

The *Independent Rising* Magazine

A magazine by indie filmmakers, for indie filmmakers!

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Producer's Journal

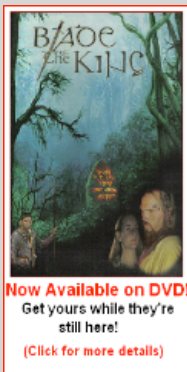
You Did What?

An Interview with Jeff Morris

By: Steven Haske



An Online guide to the
Indy Film industry



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Love can be a terrible, complicated thing. Commitment, marriage, fear of the 'couples' status-quo' that goes with both of them—if it's not one thing, it's another. At least that's how it is for Charlie, after his brother proposes to a girl he's known for a day -- much to the dismay of Ashley, Charlie's longtime girlfriend. It's not long before she starts pressuring Charlie to get married, sending Charlie into a panic.

How will he ever get himself out of proposing? Simple: break up his brother's wedding. This is the basis for "You Did What?", a new romantic comedy from writer/producer/director Jeff Morris.

IR Magazine had a chance to catch up with Jeff to learn a little more about the new film as well as his career.

Hi Jeff. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us. First off, let me congratulate you on such a great film.

Why thank you.

I wanted to take a moment to go back to your roots. Your first personal venture into the industry was a short film called [THE SLOW AND THE CAUTIOUS](#), a parody of *The Fast and the Furious*. What was it like for you, working on that first film?

We had a lot of fun working on it. We shot it entirely in one day for a few thousand bucks on film. How we got away with shooting at Go Kart World with no insurance while they were open I have no idea. But it was a great learning experience.

What were some of your first experiences in film?

I guess technically it was [THE SLOW AND THE CAUTIOUS](#). I had never even been on a set before that and I didn't go to film school. I was learning on the fly.

What made you want to get into the film industry in the first place?

I've always loved movies and I never saw myself sitting in an office.

How long did it take you to write the script for "The Slow and the Cautious"?

What were some of the challenges you faced making this film?

Like all indie projects – we didn't have enough money or time. But that's going to be a blanket answer anytime the question is asked. We had about \$190,000 and a 20 day schedule.

Is there anything you can look back on that maybe you could've done differently now that you have more experience?

If I were to go back and shoot YOU DID WHAT?, I would probably open the film up more – choose a couple of different locations than what we had and made some slight script changes.

You followed up "The Slow and the Cautious" in 2003 with *THE HONOR SYSTEM*, where you again served as writer/director/producer. How was this film, and your experiences with it, different from your first effort?

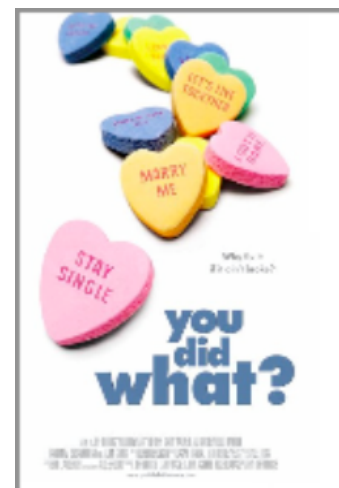
Well this film was a lot more daring since we shot on film entirely in one day – again for about 3 thousand bucks but this time with over 100 kids! 8 pages in one day with that many children was just crazy. My first short we finished early on our one day shoot. On the Honor System, we were literally shooting until we had no more light.

What lessons have you taken from your experiences with short film?

It's important to work on the craft to be able to tell a complete story. Making mistakes – learning all aspects of the process were extremely valuable. I never would have been able to do a feature if it wasn't for my shorts.

YOU DID WHAT? is your feature-length debut as writer and director? Other than the obvious longer length and additional cost and sacrifice needed to make a feature-length film, how did the process differ from your experiences with short films?

First of all there were many many more people to manage and way more at stake. Also, because you're dealing with a script that is a 100 pages and not 8, you have to constantly remind yourself of where you are in the movie, what's happened – what's going to happen and take all of that into



Poster art for YOU DID WHAT?, the new film by award winning director Jeff Morris.

for a few minutes that I would try acting while pursuing writing. I took some classes. Those classes actually really helped my writing. I learned a lot during that time. I don't ever see myself actually trying to act though.

YOU DID WHAT? looks like it's going to be pretty funny, and it's already won a number of selections and awards at various film festivals around the U.S. What kind of reaction have the screenings received thus far?

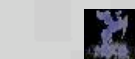
The screenings have been great. It's a feel good movie and audiences seem to really enjoy it. Laughter is contagious and the nice part about directing a comedy is you know if the film is working or not just by looking around the theater.

Has the film been picked up by a distributor?

Yes, MarVista Entertainment.

What was it like working with the cast and crew of the film?

It was a great experience. The cast and crew were all really awesome people. I was humbled by them. They worked for next to nothing to support an idea I had in my head and helped it come to fruition. The cast was a little intimidating at first because they were all well known and had a large body of work.



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About a half hour.

Was the decision to write, direct and produce a conscious one or was it more out of necessity?

It's interesting... I actually never had any intentions of directing or producing. When I made [THE SLOW AND THE CAUTIOUS](#), I had been writing scripts since I came out of college in '98 and was getting read all over town. I never saw myself as a director and I never had any desire to direct. But when I made the short – it was at a time where IFILM was taking off and a few other directors had made spoofs that got them a lot of attention. I decided that I would try the same thing to see if it would boost my writing career never thinking I would actually direct again. But since I made my shorts and now feature, I kind of see myself as a director first now and a writer second. I hate producing and would love to be in a position where I don't have to do that anymore.

account to work on the film to make sure a character is in the right place in his journey and his arch is happening correctly. The other thing with directing a feature is the endurance. It was amazing how physically and mentally tired I would be at the end of each day. After our first day of shooting I actually said to myself, "how the hell am I going to do this for 19 more days."

Having dabbled in writing, directing and producing, what other experiences do you have in the film industry?

None.

How long have you been screenwriting?

For about 9 years.

What about acting experience?

I did a little in high school and college – nothing major. When I moved to LA I thought

I mean, Susan Ruttan was nominated for 2 Golden Globe and Emmy's! Most of the others I was already a fan of. It's funny, when I first moved to LA, I actually watched Felicity on TV and Ian Gomez, who is in my film, was on that show. I still kick myself at the idea that 8 years later I would be directing him.

Any particularly great or memorable stories from the set you'd like to share?

Well, I'd like to forget that Ed Kerr – our lead – got to kiss my wife so I won't rehash that story. The story I'll tell is that we were shooting at a sound stage one day and the facility said they had a beautiful standing set we could use. When we went to set up the night before – the set didn't exist. At 9:00 on a Friday night, we had to create a set. Our actors were going to be there the next morning at 7:00 am. We picked through the facility's grave yard for sets – mixed and matched what we could – painted frantically – bought furniture right before the stores

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closed and some how pulled it off around 6 in the morning. Many people think it's our best looking set. If they only knew...

It looks like everyone had a good time with you on "The Slow and the Cautious". In "You Did What?" she has a much bigger role. How was it working with her again?

Well Kathy is my wife and she's great to work with. She's an amazing actress and I wrote the part for her. She's so easy to direct and just so natural. When we finished the film – I couldn't have been more proud of her performance.

According to your blogs on the films website, the inspiration for "You Did What?" came from a real-life problem with your brother proposing to a girl he just met, subsequently turning the screws on you to propose to your long time girlfriend. How much of the film's story is true?

There is a lot of truth with lots of hyperbole. Because I was marriage phobic and probably a little self centered about the idea of getting married – all the things that was happening with my brother seemed like a lot bigger deal then actually were. When I wrote the script, I chose the stuff that was memorable during that time in my life and then just exaggerated.

What films or directors do you get inspiration from? What was it that made you decide you wanted to get into this field of work?

It was a combination of things. I'm actually a big fan of guys who began the indie film movement back in the 90's like Ed Burns, Kevin Smith and Robert Rodriguez. What I thought was so interesting about them was that they made commercial films for indie prices and had tremendous amounts of success. They were all regular guys who did it outside of Hollywood. Then Matt Damon and Ben Affeck wrote one of my favorite movies ever (Good Will Hunting) and the story at the time was they were these two unknowns who wrote a great script and because it was so good got to star in it. It was very inspirational. While all this was

have gone on to become famous yet.

What was it about this script that made you decide that you should make it into a full length film?

Of all the scripts I have written, it was the only one I could realistically do for no money. With screenwriting, I feel like each script I



Charlie (Ed Kerr) and Ashley (Kathy Wagner) get some unexpected news.

finish is my new favorite. This script was shopped by my manager and I thought it was going to sell. At the time it was a much bigger version. When it didn't, I had just grown tired of not selling a spec. I hadn't directed in awhile either and got the itch. So I decided I would just go out and make it.

The story is obviously personal, as it comes from real life events. Was that the reason, or was it just time to take the next step with your career into directing full-length films?

So often when a spec script goes out, people ask what else had I done. I was tired of my manager having his hands tied by having to say well, just a couple of shorts. I thought it was time to have a feature under my belt. You Did What? is also a similar genre of much of what I write and thought it would serve as a good showcase. But it was also the right time. Had I done it any earlier in my career, I probably wouldn't have been ready.

When did you start working on "You Did What?"

The script was finished and shopped in the fall of '04. In January of '05, my wife and I decided we would make the movie. We made an agreement that we would shoot the film no matter what that summer. We originally had the budget at 1.5 million. We

drivers, location permits, and on and on and on. It's never ending it feels like. With a short, I always had such a short schedule I didn't have to worry as much. Also, with shorts, you know you're not going to make any real money and you also know the money you have, you're not getting back. With a feature, you have real money from real people who want a return despite knowing how high risk it is. Every producing decision I made I had to constantly think about the investors.

What challenges or hardships have you faced over the years with screenwriting? With directing?

What's nice about screenwriting compared to something like acting is you don't have to ask permission to write. Actors sadly have to

ask permission and audition just to pursue their craft. Anytime I feel like writing, I can sit down and do it. Now as a matter of getting the work made – that's always difficult. I knew going in that the over night success stories were 10 years and more in the making. It's difficult getting the elusive spec sale but luckily I've found work and have great representation. Directing hasn't been a hardship because before I did You Did What? I never pursued it. But now that I have the bug, ask me again in a couple of years and I'll let you know.

What are some of the lessons you've learned from experiences in these fields?

With writing, I've learned to try to write with as few of words as possible while getting into scenes very late and getting out as early as I can. With directing, it's about performance first – look second. With producing, I would say spend as much time on the script in preproduction because it's the cheapest time to fix any problems there may be in the story.

According to your new film's webpage, you're in pre-production on another script, for Avalanche! Entertainment. This script was in pre-production but has since fallen out of it. Any hints on what your new project is about?

The project was a big comedy called Over

happening, I was writing for my college's entertainment magazine and was interviewing rock stars, actors and people like that. It was a blast going to concerts 5 times a week and meeting my favorite bands like Counting Crows, but I got tired of it. But I wanted to continue writing. So with all that was happening in film, I decided to write a script.

At the Tiburon International Film Festival you received the Orson Welles Award, given to recipient directors for outstanding achievement in a feature debut. How did it feel accepting such a prestigious award?

I was kind of blown away – my film is light and sweet – I never imagined I would win it. Usually director awards seem to go to darker, edgier films – not a romantic comedy. I was very honored.

Who are some other famous directors that have received this award?

The festival has been around for 6 years so I don't think any who received it before me

thought, well we have 5 or six months we can raise that kind of money. We quickly realized we didn't know that many people with money. As our date got closer we held each other to our promise. When we were just a couple of weeks away from our start date, we looked to see how much money we had – it was about a \$190,000 – we said well, let's go. Let's make this movie.

How long did it take you to write the script?

About 3 weeks for the first draft. But a script is never done until the picture is locked. The script was being rewritten on the set.

As someone who has previously experienced writing, directing and producing two times previous to "You Did What?", you must be fairly seasoned at what must be a hectic schedule. How is it taking on that much responsibility for something as big as a film production, full length or not?

It's stressful. With a feature, there is so much more to worry about. Payroll, insurance, workers comp, agents, truck

Slept. It was about a rich egotistical bachelor who goes to sleep one night and wakes up a year later. When he awakes, he's fat, broke and no one missed him.

Other than the scripts you're working on, what's next for you?

I'm actually have my first son in January. Talk about a new project!?



For More Information

- [YOU DID WHAT? \(Official Website\)](#)
- [VIEW a Trailer](#)
- [Jeff Morris on IMDB.com](#)

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