



Scenes from a "Marriage"

The Collaboration of Mike Nichols and Sam O'Steen

Long-term collaborations between a film editor and director are rare and underline the editor's role in nurturing and shaping the director's vision. That relationship functions very much like a marriage. The chemistry has to click and, over time, the editor and director develop mutual respect, trust, shorthand in communication, and a comfort level that is invaluable.

My late husband and colleague, editor Sam O'Steen, and director Mike Nichols - who passed away last November - worked together for 29 years on such landmark films as "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," "The Graduate," "Carnal Knowledge," and "Silkwood." Their legendary movie careers took off in the late sixties, a period often called the Golden Age, when Mike and Sam rode the wave of that revolution in film history. But their paths to that achievement were wildly different.



Article

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Mike was the son of a Russian physician; Sam was the child of Arkansas sharecroppers. Mike's family fled Nazi Germany for New York; Sam's family escaped the Dust-bowl and Depression, ending up in California.

Before they worked together, Mike had prodigious success from his improvisational comedy act, Nichols and May, and from directing hit plays on Broadway. With limited resources and no insider connections, Sam's rise took longer. He spent ten years in Warner Brothers Studio's print shop, then edited 'under the table,' dazzling many, while waiting the required eight years to become a full-fledged editor. When Mike was about to direct his first film, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" for Warner Brothers, veteran director Billy Wilder advised him to use his longtime editor, Doane Harrison, for help in laying out the shots. Sam - who by then had edited five features - was also hired, because Mike had to use a studio editor and only picked Sam because he was the youngest. But when they met, Mike said that, although Sam didn't say much, he gave Mike a feeling of confidence.

As it turned out, Mike and Doane did not get along, and Doane quit. Soon, Sam was being called to the set for advice, and he and Mike developed a pattern that persisted throughout the years they worked together. Sam would be



on set for rehearsals and the first weeks of filming and then, during slack periods when they would be lighting, etc., he would run to the cutting room. Sam was able to be there for the entire shoot because he was incredibly fast and decisive; he never looked at anything he cut before he showed it to the director, unless there was a technical problem. And Sam's presence on set allowed him to "watch for things that might not work. We solved the problems there instead of trying to solve them later in the cutting room." Sam was also able to help Mike and the cinematographer create

coverage that often resulted in stunningly fluid and dynamic transitions, both, within the scenes, and from shot to shot.

Mike recognized his own strengths and weaknesses. He knew he wasn't adept at the mechanics of shooting, but was brilliant with performance and language. "Words are all important to him," Sam said, and he often would have to "go through all the outtakes and maybe find a different inflection."

Sam also shared and appreciated Mike's razor sharp humor. "He's probably got the best comedy timing in the world."

In addition, Mike and Sam discovered they had the same birthday – and they both happened to be masters at understanding the subtle complexity of human behavior. Mike had the following to say about Sam when "Cut to the Chase" was published, a book I wrote based on my interviews with Sam about his life and career: "Sam was listening to the currents that flow underneath human events...He was a master at making manifest the thousands of small, nonverbal clues to a person's nature, to a relationship, to a story."

During their first meeting, Mike asked Sam whether he could shoot overlapping dialog. Sam's response: "If you shoot it, I can get it together.' Mike said, 'That's interesting,' because a lot of editors had told him he couldn't." Sam soon discovered that the constant verbal sparring on "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" was a bigger challenge than he anticipated. "It was like a very fast motor and you had to keep it going. Once you opened that up, you just had to go with it." So Sam invented a technique: "When George and Martha [Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor] were talking at the same time, I mixed the two tracks together, I did a dub on it and...bang, the scene timed out about right, so then I coded the soundtrack. I did it twice to match both actors, George's takes and Martha's takes. So say George is speaking Latin and Martha is wailing away and they're talking between them – well, when I started cutting first to him then to her, it didn't matter if they overlapped, they would always be in sync. I could cut anywhere I wanted to."

Even though Sam had such opportunities to innovate, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" was still a studio film. And Mike was feistily flexing his muscles when directors - especially first-timers - were still mostly treated as hired hands. The last straw was when Mike fought studio chief Jack Warner about a composer and Warner gave him four days to finish editing the movie. Sam worked literally day and night to get the cut done before Mike was kicked off the lot. And then, from the mixing stage, Sam had to hold the phone up for Mike during the entire month so he could give his input. Nichols later said that was a "remarkably brave thing" for him to do because if Warner had found out, Sam would've been blackballed. Sam explained, "There were seven or eight studio



heads who could just call each other and that would be the end of you."

After the success of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Mike convinced Sam to leave his steady job at Warner Brothers and work on an independent film called "The Graduate." Now they had real time and freedom, and a lot of very brave work was done with sound, music, cinematography, and editing, which only served to elevate Sam's stature and that of other editors.

A prime example: the iconic scene when a naked Mrs. Robinson (Ann Bancroft) traps Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) in the bedroom. When Mike ran the first cut, Sam had assembled it somewhat conventionally: close shots of Mrs. Robinson's face, nude shots of her breasts and belly and close shots of Benjamin reacting. Sam said, "We both decided it wasn't funny." Sam started problem-solving. First, he found an outtake of Benjamin reacting, that was shot past Mrs. Robinson's shoulder - the only angle where a part of her body is on screen with him. He used that angle whenever he cut to Benjamin, so the audience always knew what he was looking at. Sam said, "Since I wasn't locked into using conventional cuts to establish Mrs. Robinson, I could play her dialogue off screen, I was free to experiment. I used subliminal shots of her breasts and belly and found out that three frames register, but only like a flash...you just don't know if it'll work, but I thought it would here because Benjamin can barely look at her, yet he can't look away." By using Mrs. Robinson's disembodied voice and intercutting Benjamin's increasingly panicked face with her naked body parts, Sam made a surreal situation even more surreal and absurdly funny.

Mike and Sam's teamwork on "The Graduate" also brought about the pioneering use of source music. Mike had found a Simon and Garfunkel song he liked, "The Sounds of Silence," and wanted to put it in the main title. Sam said, "When we were transferring the song to tape, I just pulled the other songs off the record, too. They worked so well, I cut the whole movie to the record...Paul Simon kept saying, 'I can't get over how that music fits.' I said, 'I cut the picture to make it fit!'" The music grew on Mike and it all stayed in the movie - and the era of the hit soundtrack album was born.

The college and foreign-film educated audiences of that time turned out to be ripe for a film with an offbeat anti-hero, frank sexuality and a thrilling visual style that reflected the psychology of the characters. "The Graduate" - with no stars in the cast - would shockingly become a huge hit.

Of course, not every film Mike and Sam did together was a home run like "The Graduate," but overall, they had a terrific track record and, like a married couple, were able for many years to weather their career ups and downs. It helped that Sam was a perpetual optimist and had a calming influence on Mike, the worrier. "It's only shadows on the wall," Sam would say when the fate of a film was being taken too seriously. Mike appreciated Sam's positive spirit, "He was a joy to work with because he had great enthusiasm for what he was doing."

Sam, too, valued the relationship, "When you work with a director for years, you know what they're thinking...basically you're in sync." And then there's the honesty that developed over time, "Because [Sam] told the truth, he was wonderful to be around... No one can ever replace him."

No one can ever replace either of these incredible talents. But we will always be able to enjoy their films, the wonderful consequence of their inspired collaboration.