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REBEL WITHOUT A CREW

Or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with $7,000 Became a Hollywood Player

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AN EXCERPT FROM ROBERT RODRIGUEZ'S "TEN-MINUTE FILM SCHOOL"

So you want to be a filmmaker? First step .to being a filmmaker is stop saying you want to be a filmmaker. It took me forever to be able to tell anyone I was a filmmaker and keep a straight face until I was well on my way. But the truth was, I had been a filmmaker ever since the day I had closed my eyes and pictured myself making movies. The rest was inevitable. So you don't want to be a filmmaker, you *are* a filmmaker. Go make yourself a business card.

Next.

Now, what about all that technical knowledge you actually need to make a film? I think some famous filmmaker once said that all the technical stuff you need to know in order to make movies can be learned in a few weeks. He was being generous.

You can learn it in ten minutes.

With the following information you can embark on making your own cool movies, all by yourself, without a film crew (and trust me, there are extreme benefits of being able to walk into business and be completely self-sufficient. It scares people. Be scary). . . .

ROBERT RODRIGUEZ was raised in Texas and has ten siblings. Since *El Mariachi* he has written and directed a sequel to the film, *Desperado,* participated in the collaborative film *Four Rooms,* and directed *From Dusk Till Dawn,* based on a screenplay by Quentin Tarantino. He lives with his wife, Elizabeth, in Austin, Texas.

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INTRODUCTION

I associate my earliest memories with the movie theater. Being third oldest in a family that eventually grew to ten children, my mother would take us all to a San Antonio neighborhood revival house, The Olmos Theater, for our weekly dose of double and triple features of classic films.

My mother, who was always wary and suspicious of the current slew of movies out at that time, trusted our young eyes and minds only to the kind of cinema she grew up on. So our big screen diet consisted of heavy doses of MGM musicals, Marx Brothers comedies, and the occasional Hitchcock double bill. I still remember that strong dose double feature of Rebecca and Spellbound. My mother's name was Rebecca, so I figure that must be the reason why she took her young children to see such powerful imagery as the Salvador Dail dream sequence and the kid falling onto the spikes in Spellbound, or the burning Manderley crashing down on the possessed Mrs. Danvers in Rebecca.

In fifth grade I remember sitting in the back of the class with a paperback dictionary in my hands and using the side margins, where there is no writing, to draw in little stick figures on each page, creating my own little flip cartoon movies. Since I wasn't paying attention to the teacher, I had the entire day to draw my movies, giving me the patience and attention to detail 'I could never have now. The elaborate cartoons featured invincible characters bouncing around and off the pages, battling evil, and blowing up everything in sight.

I wasn't very good in math, science, history . . . in anything really. But I would get approval from the other kids through my flip cartoon movies. I remember how good it felt when someone would see my paper movies and laugh. It was addictive. I drew all the time. In eighth grade a few of my friends and I, after seeing John Carpenter's Escape from New York, decided we wanted to start making our own real movies. Even if they were stop-motion. But we had no equipment. I'd read books about Ray Harryhausen and they said you needed at least a 16 millimeter camera with stop-motion capabilities to do animated movies or claymation movies. Clay animation is the best kind of movie to make when you're younger because you can shoot for hours and hours and your clay actors never complain, they don't ask for food, and they don't need stunt doubles. My father did have an old super 8 film camera but it couldn't do stop-motion. So I improvised. I'd tap the shutter and move my clay guy around, but the camera produced an annoying flashing effect. I needed the proper equipment.

I tried to shoot a regular movie with my friends using the super 8 camera but it was completely discouraging. We'd shoot a $5 roll of super 8

film that lasted 21/2 minutes, wait several days for it to get developed, spend another $7 on developing, and then when I'd view it, I was always disappointed. The footage was too rough looking, the automatic exposure was usually off, the footage looked primitive, and it upset me. Waste of money. I did it only a half dozen times more before hanging it up. It seemed that making movies required too much money. Money I didn't have. Then a miracle arrived.

In 1979 my father, who makes his living selling cookware, fine china, crystal and all that kind of stuff, bought yet another one of the latest gadgets out on the electronic market (he'd buy anything he thought would help him with his sales). It was a four-head JVC video cassette recorder that he figured he could use to make sales presentations with. It was an expensive machine at the time, so the store where he bought it threw in a video camera for free. The camera was an old Quasar camera that connected to the VCR with a twelve-foot cable. It had no viewfinder and was completely manual, so I had to look at the TV set to see where I was pointing the camera. My father gave me the instructions to figure it out and before he knew it, I was using the machine to make my claymation movies and little action comedies with my brothers and sisters. The nice thing about being a budding filmmaker and growing up in a family of ten is the endless supply of cast and crew. The stop-motion movies didn't look very good because of the glitches every time you hit the pause button, but the live action movies came out great. The VCRs in those days had more extra features than the newer models today. This one had an audio dub feature which allowed me to erase the, sound track and add a new one without erasing the picture. So I'd make short movies, edit, in the camera, and lay music over it later. This new toy kept my interest for about a whole year. I shot everything. My newborn sister (the tenth), family gatherings, my own mini sci-fi comedy kung fu action movies, anything I could think of that I could shoot within a twelve-foot radius (I was still limited by the attached cord). The nice thing about this machine was that whereas before I'd spend over ten bucks for a two-minute super 8 movie with no sound, now I was getting two hours of erasable color picture and sound for the same price. The video age had arrived. Things really took off when my father decided to buy another VCR, since I had taken over the first one. To his surprise (or maybe not) I took over that one as well. I had realized that with two VCRs hooked together I could edit by playing my movie on one VCR and recording on the other VCR, using the pause button on the recorder to edit out unwanted material. My editing system was born. From then on I shot my movies, edited them between the VCRs, and then laid sound effects and music over them. I did this from the age of thirteen to twenty-three. What I didn't realize was that by making movies in this homemade, extremely crude and time-consuming manner, I was actually training myself for my future filmmaking challenges.

When you edit between two VCRs, you are playing your raw footage on one VCR and recording on the other while pressing pause. The pause button made nice clean edits but if I stopped the VCR to check my work and then restarted the machine in the place I left off, it would make a huge glitch, ruining the flow of the film. So I had to edit the entire film without being able to check my edits until I finished the entire movie. And I had to do it all in one sitting because the VCR would only stay in the pause mode for five minutes before shutting off, meaning that I'd have to restart the machine and get the dreaded glitch. So I'd edit a shot then I'd have to find the next shot before the five minutes were up.

This taught me to shoot as little footage as possible and as few takes as possible, because the more raw footage I had, the longer it would take to find the take I wanted and the greater chance I had of the recorder turning off and giving me the dreaded glitch. Learning how to make films this way for ten years trained me to see the movie edited in my head beforehand, I had to see it edited beforehand. When I made a cut it had to be right because there was no going back. That kind of previsualization skill came in extremely useful on my later films. These are skills they could never teach you in any film school but that proved invaluable to me later.

I attended a private boarding school, actually a junior seminary, during my high school years.' I practiced making my movies all through school and I found that the movies consistently got better the more of them I made. I'd pour all of my weekends and after-school hours into my movies and my cartoons. My short movies were getting so famous that my teachers would let me turn in term movies instead of term papers. No one complained because they knew I was pouring more work, time, dedication, and hours into my movies than if I were writing a hundred term papers. Besides, they were entertaining, they starred my schoolmates, and we'd screen them in class. I never learned to write very well but I did learn to visualize.

I met another young filmmaker there, named Carlos Gallardo, and he eventually was the star of many of my short movies. He was a boarding student from Mexico, and since I lived across the street from the school, he'd come over on weekends and help make short action comedies in the backyard. I kept all my movies under fifteen minutes because I wanted captive audiences and I found the faster and shorter I made my movies the more people liked them. It would leave them wanting to see them again, which is the best compliment you can get on a home movie.

During summer vacations I would go to visit Carlos in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, and we'd make an action comedy of some sort. The town was a beautiful, natural location, and the townspeople were used to seeing us running around with Carlos's video camera. So we'd get away with staging elaborate stunts in the middle of a busy street. After I'd shoot the movie, I would return home and edit between my two trusty VCRs, add music and

sound effects, and then send Carlos a copy to air on the local television station. He would also lend the tape to the dance clubs who would play the movies on their video monitors.

I graduated from high school and miraculously got a scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin. My grades were never very good in school but I found myself making the honor roll and getting straight As by my junior year in high school. I attribute my sudden boost in scholastic achievement to the fact that I had finally become comfortable with myself through my movies and cartoons. I found so much validation from peers and faculty who all appreciated my hobbies that I became more positive. I had a better self-image and my grades went up.

Because of the scholarship I decided to attend UT-Austin. They had a film program there. I knew that my parents expected all of us to go to college and get our degrees. I figured the only degree I could possibly get would be a film degree since there wasn't anything else I'd work harder at. I thought it was a good plan.

Then trouble struck. You can't apply to the film department until you've first completed two years of all the math, science, history, and English classes. These were called “weed out” classes. Those are the kind of academics I'm worst at, the monkey drills designed to teach nothing except how to cram as much information into your short-term memory as possible. My grade point average at the university started out bad and got worse. By the time I finished my two years of weed out, I couldn't get into the Film Department because my GPA was too low. The film classes are so small (fewer than thirty seats) and so many people are trying to get into them (more than 200) that the school chooses their film students by their GPA. If you've got a high average, you've got a good chance. If you don't, forget it.

There were a lot of academic types who got into the film classes but made horrible movies. I was one of the many creative types with low GPAs stuck on the outside looking in.

While I was taking art classes trying to get my grades back up, I applied for a job as a cartoonist at The Daily Texan, our school newspaper. I got the job and started up “Los Hooligans,” a daily comic strip based on my youngest sister Mari-carmen. It became popular and it allowed me to exercise my creativity. Meanwhile, I had continued making my short video home movies and a couple of them—”David and his Sisters” and “Waterlogged”—both starring my own siblings, won a few video festivals. I also made “Austin Stories,” a trilogy of short movies shot on video and again starring my siblings, and entered in the National Third Coast Film and Video Festival based in Austin. I won first place, beating out movies made in the UT-Austin Film Department. I took my award-winning video to Steve Mims, the film professor who taught Production I, and asked if he would admit me to his

class since, in spite of my GPA, I beat his students and I hadn't even taken his class yet. He saw my movie and let me in the class.

Before school began, I knew this was my big chance to shoot on 16mm and make an award-winning film to get myself some recognition. The problem with my video movies, although they were good, was that most festivals at that time only accepted movies shot on film. I knew that in the school environment I would get free 16mm equipment and could make a great movie with very little money. I cast my movie with my younger siblings once again, storyboarded heavily, and I even shot a home video version first, cut it together, and showed it to the children so that we'd all have a better idea of what to do.

I shot my movie, pouring every idea and camera trick I could think of into it, and my eight-minute film "Bedhead" was born. It won several first places among the fourteen film festivals I sent it out to. The nice thing was that a lot of festivals were starting to allow videotapes into competition. I shot my movie on 16mm but I transferred the film to video and edited on video. I sent VHS copies to the festivals and the tapes were treated as films since they were shot on film. This provided me with an extremely low-cost way to make films and get recognition in film festivals without the huge cost of a final film print.

"Bedhead" cost me around $800 to make and it was eight minutes long. I had written the script around production values I already had available to me: my siblings, my parents' house, my sister's bike, and my brother's skateboard. All of these things are featured prominently in the movie, along with a lot of creativity and lightning-fast storytelling techniques I had learned through all those little home video movies I had made over the years. All that experience plus the experience I had gotten drawing my comic strip for three years helped me to make that movie what it is.

With the awards and recognition I was getting at festivals, I realized that it was time to venture into feature films, because if someone offered me a film project to direct, it would not be a short film, it would be a feature. So I decided what I needed was as much practice making features as I had gotten making short films. I realized it was the experience that had gotten me where I was. If you want to learn the guitar, you don't take a couple of guitar classes and expect to do anything innovative. You practice in your garage until .your fingers bleed. I had done that with my home movies. I made over thirty short narrative movies, edited, with opening and closing credits, sound effects, and music.

I had realized when I got into the film class that a lot of the other students had never touched even a video camera, yet they wanted to be filmmakers. They spent almost $1,000 on films that didn't turn out as good as they expected, so they figured they weren't cut out for movies and would go into something else. I remember my first movies on video. I never would have

wanted to spend $1,000 on those terrible experiments. Since it was video, it was no great expense; and since I loved to make movies, I just kept at it until I got better. So, if you're noodling around with a video camera, keep it up. Don't listen to film snobs who tell you that you're wasting your time, either. I started on video and used the less expensive format to learn storytelling, and later found the tiny jump to film was no big deal at all. It's all the same thing.

If you want to be a filmmaker and you can't afford film school, know that you don't really learn anything in film school anyway. They can never teach you how to tell a story.You don't want to learn that from them anyway, or all you'll do is tell stories like everyone else. You learn to tell stories by telling stories. And you want to discover your own way of doing things.

In school they also don't teach you how to make a movie when you have no money and no crew. They teach you how to make a big movie with a big crew so that when you graduate you can go to Hollywood and get a job pulling cables on someone else's movie.

Or they teach you how to make contacts. They say that the only way into the business is by knowing people. It's not what you can do, it's who you know. That might get you through the door but it won't keep you there. When it comes down to it, sooner or later someone figures out you can't make them any money and you're out. Flavor of the Month. Adios.

So how do you get in? We're getting to that . . .

I was never big on writing scripts. I have read many times that the best way to learn to write scripts is to actually sit down and write two full scripts and after you're done you should throw them away. You'll learn a lot by doing those first two but they'll be awful, so after you write them you should throw them away and then start writing your real script. What?! Whoever thought of that game is whacked. In a way it makes sense. I mean, I think everyone has a few bad movies in them, the sooner you get them out the better off you are. I just know I could never bring myself to create two complete, time-consuming scripts only to throw them away afterwards. It is hard enough to try and find the motivation to write anything, much less something that you know you will throw out because it will be awful. I knew that in all honesty, I could never bring myself to actually write a script not knowing what was going to happen to it before I started. Will I sell it? Will I burn it? Will I write it over a three-year period and hope it makes me rich someday? In that kind of a situation, motivation is practically nonexistent. You need motivation in order to take on something like writing a script.

My motivation to write El Mariachi was very simple and it really opened my eyes. It suddenly hit me: Instead of writing two scripts and throwing them away afterwards, why not just take the scripts and make them for really low budgets? That way while you're practicing your writing skills you can also practice your filmmaking skills. That's what I decided to do with El Mariachi. I would write two scripts, both about the same character, but I

would film them on a low, low budget all by myself. Then I would sell them to the Spanish video market where no one in the movie business would see them if they were no good, so it was almost like throwing them away, only I would get paid for them. That's a better motivator. Then I would write and film my third script. The third installment in the Mariachi series. I would sell that to the Spanish video market as well, but if it came out as good as I thought it would . . . Writing and directing three movies in a row like that would give me so much experience and confidence that I could use the best scenes from the trilogy or all of Part III as a demo tape and get financing for a real movie—say a sex, lies, and videotape or Reservoir Dogs times ten—and explode onto the American independent scene and pretend like I had never made anything before in my life. My brainstorm came so strongly it almost knocked me out. I remember thinking, why hasn't anyone else done this? Could it be that no one else has ever done this? Could it be that I may be on to something? Even if Part III is awful, if I can sell my movies to the Spanish video market and make a profit, I'll be in heaven. I love to make movies. But to make movies and make some money to live on so I could make movies full time would be the greatest thing in the world. I was excited beyond belief with the idea.

We've all heard of independent filmmakers that make one great film, are pushed into the limelight, then are so scrutinized on their second movie they are never heard from again. I think part of the reason is that their success came unexpectedly, before they ever got the chance to experiment and hone their style and talents. I was only twenty-three and in no hurry to rush into the film business ill-prepared, and I was already winning festivals with some short films. I realized that by making my first, second, and third feature film in complete obscurity, I could make mistakes quietly, experiment freely, hone my talents in every department because I would make this Mariachi Trilogy with no crew whatsoever. I was inventing my own film school where I would be the only student and where experiences, mistakes, problems, and solutions would be my teachers. And the best part was that even if my movies were no good, no one would ever see them and I'd still be able to get my money back.

Now that was motivation. I went on to write the first Maria-chi in three weeks. It's amazing how quickly ideas come to you for a script when you know you're going to be actually making the movie in a few months, not just writing for writing's sake. How did I get the idea about the Spanish video market? I guess it all started for me in March of 1991. “Bed-head” was on the festival circuit and doing well. I got a call from Carlos Gallardo. He told me to come back to his hometown in Mexico.

“To make another movie?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “to see a movie being made.” He filled me in on the movie that was being shot in his own hometown. He was amazed because it was the biggest budget movie ever to be produced in Mexico. It was the film