me not demonstration, which wasn't going to work for the story. The final tactic was to have him open up an actual pod of mustard, and tell him to look deep inside and count all the little mustard seeds inside. This helped get him out of 'his head', as I gave him a task that he could actually do, and make sense of in the moment. It worked.

Post-Production

My German producers wanted me to jump immediately into editing, the day after we wrapped. I disagreed. I needed a break, at least a couple of days to regroup, rest, and get some perspective. Two days after we wrapped, I went to meet my editor, a Spanish woman named Anna whom Fabian had worked with before. Our first meeting was a bit worrisome, because it became clear to me that her English wasn't as great as Fabian had claimed. I suggested we bring the 1st A.D. in to the editing sessions in order to help us communicate, but Anna assured me she understood me, and also she was adamant about keeping it just between the director and editor. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of going along with her suggestion.

The editing process was very quick, but also brutal because of the language. I would ask her to make a change, she would assure me she understood, but of course it became clear she didn't. This back and forth was frustrating for both of us. I remember writing her an email asking her to include punctuation in the subtitles, and she wrote an angry response saying she had no idea what this 'period' was that I spoke of. I had to respond and show her, in parenthesis and with examples, what a period was. It was painstaking, time consuming, and insanely frustrating. But three weeks after we wrapped, we had a locked picture, and an amazing sound design. It was time to fly to Toronto to take advantage of the Alter Ego colouring grant I had been gifted. The process was amazing, and it felt good to be back home to put the final touches on my film.

Conclusion / Reflections

I wrote above that the highest compliment I've received thus far had to do with my ability to put my vision up on the screen. There's some kind of magic alchemy at work when a one-page short story becomes a seven-page script, and then an eight-minute film, brought to life in a different country halfway across the world. I am always astonished that this is possible, that every one of my three short films, these small ideas in my brain, somehow escaped into the ether to become practically living breathing things.

My ultimate goal is to have these short films stand on their own, but also within the broader scope of my series with the possibility of them being screened back to back within one showing. *Mustard Seed* adheres to the little formula I've created thus far in the series: similarity in length, subject matter, as well as visual style. However, it still feels slightly different, more mature than the others, perhaps because the violence in the film is more powerfully implied than say the child abuse that took place in my film *The Vow*. Case in point, *The Vow* and *Winter* were screened at TIFF Kids Festival two years in a row (*The Vow* in 2015, and *Winter* in 2016). I was hoping to set a three year record and that *Mustard* could find a home there in 2017, however, the kind programmers at TIFF told me that although the film was beautiful and heartbreaking, it was just a bit beyond the mandate of their children's festival.

Although *Mustard* is clearly a darker and more violent film than its two counterparts, there are still similarities that go beyond visual style and length. A colleague of mine, recently noted a motif found across the *Little Whispers* series, which admittedly, I hadn't thought of. In both my first two works there is the burial of a symbolic object connected with death, wherein in *Mustard Seed*, the story begins with the exhumation of a symbolic object, a dress, which had been stowed away after the death of Jan's sister. My colleague must have been on to something

because the fourth short in the series which I've already written, titled *Shell of a Dead One*, opens with children digging in the sand on a beach, and that story deals with the end of a relationship, which is ultimately understood by the children as the death of their parents' marriage.

In hindsight, it appears that this subtle motif is my way of unconsciously writing about death. When Jan uncovers that old dress, he unwittingly digs up a buried memory, the ghosts of his long departed family, but more specifically, the last moment of his childhood. This motif of burial and uncovering of important objects symbolizes not only mortality- the physical termination of life, but also the death of innocence, which is true to my motivation for telling stories of children who are forced to experience the harsh realities of the world. Moreover, further research into the genre of Holocaust films, and cinema as an art form has brought me to the ideas of French critic Andre Bazin, who wrote of the "mummy complex" at the heart of all art: "To preserve, artificially, [a person's] bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life." This is also a theme relevant to *Son of Saul*, which also follows a burial motif. Saul, a sonderkommando in charge of disposing bodies from the gas chambers, is desperate to bury the body of a boy whom he claims is his son. The sudden and urgent need to do this forces him to risk his life, and when one of his fellow prisoners accuses him of giving up the living for the dead, Saul replies that they are already dead. The irony is that this desire to bury the body, gives Saul purpose, and that purpose forces him to remain alive. For both Jan, and Saul, and all the victims that perished in the surreal nightmare that was the Shoah, all we can do is to watch their ghosts on the screen, and force ourselves to remember. Our psychological human need to try forget is paradoxically coupled with the need to keep alive and relive our memories, and by doing so, continue to live in time that has no clear beginning or

end, is another example of how no matter how hard we may try, we cannot bury the past. It lives within us, and we carry it with us always, and forever, in our temporal existence.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Set Photos



Image 1: First shot! We're making a movie!



Image 2: Setting up for the dolly shot of Jan running out of the shed.



Image 3: From Young Jan's P.O.V. in the field.



Image 4: Me directing from the ground up.



Image 5: Walking back to the monitor while our lovely host (wearing his Canadian suspenders) looks on in the window.



Image 6: The awkward moment where our lovely actress Clara wanted to try on a Nazi helmet.



Image 7: Who me? Paul, caught red handed while adding his personal touch to the set.



Image 8: If looks could kill, my poor first A.D. Keno would be a dead man. Someone takes their work very, very, very seriously...



Image 9: Keno translating my directions to Paul: "Imagine the van is driving away with your dog, and you'll never see it again." Also, "This time, please don't rip out all of the flowers."



Image 10: Behind the scenes lighting set up for the inside of the shed.



Image 11: The amazing work of Veronica Wuest, our production designer.



Image 12: Waiting for Veronica to come back with some more ladybugs. Macro time.



Image 13: We chose a coffee makers decal for the gas van - a sinister illusion based on documents and photos of the originals.