

FILMMAKER

How to Assemble a Rough Cut Two Days After Shooting Wraps: Editor Phillip J. Bartell on *Miss You Already*



Toni Collette and Drew Barrymore in *Miss You Already*

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Catherine Hardwicke's razor-sharp blend of comedy and tragedy, *Miss You Already*, arrives on Blu-ray, DVD, and a variety of VOD platforms March 1. The story of best friends (played by Drew Barrymore and Toni Collette) struggling to deal with the fact that one of them has terminal cancer, it's a film that walks a tonal tightrope: silly, devastating, sexy, angering, and bittersweet, the movie's diverse range of effects is a testament to Hardwicke, her actors, and an ambitious script by Morwenna Banks. Pulling all of the elements together is editor Phillip J. Bartell, whose superb work on 2014's *Dear White People* was just an indication of what was to come on Hardwicke's film and the recently released brain-teaser *The Vanished Elephant*. That film, a Lynchian puzzle that leads the viewer through a complex labyrinth of disparate levels of

reality, represented one kind of challenge for an editor, one that Bartell rose to and conquered with stunning proficiency. *Miss You Already* is less flashy, but an even more impressive achievement in its own way, a subtle job of editing in which Bartell keeps every nuance and emotion in perfect balance. I spoke with him about his work on the film a few weeks before the movie's home video release.

Filmmaker: How did you get the job on *Miss You Already*?

Bartell: I was brought on to do some additional editing on a feature that Catherine was executive producing. I think she was pleased with the work I did, because a few weeks later she was asked to write and direct a short film as part of a shorts collection on the US economy that Morgan Spurlock was producing, and she asked me to cut it. We got along really well, and I knew *Miss You Already* was potentially her next project. I'd edited Toni Collette in *In Her Shoes* for Curtis Hanson years ago, so I let Catherine know that, and within a few days she brought me in to meet and discuss the project with her and producer Christopher Simon.

Filmmaker: What were your initial conversations with Catherine Hardwicke like? How were your initial impressions of the material different from how Hardwicke saw it, if at all?

Bartell: When I met with Catherine and Chris, Catherine, who was concerned about the relatively short shooting schedule, was particularly interested in if I saw any potential cuts in the script. I think the three of us responded to a lot of the same things in Morwenna Banks' script — it felt human, the friendship between Milly and Jess felt real and lived in. You loved these people because they were messy, sometimes selfish, sometimes generous, sometimes hypocritical in ways that were familiar to all of us. I felt like, done correctly, audiences would fall in love with the characters in the way I did when I read the script. What felt the most fresh to me was how it didn't shy away from cancer treatment. In a lot of the tearjerker movies of the past, the illness usually shows up in the last fifteen or twenty minutes and feels a bit sanitized. Catherine said she didn't want to shy away from this, and to her credit, she didn't.

Filmmaker: At what point did you come on board the project in relation to when it actually started shooting?

Bartell: Because of their short prep time — I think they found out they were greenlit six or seven weeks before principal photography began — from what I recall I found out I had the job a week before they started shooting — in London! Thus, some of the more practical matters I'm usually a part of — hiring an assistant, checking out potential post facilities — had already been taken care of, so all I had to do was pack and watch a number of films Catherine suggested I check out: *Terms of Endearment*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and a few others.

Filmmaker: Once shooting begins, what's your typical day like?

Bartell: We edited on Avid 6.5, using two systems connected via Unity, so as soon as our assistant editor Philip Scaife had the dailies prepped, generally sometime between 9:30 and 10:30 in the morning, I'd start cutting. By day's end, I had cut — rough, mind you, but edited — every scene they'd shot the prior day, which we'd then upload for Catherine to watch after she'd wrapped for the day. Generally, that would keep me busy all day, but if I had time left over, I'd address any notes Catherine was sending my way. Catherine really knows how to utilize her editor during production, so at times she'd call asking me to prioritize a scene so I could let her know whether or not she'd gotten everything she needed before they left a location. She also wanted to know how I felt the film was working as a whole, and, in keeping with our initial discussions and her concerns over the time she'd have to shoot everything on the page, she asked that I keep my eyes open for any scenes not yet filmed that could potentially be dropped. Sometimes it takes seeing several scenes to know that ideas that didn't seem clear in the script are actually quite clear, so they don't need to be covered as often...or sometimes, transitions that felt necessary in the script suddenly don't once you're placing scenes up against each other. That said, the opposite can be true as well; "Oh, we need a transition here that wasn't in the script!" Luckily, we had Jeff Toye directing 2nd unit, and he got us a lot of great footage to use in those cases.

Filmmaker: How fast after production did you have a rough assembly?

Bartell: We watched our first assembly — with temp sound effects and temp score — one or two days after they wrapped. I think they wrapped on a Friday, and we watched the entire film that next Monday or Tuesday.

Filmmaker: Where was the work done?

Bartell: In London, we were at a facility called Edit Spaces in the heart of Soho, and when Catherine and I came back after production, we were at Digital Difference in Santa Monica. We went back to London to mix the film at Pinewood Studios, which for a film geek like me was heaven.

Filmmaker: Once the assembly is done, what's the next step? At what point do you start showing the movie to other people for feedback?

Bartell: Once Catherine and I had spent some time on the cut, we showed it to our producer, composer, and music supervisors, so we could discuss what we needed from them and to get their creative energies going. We also got notes from them, and we worked on those, as well as any new ideas she and I had, in preparing to show it to a group of somewhere around 40. The focus groups varied — one time we wanted to see how cancer survivors felt about our handling of the material and if anything felt false, so we recruited accordingly; another time I think we tried to get as many men as we could, to make sure it was playing for them as well. If you're not doing a recruited screening from NRG or a place like that, I generally try to suggest getting as many people who know nothing about the film or filmmakers to the screenings as possible. Or to invite a

friend but have them bring someone who knows nothing about the film. We're looking for as honest a response as possible. You want to hear what's not working now as opposed to when the reviews come out!

Filmmaker: How did the film evolve in editing? Did the emotional emphasis or structure change at all?

Bartell: You're often confronted with issues of getting into the movie and getting out of it. Catherine is great at not being too precious with what she's shot, so after we watched the first cut, we immediately lost a number of scenes in the opening because it felt we were taking too long to get to the tension of the story, especially since the opening montage did such a solid job of summarizing and allowing us to feel Jess and Milly's friendship. We didn't need more of that, and how unexpected it would be to start the film on Milly finding out she's got cancer. One of Catherine's goals with the movie was to not sugarcoat the cancer and its treatment, so jumping right into it was, frankly, shocking and effective. And prepared the audience to a degree as to what they were getting themselves into.

Filmmaker: What were the biggest challenges on the project? What were the biggest satisfactions or things that went easier than you expected?

Bartell: There wasn't an overall capital BC Big Challenge, more like a plethora of tasks hurled our way that we had to deal with in the moment, or to properly plan for, on a fairly small-scale budget which left us with a shortened post timeline. Our US assistant Knar Kitabjian admirably handled a lot thrown at her between the visual effects, sound work, and music coming in, all the while continually turning over reels and uploading them to the England-based producers and crew. For me, probably the main challenge was letting all the extraneous noise, for lack of a better word, vanish so I could get back into the groove of focusing on editing the best movie possible.

Filmmaker: How difficult was it to get the tonal balance straight, given that you're dealing with both comedy and tragedy in the same film?

Bartell: Morwenna's script got this balance totally right, so as long as they didn't mess it up in production, which they didn't, I felt we were gonna be fine. That said, as we whittled down the movie and lost scenes, Catherine and I were continually conscious of where we were losing jokes and if we'd gone too long without a laugh. I love dramas, but I've always had a beef with dramas that allow for absolutely no humor, because in life, humor is often the *best* way, the *only* way people can deal with some of the horrors they face. Seeing a dramatic story without laughter usually feels false to me, and often pretentious, too; "Oh look, this is *so* dramatic and *so* important that *no* character will even crack a smile!"

Filmmaker: What is your role in helping shape the performances? Talk a little about editing the actors' work.

Bartell: I'd edited Toni in *In Her Shoes*, so I was well aware that we'd be getting fantastic work take after take. The challenge with shaping Milly was that she's a mess, and because of what's going on with her — getting breast cancer wasn't part of her up-till-then perfect life — she's angry, and we risked alienating people if Milly became too enraged or cruel to her friends and family. Toni gave us a beautiful range with which to play, and Catherine and I were actually fine if she upset people every now and then. She's not perfect, she's not an angel, and if you feel annoyed by her and yet still find yourself feeling for her, it's a fun, complicated place to find yourself as an audience member.

Toni and Drew did a number of improvisations along the way, and Catherine gives her actors space to improvise, so knowing what to choose and, just as important, what *not* to choose, was important. Drew visited the cutting room after watching the movie and said she was thrilled that we'd chosen what she thought were their best bits.

Filmmaker: At what point does music become a factor? Were you able to cut to cues that were actually used in the finished film, or is your job more or less done by the time the final score comes in?

Bartell: We knew Harry Gregson-Williams was our composer going in, so I tried to temp the movie with any of his cues that fit. Once we showed him the cut, he began composing in earnest and began delivering us cues, which I would cut in to see how they played. Every time a cue was approved, it went in the cut, so he was composing, recording, and fine-tuning right up to the mix.

Filmmaker: When is your job done? At what point in the process are you finished with the film?

Bartell: My job is done once the final mix is finished. A director having his or her editor on the mixing stage is invaluable. An editor intimately knows the film, remembers the director's intentions and can be the person most focused on what's going on on the stage if the director is juggling other things. I remember reading a quote by the incredible Carol Littleton, that the editor should be the film's cheerleader, routing it on to be the best it can be, and I take that feeling onto the mixing stage as well: "We're almost at the home stretch, let's do great work and have as much fun as we can!" It's also good to have the editor on the stage because picture changes sometimes get made there, although no one likes that. [laughs]

Jim Hemphill is the writer and director of the award-winning film [The Trouble with the Truth](#), which is currently available on DVD and iTunes. His website is www.jimhemphillfilms.com.

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