

SCRIPT TO SCREEN EVOLUTION OF KATE MELVILLE'S *PICTURE DAY*

BY MATTHEW HAYS

When Kate Melville describes the process of writing her feature-length drama *Picture Day* as “very long,” she’s not joking. “It began when I started writing a play in high school,” says Melville, who’s worked >>



WGC Screenwriting Award nominee Kate Melville

PHOTO: Johnny Yong

as a story editor and writer for various TV shows, including *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and *Being Erica*. “It’s been a 20-year process! It’s a coming-of-age story that I’ve come of age with—been with me my entire adult life.”

Melville says she then left the characters for a time, returning to flesh them—and the ideas that surrounded them—into a ‘complete’ screenplay in 2003.

Then, another turn in the project’s evolutionary path: it got optioned in L.A., remaining there effectively in limbo for five years. “Then I got the rights back,” says Melville, recalling her relief.

With that came a revelation: “the people handling the project in L.A. had seen the budget as about ten times what we’d conceived of. We had thought of it as a low-budget, character-based story.” She believed that this kind of writing could be seen through to a completed feature on a much lower budget.

Melville says a key to envisioning the film, as well as writing it, was to cast her three main players. *Picture Day*’s story called for a solid ensemble, in particular the lead, a young woman who is struggling to get through high school and on the cusp of entering the world outside as a young adult. “I knew who my three leads were for one full year prior to filming,” and this proved formative in the way she developed the script.

Melville cast Tatiana Maslany, who had already gained critical accolades for her turn in another independent Canadian feature, *Grown Up Movie Star*. “I would write a draft of a scene and send it to Tatiana. We’d get together and have coffee, and have a discussion about who this character really was. That changed things, because Tatiana really saw the character as this loveable shit disturber. So her feelings about the character shifted how and where I was taking the script.”

Extensive rehearsals prior to filming were something Melville felt passionately about. “I’m a huge admirer of [British director] Mike Leigh. And given my background in the theatre, I wanted to spend a lot of time in rehearsal.” This led Melville to an epiphany: she found herself letting go of the very idea of a script. “When we finally had our shooting dates set, we gave ourselves five days of rehearsal. It was like a workshop. It allowed us to work on things together, to really get a sense of where each scene was going. I like the way director Judd Apatow works—it’s the semi-improvised films I’m really excited about.”

Entire scenes were created out of workshopping the script, days before shooting actually began. “As a writer, you want to get the perfect line of dialogue. But sometimes what they’re saying is the least important thing. It’s the underlying stuff that really matters.

Because we’d rehearsed, the actors knew the intent of each scene. It allowed the four of us to arrive with a strong sense of story as shooting began.”

And this is where Melville’s extensive TV background came in very handy. “In TV, there are so many drafts. You learn not to hold on to things too tightly. You have to be flexible. You learn that there can be different drafts, different ways to tell the same story. I learned to try not to be too precious. Sometimes it’s good to shake up a script and see where the pieces land.”

Melville also allowed her locations to shape the direction of the script. “Having done a lot of TV, where we’re working on sets, the idea of working on location really excited me. When you’re watching something shot in a real place, it feels like a real place for a reason.”

They chose as a location a school that looked like a prison. And even there, things that actually happened found their way into the script. “When we were there, the principal made an announcement about the school’s gay-straight alliance group having a meeting that afternoon. I thought, ‘I want that in the film!’ So we put it in.”

And the writing process didn’t end with principal photography. Melville reports that there was an additional, extensive and exhaustive writing process that occurred in post-production. “We ended up with quite a bit more story than we needed for the final cut. The editing room was where another draft emerged. We had index cards all over the editing room.”

“Ultimately, I was still faced with the questions any writer would be: how do I keep the audience excited? How do you set up a world that people feel they hadn’t seen before? In a sense, we’re in an entirely new era of digital filmmaking. We have cameras that cost \$900. It’s opened us up to different ways of telling stories: you can gather more stories than you need and finish it in post-production.

“We no longer need to be like Hitchcock and plan every shot. It opens up room for another kind of storytelling. The result for me was that things changed, a lot. The white pages of the script and the closed captions of the finished film are very different.”

That being said, Melville laughs when asked what she learned from her process. “I’m not sure I’d recommend this process. I’m really happy with the performances we got and with *Picture Day*. But you don’t really even have a process with your first film. It’s just how it works out.” ■

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