Note to examiner: the download of document did not work, this is copy and paste effort, so the presentation is not the same as was submitted by the student.

The Acquaintance – Evaluation and Production Report

The Acquaintance follows Irene Lambeth, a retired architect who after her husband’s

death is left alone in her large, isolated house with never any visitors. She is about to

take her own life when her neighbour Zoe and her teenaged son Ryan knock at the door.

We follow Irene and Ryan during their time in the house as their bond grows and Irene

rethinks her choice. Initially we had quite a dark and eerie tone in mind, but this

transitioned as we developed the script and our production plans to produce something

emotional and poignant but not too heavy. We were very much inspired by films such as

David Lowery’s A Ghost Story (2017) – a film that focuses on isolation within a house

including shot of a countryside exterior that we wanted to mirror within our

production. Dean Andrews writes, “A Ghost Story is an intriguing reflection on time,

loneliness, memory, existence, death and grieving… this is a film that requires patience. It took time (no pun intended) for me to be drawn in, but once there I was fascinated.” (Andrews, D. 2019:391) These affects achieved are ones we wanted to try and parallel with our production at the beginning, as well as being sensitive and thought-provoking.

Storytelling

When viewing the final product, the plot seems relatively clear to follow up until the

ending just after the pool scene. The end scene was supposed to symbolise that Irene

and Ryan had overtime become closer and that he had come back to the house on a

separate day to help her sort through all her possessions and old photos. However,

being pushed for time during filming, we did not manage to get enough effective

establishing shots to show the passing of time here, so all there is to signify this is both

of them in a change of clothes, which is less noticeable. Overall the tone and style of

storytelling feels consistent throughout, with elements of subtlety from the script that

are not overly spelt out for us visually in the film. It is a calm and simplistic plotline that

remains steady without drastically fluctuating in intensity, which perhaps this makes it

lack an element of excitement but is positive in that it is continuous and coherent.

Characterisations

We wanted our cast to give convincing, naturalistic performances that our audience

could relate to, and they mostly achieved this for us. The characterisation Joanna gave to

Irene overall supports the storytelling of the piece, but certain moments detract slightly

from the flow of the film when her vocal delivery of certain lines doesn’t feel quite apt. For example, when she angrily walks in on Ryan looking through her old photos, she

could have put more emphasis into her delivery and this whole scene could have been

removed of music and slowed down in the edit in order to emphasise Irene’s secrecy

and sensitivity around people going through her things.

Finn’s performance as Ryan was essentially as we had hoped it would be, since his

portrayal of the sweet-natured, shy young boy with a previous friendship with Irene is

easily detectable when watching the final film. Perhaps, we could have instructed him to

stutter slightly more in places to further emphasise the nervous demeanour about his

character. Carole’s interpretation of Zoe was completely in line with what we were looking for when developing the characters, and her performance very natural and easy to view.

She brought a large element of normality and sanity to an otherwise bleak and

unsettling scenario, and her expressiveness and understanding of the role in relation to

the other characters gave more life to the story.

Costume/Hair/Makeup/Props

Irene’s polka dot top, smart trousers and light makeup give her the mature, classy look

we desired from our retired architect protagonist. It contrasts Zoe and Ryan’s more

casual costumes, helping to show the divide between Irene and other people. Zoe’s

brightly coloured jumper works nicely against Ryan’s more plain, conservative shirt to

bring out his quiet personality and her opposing bubbly, confident one. In terms of

props, the plaque that sits in the woods to commemorate Irene’s husband is

sophisticated looking and well positioned, making Irene’s loss more vivid and real in the story. The noose could have been made to look more old and worn, as though she might have fashioned it from an old piece of rope that belonged to her husband or something of that nature. Instead, it looks somewhat new and shop-bought in the film.

Production Design

Due to us having to produce our film under challenging circumstances with a much

more limited budget than anticipated, we did not quite achieve the setting we had

envisioned in the early days of project planning. Our production design distracts from

the storytelling as we had limited ability to experiment with how empty and eerie we

could make the house look – it does not have the untouched vintage aesthetic that we

had originally hoped for. All the rooms in the house had painted white walls, which

washed out the set, and the modern style of furniture and décor opposes the desolate,

hollow tone I had previously had in mind, so our initial concept does not come across as

clearly. However, our dressing (or rather undressing) of the set with white sheets over

furniture and brown boxes does help to give a more soulless vibe to the space and make

it look as though Irene was moving or planning to, which was our intention. We hoped

our use of the sheets would hint at a ghost-like theme since it represented that Irene

was preparing the house for her to leave this world. However, the sheets are focused on

enough with the camera for this to come across plainly, and even if it did it would

potentially not match the now more sweet and poignant vibe to the film.

Blocking

The blocking of each scene enhances our storytelling as the focus is always placed

clearly on the speaking character, and the plot is communicated well through their

movements and position in relation to the camera. The moving shots that follow the

actors add something new and different to the many static medium and close-up shots

of individual bodies and faces. One of the most interestingly blocked scenes is the one at

2 minutes 50 in which all three characters are shot moving through the hallway into the

kitchen at staggered intervals, showing the whole cast together. This helps viewers to

get an idea of the dimensions of the interior space and is simply an aesthetically

pleasing shot.

Cinematography

Our cinematography generally enhances the storytelling as the focus is often placed on

the characters’ body movements and facial expressions, such as the opening close-up on Irene’s face in the noose, and the close-ups of nervous hand gestures (e.g. Irene and Ryan’s hands as they anxiously tap their fingers on their cups of tea). These highlight the awkward subtleties in human body language that can indicate a hidden feeling or a backstory, and work well to build our characters and show the development of the relationships between them as the film progresses, which was a large priority for us. Some of the most aesthetic moments for our cinematography were during the outdoor

scenes using the stabiliser and the shots looking up at the black tree branches against

the white sky. These aided with the theme of isolation and communicating that the

house was remote and separate from civilisation while exhibiting the beautiful

countryside. Cool tones were enhanced during editing to bring out the contrast between

the inside of the house and outside of it, mirroring certain outdoor shots seen in A Ghost

Story.

Lighting

Much of the indoor lighting of our scenes does not correspond with how we initially

envisioned since the house contained a lot of bright natural light which was impossible

to block out or minimise, but having worked with what we had at our disposal adds

realism to the piece. If we had toyed with the house too much or tried to use too many

artificial lights this could have taken away from the naturalistic style we were aiming

for and the realness of our story. The lighting and natural colouration of the outdoor

shots was perfect in illustrating a cold, cut-off atmosphere surrounding the lonely house

in which Irene could not easily seek out casual company or people to remedy her

loneliness.

Music/Sound

Tan, Spackman and Bezdeck’s research study states: “Music can interact with visuals in more complex and subtle ways when the audience’s focus is on human characters,

thereby affecting the progression of the narrative.” (Tan, S., Spackman, M., Bezdek, M. 2007:136) Dream a Little Dream of Me played at the beginning of our film is a great

juxtaposition, contrasting the morbidity of Irene preparing to hang herself with this

‘dreamy’, comforting tune, all while zoomed in on her face in the noose. This effectively

sets our story off with a haunting vintage vibe and characterises Irene by suggesting she

is ‘dreaming a little dream’ of being reunited with her husband in the afterlife.

There are some moments throughout the film in which the sound quality for dialogue is

not at its best, and certain characters are not heard as clearly. This was down to a

technical issue in which we were not able to connect our sound system to one of our

cameras when using the stabiliser, and so for certain scenes, sound recording had to be

taken on a separate device so that they could be matched up to the correct video clips

during post production. In an ideal situation where we could have all edited the piece

together this would have been my job to do, but under the circumstances the highest

quality overall sound standard was not reached and my plans for sound design were not

able to be carried through to the end. However, the most problematic scenes have been

cut or concealed with the use of music, and sound overlap between scenes is also

utilised at one point to ease the transition in quality between outdoor and indoor audio.

- - - - -

The Acquaintance is a smooth-flowing and attractive short film that tells a very moving

and unique story. Its largest overall strengths involved use of music, casting, blocking

and cinematography and credit can be given to its commitment to naturalism and

speaking on a down-to-earth level about the real mental and social struggles that can

come with age and loss, uniting young and old in friendship.