The Thrill of Living on the Edge

Dody Dorn

Dody Dorn grew up with the film industry in her blood. Her father worked as a set builder/designer and later as a movie producer. She was still in high school when she began working at his sound stage, Hollywood Stage, where she made the contacts that would ultimately allow her to find work in her chosen field--motion picture editing.

After working a number of production positions, including assistant to the producer, script supervisor and assistant location manager, as well as production assistant on *Elvis,* (the John Carpenter MOW), she was offered the chance to assist that film's editor, Chris Holmes.

Dorn found a home in the cutting room. Earlier this year she received an Oscar nomination for her work on Christopher Nolan's *Memento.* Recently she has teamed up with Nolan again for *Insomnia,* the much talked-about psychological thriller starring Al Pacino, Robin Williams and Hilary Swank. Here Dorn talks about the various roles she's taken on in the film business, why she gravitated toward editing, and her second go-around with Chris Nolan.

Jennifer Wood (MM): *You've worked in so many positions in this industry, including producing, directing and acting. How did you decide the editing room was the place you liked best?*

Dody Dorn (DD): I knew through my work on films in post-production, both as a sound editor and a film editor. After seeing so many films and educating myself about film history and filmmaking, I grew to love cinema. I worked as an assistant editor until 1982, when I started working as an assistant sound editor. I learned the craft of sound editing and moved on to being a sound editor and supervising sound editor. I started my own company, Sonic Kitchen, in 1986 and continued working in sound through 1999. My company did well and I was getting jobs on bigger and bigger films, and I got a lot of recognition for my work. I was the supervising sound editor on James Cameron's *The Abyss*, and we won a Golden Reel award for Best Sound for that film, which was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Sound. Shortly after that, I decided to move back to picture editing. I found, as my business became more successful, I was moving further and further away from the creative work that had attracted me in the first place and becaming more of a business person--something I wasn't interested in at all. I felt working as

a film editor would bring me closer to the center of the creative process of filmmaking and collaborating with directors, which was what I loved most.

MM: *What do you think is the biggest misconception people have about what a film editor does? What was your own biggest misconception when you were first starting out?*

DD: The average moviegoer thinks the editor cuts out all the bad bits. Of course editing a film is an involved, complicated, collaborative process where the editor combines his response to the material with his interpretation of the script and the additional information the director provides through conversation and analysis of the material. There is also a lot of trial and error in the editing room. Even if a director has a clear vision of what he wants, until the images are actually juxtaposed and the rhythm is defined by the editing, you never really know how it will work.

MM: *What are the biggest changes you've seen in your job since first starting out? How has digital technology changed the way you work?*

DD: Because of the AVID and other non-linear systems and the ability to try many different edits of a film while being able to keep previous versions, there is probably a lot more experimenting that goes on. There is also a greater acceptance of different editing styles and rhythms now than before. MTV is often referenced as being responsible for that and certainly the non-sequiturs one can see in a music video at every turn have opened up people's minds to using imagery in more non-conventional and experimental ways. But editing, regardless of the technology, is still editing. There is still a story to tell and how that is achieved is basically the same whether you're editing on a Moviola, a flatbed or an AVID.

Digital technology hasn't really affected my day-to-day duties very much. I am still responsible for looking at the material and putting it together in a cohesive fashion that tells the story as well as possible. I still need to do this work quickly during shooting to make sure all the elements are there. The one big change is that I'm able to work in a more elaborate fashion relative to opticals, visual effects, sound and music than I would be able to do on film. If I want to try a dissolve, I can see it right away. On film, I would have to pull the pieces and send it out to have a temp dissolve done from the printed dailies. That could take a day or two. It wouldn't stop me from working, because I would just go on with something else while waiting for the temp optical to come back, but it is not as convenient. I can lay sound and music in right away and start trying out ideas for a direction to go in much earlier.

When editing on film, you have to think very carefully before making a cut. You are working with a daily work picture and you don't want to make a bunch of unnecessary cuts and make the work picture look all messy. But on the AVID, that is not a concern at all since it is non-destructive. From looking at an edited AVID work picture, you can never tell where some of the other edits you once tried are. So once in a while, I edit in a slightly quicker fashion just to get something put together so I can start working on refining that.

MM: *You've worked both on big budget, special-effects laden films and low-budget indies. Do you have a preference for one over the other?*

DD: I really don't. I love cinema, and any story or filmmaker that intrigues me is what keeps me excited about a project.

MM: *What is your process for accepting a project? What is your preferred method of working?*

DD: I start by reading the script. Some films I reject out of hand if I can't relate to the subject matter. Occasionally I will meet on a script that I don't have strong feelings about one way or another, because a meeting can push me over into wanting to work with someone, or they explain their vision in such a way that piques my interest. Also, a director, writer, or actor whose work I admire could definitely come into play. One of the most important things is getting the sense that I would like to sit in a small dark room with the director for hours, days, weeks and months on end and that they feel the same way. It is a kind of marriage so it's best to make sure it's going to be enjoyable.

MM: *Are you usually close by the set or do you work remotely?*

DD: I like to be in close proximity to the set. I like to see the set and to be able to communicate with the director and the DP. I like to have as much communication as time allows with the director during shooting as to his intent for any given scene and get his comments on the performances. All of these reasons are a matter of convenience and quick access to the director or DP.

But I don't like to be on the set while shooting is going on. I prefer to be removed from the actual shooting because I see it as being a large part of the editor's job to be objective. Having been there while something is being committed to film clouds that objectivity. I need to see the performances and images fresh for the first time in the screening room while watching dailies, seeing the film, and not beyond the edges of the frame, as an audience member would see it. If I know it took them hours to set up a complicated dolly crane establishing shot, and how hard it was to get all the elements to fall into place, it will be much harder for me to say to a director when we're trying to cut five minutes out of the film--"We just don't need this shot."

MM: *Before cutting picture you worked steadily as a sound editor. Is it easy to shift gears when editing for one sense over another? Could you employ a lot of what you learned as a sound editor to your work as a picture editor?*

DD: I see a finished film as a total product and I cannot separate (nor do I want to) the various aspects of the film. The images work in conjunction with the sound and the music and they need to be considered together, in just the same way that the rhythm and juxtaposition of the images need to be considered. I do use my experience in sound all the time. I work with temp sound and music in the AVID from day one. I may sometimes edit without sound for technical reasons, but putting sound in follows very close behind and will definitely affect how I evaluate what I have edited and will often stimulate changes.

MM: *In what ways can a director make it easier for the editor to do his or her job?*

DD: Communication is the most important part of the director/editor relationship. I love the collaboration with the director so I am always happy when a director wants to be in the editing room. I also truly enjoy being immersed in the footage and the narrative. I go into the story and live with the characters. If the director is communicative, either directly or obliquely about his vision for the finished film, I have more to work with. Naturally, the material speaks a lot for

itself, but more information is better. If there is no communication, I can certainly edit a film, but it may not be the film the director wanted.

MM: How did you first come to meet Christopher Nolan and begin work on Memento*? I imagine that, at first read, the script itself was a bit confusing. How closely did you remain to script? Also, how close did you keep that script to you while editing?*

DD: I met Chris Nolan via a meeting set up by my agent, Heather Parker, at Innovative Artists. I was fascinated by the script and had to read it several times before our first meeting. I did not understand it fully, but knew it was going to be fun to edit. I had no idea that it would make the impact that it has made. Many aspects of the film did not reveal themselves to me until I was editing the pieces together. I used the script as a very literal blueprint and followed it precisely while editing. After Chris and I finished his first cut of the film and we watched it all the way through, we decided to join a couple of the scenes and then lose a couple jumps to the black and white motel room scenes. No material was left out, though. The intricate puzzle piece construction of the film made every moment essential. The black and white scenes informed the color scenes and vice versa, so it was a delicate balance of keeping the narrative alive while trying to maintain the disorientation that was meant to be felt by the audience--all in the name of creating a viewing experience that most closely mirrored what it must be like to live life with Leonard's condition.

MM: Obviously, the structure of Memento *was one of the keys to its originality. In what ways did the structure make it easier for you as an editor? In what ways did it pose unique challenges?*

DD: Most narrative films are conceived first as a script and editors refer to the script when editing. In the case of *Memento*, the structure is definitely part of the narrative, so it had to be written, performed, shot and therefore edited with that in mind. I stuck rigidly to the script and needed to refer to the script more often than I might normally do, because the natural chronology had been altered. I had to create banners to run across the entire film to indicate where in the film I was, because the chronology did not follow the usual logic.

Also, the black and white footage in the motel room was shot at the end of the shooting schedule, so I needed very detailed 'scene missing' banners that indicated exactly what was missing. A simple 'scene missing' banner would not do. I could not make any changes or adjustments in how the color transitioned to the black and white until I had those elements adjacent to each other. As I mentioned, we did make some adjustments to the number of cut backs between the black and white and color, but not until after completing the director's first cut.

MM: You're back working with Christopher on your latest project, Insomnia*. How has the process changed for you this time around, if at all?*

DD: The main difference in the process is that Chris and I didn't have to get to know each other this time around. We both know and understand how the other works and communicates. There is a high level of trust.

MM: Whereas Memento *was a completely original story,* Insomnia *is different in that it is the remake or retelling of Erik Skjoldbjaerg's 1997 Norwegian film. What sort of challenges does*

this pose to the story and the process of telling that story? You want to tell the story in a unique way, and the success of doing that relies heavily on the writing, directing and editing of the film.

DD: I saw the original *Insomnia* once before shooting started, but I did not study it. I was curious to see what Chris would do to make it different. I knew he was not the kind of filmmaker to strive to recreate something as a remake, but rather reinterpret it and create a completely new experience. I feel that the two films are remarkably different from each other, considering the fact that the narrative of both is essentially the same. To me, Skjoldbjaerg's *Insomnia* is a nihilistic study of a bad man doing bad things and Chris Nolan's *Insomnia* is a film noir morality tale of a good man having done some bad things and the consequences he pays.

As for what I wanted relative to similarities and differences, all I ever want is to manifest a director's vision, so going into it knowing that Chris would want to do something different, I just let it unfold as the film came together. It was a pleasure to see it happen and to be a part of that.

MM: *Projects like* Insomnia*, where an older (and sometimes contemporary) film is remade are becoming more common. If you were given the opportunity to edit the remake of another film, what would your dream project be?*

DD: I would love to see a remake of *Il Generale Della Rovere,* directed by Rosselini, be made. I love the film and think a contemporary interpretation of the character--a swindler completely without morals and his transformation--would be fascinating set in modern times.

MM: *What do you think is the unique thread that runs through all your work?*

DD: I am a material driven editor. I choose projects based on material and the filmmakers making it. I look for a unique vision. I prefer films that are edgy, rather than product that has been put through the lowest common denominator mill. It is exciting for me as an editor to work with directors whose creative minds are exposed through the uniqueness and quirkiness of their visions.

MM: *Any plans to work with Christopher Nolan again? What's up next for you?*

DD: I would be thrilled and honored to work with Chris Nolan again. Currently I am reading scripts and looking for my next project.