

FERMATA : A SHORT FILM

by

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HONORS THESIS

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DEDICATION

For all my fellow band kids. From the ones who stayed and to all the ones who left.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my incredible friends for helping me and my film. Thank you to Nick Muller and Riley Griffin for being my cinematographers as well as assisting me in editing the trailer. I had no idea what I was doing or how to work the editing program but you helped me at each step. I would also like to thank Andrew Hodge for helping me with sound recording. It was sketchy there for a moment and it also didn't help that the circumstances had us jerry-rigging a microphone to my computer. Despite all that, you made it work and it came out extremely well. I would also like to thank Hodge for showing me the absolute joys of sound design when I spent ten minutes listening to people breathing just to find the right one. I will now have to remember those sounds forever. In addition, I would like to thank my extremely talented actors Jazzton Thomas and Lily Bedford. I was really stressed and unsure on whether I would be able to film anything this semester. Finding actors had proven to be difficult with so many varying schedules and responses. So, I really want to thank the two of you for finding the time to film with me on one of the hottest and nastiest days. You brought my script to life. Lastly I would like to thank my amazing thesis supervisor Jordan Morille. This semester was a challenge and this thesis was even more so. Thank you for being there and helping me. Thank you for letting me know that it's okay to not have everything filmed by the end of this semester, that I had other options that are acceptable. I also Want to thank you for letting us use your guitar and backyard for filming. You're the best!

ABSTRACT

I plan to produce a short film based on a script I have previously written and is titled *Fermata*. This film follows two high school band students as their relationship with music starts to strain. The story behind *Fermata* was inspired by my own experience in a high school band and draws elements from films like *Drumline* and *Whiplash*.

By telling this story using an emotional soundtrack with an emphasis on visuals rather than dialogue, I plan to personify the following synopsis:

Brothers Ace and Michael were talented musicians and their futures were both bright and full of opportunities. However, after a tragic accident leaving Michael without his brother, their dreams they composed together are diminished. Now Michael is haunted by the horn Ace left behind and the expectation to continue his legacy.

Libby is Michael's only friend and she is losing control after changing schools. The perfection that she learned from her past music program is pressuring her to get back the life she had before. And having Michael achieve perfection with her is a part of her plan. She just needs to make sure he gets a grip. But the Michael she knew before the accident is long gone, and she feels more alone than ever.

Now music is losing all its meaning.

But music all Michael and Libby know how to do.

Foreword

Before the idea for this film, I had an idea for a series. And before the idea for the series, I was inspired by a pep band at a high school football game. This was over six years ago when I was sophomore in high school. I was of course in the band and I was also in a band program that was filled with really talented players. Name the section or instrument and there was bound to be a name or two destined for All-Region and even All-State. We were a pretty sizable band so it wasn't that uncommon to have multiple people from our school make the cut for these auditions. It was like that for most of the competitions we participated in. Because the only way to be the best, was to be the best. Even if we didn't want to.

My band director actually had a catchphrase during All-Region season: "All-Region, all the time." If you had time to practice, you had time to practice your All-Region music. If you had time to *not* practice, you had time to practice your All-Region music. Me however, I didn't really care about being the best I just liked playing with my friends. Which leads me to that football.

First of all, we were not having a good time. It was hot as hell and we were forced to wear our band uniforms with no insulation. This means that they'll burn you up in the summer and freeze you to death in the winter. The worst part was that they were in our school colors: black and gold. It was really sunny that day and we should have been wearing our pep-band clothes. It was just miserable.

This game was also one of the first few games of the season. Which are mostly just to warm up the football players and to see where they're at. So, it didn't really matter who we were playing or what we were wearing because it wouldn't count towards our

school's qualifications for the play-offs. That being said, it also made a striking contrast to the school we were up against.

I was from in a 6A school and the school we were playing was a 1A. We were also playing on their home field—it was the size of our practice field, bleachers and all. My band alone took up half of the seats available. While the home team's pep-band was rolling up with over a handful of players on barely three rows. But despite their numbers, they were having the time of their lives. Yeah, their team was losing and we were forced to run the clock to save them some face, but who cares about that when your whole student section is there because they would rather see you at half-time than to root for the football players. And I too was entranced by their performance.

You see my band had ridged rules for game-day etiquette. Meaning we weren't allowed to sit for the first half of the game and we also weren't allowed to break our lines and rows. And if we were caught talking to close to the people around us or even hanging out in another section we were called out by the directors and even given demerits.

So, when I saw the pep-band all mixed up in their bleachers and having fun, that made me curious on what it would be like to be in their band. I wondered what their band classes were like, and what music they would play with only a limited number of members. I wondered if they might have a different relationship to music. Especially since they didn't have to worry about marching competitions or all the weekends lost to long commutes. I wondered if they loved band and loved playing. I can always remember everyone in my band complaining about rehearsals, call times, and having to live in the band hall. We would always said we loved band but sometimes it was hard to justify.

That was when I came up with Libby. She was the first character I created for this

story and I based her off me and my friends in band. They were the ones who were talented but were overly stressed out about band. Band was everything and if you weren't giving your all, the band wasn't going to be that kind to you. This was to the point where people would quit. The program and the people in it weren't about learning to play, it was about taking the ones who already know how to play and making them into competitors. Music is very unforgiving, and so much pressure was placed on everyone to play the fastest. To play correctly and with the right sound. Perfection in band is also especially hard on girls and I wanted to show that through Libby as she tries to use band as an escape from her responsibilities back home.

Like I said before, my original plan for this story was for it to be a TV series where we would see Libby as she moves from a prestigious music program in well-funded school to a school who hasn't seen a student make All-Region in years. I thought of it as a *Bring It On* meets *All American* but make it about band. This clash of perspective of course led to the creation of Michael and his brother Ace.

When I was first writing this script as a short film, I faced a lot of struggles in deciding who was going to be my main character. However, as I was exploring Michael's backstory and how it related to the school and town, it became clearer that I needed to focus more on him, even if Libby was the one I created first. But I still wanted to include her story into the script. Her perspective and family drama are so important to her and her journey and I found it really hard to cut out those scenes. Needless to said I've had to revise this script so many times I've lost count. Even up to the morning before filming the trailer I was rewriting.

As far as the process of producing a film goes, this had proven to be very difficult

experience for me. It also didn't help that I've never done anything like this and the only experience I had was from an English assignment back in high school. Which, according to my friends, doesn't count.

The biggest hurdle I had to face for this process was just finding people. Whether it was to act in it, or be on the production's crew, I could never find enough people. It was incredibly frustrating and disheartening. I would get some responses who were interested but when it came time to audition and cast, I mostly got radio silence. However, despite this I was lucky enough to have quite a few people tryout for Libby's role. But for my male lead, Michael, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack trying to cast. In the end I'm so glad that I was able to find Lily and Jazzton for these roles even if I couldn't find the supporting roles.

As for the crew, we did the best that we could. And the best, are in fact, my friends. Shout out to Nick, Riley, and Hodge. You all are the real MVPs of all this and my saving graces. I've never been on a film set before, let alone directed one. So, it was comforting to be able to rely on them with their experiences and to be able to see the scenes that I wrote come to life.

Another obstacle I had to face was finding places to film at and getting the right equipment for props. Because of the process of finding my two leads took so long, I also had to put off my search for locations. For my film I needed access to certain places and expensive instruments; however, getting that access turned out to be a real bust. This story takes place in a band hall with numerous band instruments and I unfortunately couldn't get that for filming. Even the scenes that didn't take place in a band hall had been difficult to get permission to film. In the end, for plan E, we decided to film just a

trailer behind the art building—which is a really cool place by the way. But that day sadly was also really hot and uncomfortable. I'm just grateful that my cast and crew were able to work out there for the three hours that it took and the quality that they produced.

The last challenge that I faced was with the editing of the trailer. Again, I have very little experience and as it turns out my computer isn't exactly cut out to handle the editing software or even the reels. The most I could do to do was putting together two of the shots. But thank God to Nick who let me use his desktop that was able to handle it and allowing me to finish up the trailer, even if it was down to the wire the night before my presentation.

All in all, I'm happy with what I have so far. The good thing is that it's done and completed, and also I'm proud of what I've accomplished this semester.

Fermata (A Short Film)

By

Ansley Haman

FADE IN:

EXT. JUNK YARD - DUSK

Michael stands in front of a broken RED CAR, face long and eyes wide.

A TROMBONE softly plays a flowery lyrical etude.

ACE elegantly manipulates the slides on the trombone; HEADPHONES rapped in DUCT TAPE cover his ears. Michael expertly works on a COMPUTER, KEYBOARD, and MICROPHONE SET. Ace nods to Michael, who smashes a red BUTTON and nods back.

The music accelerates into a technical etude.

Michael blinks; he's alone.

The sky fades and a LIGHT hums to life.

SHEET MUSIC, dark with complicated NOTES, leans against the car's window. Michael brings Ace's trombone to his lips.

The bell tones of a dry tongue crescendos into a più mosso.

Michael takes a deep breath and closes his eyes.

The music chokes off. The light flickers out.

A trill.

INT. BAND HALL - MORNING

The room is small and outdated. CHAIRS with snapped off backs creak under the STUDENTS sitting on them. Useless and tilted STANDS are condemned to their lowest positions.

The band prepares for class. Chromatic scales are halfheartedly played while HORNS practice their stop tongues at fortissimo. A small ensemble stumbles around the room swinging Tequila at half beat.

LIBBY sits patiently with a REED hanging out of her mouth and meticulously assembles her OBOE. A CLARINET PLAYER puffs out a melody that muffles in and out. Libby reaches over to them but is stopped by a glare as the player moves to chat with a FLUTE PLAYER.

Libby shifts her reed and rolls her eyes. She fingers her Oboe but keeps messing up; she puts her reed on but can't seem to start playing. Her breathing is hard and fast.

Libby looks carefully at the back row where a CHAIR rests a beat between TWO TROMBONE PLAYERS.

INT. FRESHMEN ALL-REGION BAND AUDITORIUM - TWO YEARS AGO

Michael rips out a riff that resonates throughout the auditorium. Libby, wearing a red Marc View High School SHIRT, watches Michael show off before holding a tuning note for the rest of the BAND.

A DIRECTOR salutes the audience and calls the band to attention. Breathe in; out.

Michael's soulful solo. Libby tilts her head as she rests, a soft smile on her lips. Michael winks and she flips him off.

Laughter and then the band falls flat.

A caged CLOCK above the exit DOORS clicks off a tempo of 60bpm.

Michael stops playing and walks off stage.

A jagged breath pants in time.

INT. HALLWAY - CURRENT TIME

SHOES slap tiled floor and squeak at sharp corners.

Orange LIGHTS reflect off floors, making the green paint on rusted LOCKERS appear as brown and dull. MOLD forms where the walls meet the ceiling. STUDENTS file into doorless classrooms, bumping fists as they go.

A TROPHY CASE marked "In Memoriam," is packed with a flared-up LETTERMAN with the name "ACE" on the back, a set of MALLETS, and AWARDS in treated wood FRAMES. There is a PHOTO with Ace and SIX STUDENTS dressed in concert black. They hold INSTRUMENTS and pose in front of a SIGN that reads "T.M.E.A."

A TROMBONE breathes out a rich low note.

Michael runs down the hall. The BELL rings.

INT. BAND HALL - MORNING

A trombone player barely gets through a line of a lyrical etude when Michael rushes in, out of breath and sweaty with crumpled sheets of music in his hand.

Libby sits up and forces Michael to meet her eyes, but he looks away to find his chair; it creaks loudly as he sits. The players beside him lock eyes. The one playing rolls his eyes as they finish on a fermata.

The class claps as Michael takes his instrument out and puts his music on the flimsy stand in front of him. He keeps his head down.

MR. SCOTT lets out a breath looks up at the ceiling. He gestures to Michael.

Michael takes a few deep breaths. A bead of sweat rolls down the side of his face.

Libby nods enthusiastically at Michael. He swallows and fixes his eyes on the music.

Ace softly plays in the middle of the room. Michael replaces Ace on a different note.

Mr. Scott clears his throat. Michael looks up. Students snicker.

Libby shakes her head at Michael.

Michael shifts his sheet music around. He plays another note. Mr. Scott shakes his head.

The player next to Michael sighs and puts the TECHNICAL ETUDE in front of him. Another beat of sweat. More snickering.

Michael plays the warm-up note then looks at a nodding Mr. Scott.

Michael makes a mock bow for the laughing class before grimacing and bringing up his instrument.

He plays two notes and Libby turns away wincing, eyes blowing wide and looking down. Michael gives up after a measure. Mr. Scott writes out a TARDY SLIP.

Glass shatters.

EXT. JUNK YARD - NIGHT

There is the clash of METAL and the racing beat of DRUMS and XYLOPHONES.

Michael is curled up in the BACK SEAT of the red car and listening to the RADIO. Crumpled up sheet music are thrown across the DASH and a trombone lays in the driver's seat.

Michael's breathing crescendos until the belt of the trombone cuts off into silence.

Suddenly a second Michael sits in the driver's seat and carefully plays the trombone. Quiet notes flow out as his hand cups over the bell.

A LAMP POST casts a warm glow as Ace digs through SCRAPS.

The radio is a drone, shifting on a note, sharpening as the light grows cold.

A loud note pops from the trombone and Michael jumps and hits his head on the roof. A CHIP in the car's red paint falls off; it's green underneath. Second Michael's face scrunches at the instrument and then at Michael.

Second Michael flips Michael off and puts the trombone away. He takes out a set of DRUMSTICKS then hacks on the dash.

Ace barks out a laugh. Second Michael and Michael look up. Ace holds up a busted PC.

Second Michael hops out the car and runs his hands over the CIRCUITS and cracked SCREEN.

A light fades in Michael's eyes. A CAR HORN holds out a fermata before being cut off by the skidding of tires and a screaming.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT - ONE YEAR AGO

Michael sits in the waiting area; a TRAUMA BLANKET covers his shoulders. 60bpm.

Libby walks out of an INTERROGATION ROOM with a COP. Her FATHER, in CUFFS, passes her on his way in but she turns her head and furrows her brows.

Michael glances at Libby; his head tilts. She snaps her head to him, her mouth half open. A pause: her eyes blow wide as she looks at Michael.

(CONTINUED)

Libby notices dried blood on Michael's lip and recoils. Michael cries. Libby clutches her fists and looks forward.

Libby's MOM puts a hand on her back and Libby jumps as she looks up. Her mom gestures for the door; her father walks out of the room. He raises his cuffed hands at them but Libby rushes out and her mom glares at him before following.

A DETECTIVE walks over to Michael but he's gone; the blanket rests in his place.

INT. BAND HALL - EARLY MORNING - CURRENT DAY

The OVERHEAD LIGHTS are off. A handful of rays peek out from a WINDOW down the hallway. A METRONOME drones out a rushed 160bpm.

Libby paces across the room running her fingers up and down her oboe. Her reed soaks in an old PILL BOTTLE against a stand and SHEET MUSIC. The metronome stops and Libby starts.

Michael runs in slightly breathless as chromatic scales and arpeggios fill the room.

Michael goes still. Sixteenth notes and stop tongues. Rest.

Michael fumbles his trombone as he brings his horn up. 120bpm.

A COCKROACH skerries across the floor: over broken CASES, STAINS, and overturned TILES. It disappears in a dark CUBBY in the back corner of the room. Michael cracks.

Libby puts a hand over her mouth before looking around and rubbing the back of her head. She clears her throat. Michael looks at her but she can't meet his eyes.

Libby huffs out a breath and stares at Michael. Michael holds her stare. Libby nods her head and walks away.

Michael stands alone in the band hall.

Ace smiles beside Michael in BIBBERS and GLOVES, laughing as he holds up his instrument. Michael looks at Ace sideways, looks forward, then brings his trombone to his lips and slowly plays Low Rider. Ace's smile slowly falls as Young Michael yells--his horn hangs limply by his side.

An audience screams. Low Rider accelerates.

EXT. FOOTBALL STADIUM PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Sitting on a curb, Michael stares out into the emptying lot. His JACKET rests folded on a SHAKO BOX and his horn case.

The sliding of the trombones and the clashing of a battery decrescendos into the last scores of the game.

Libby walks up to him and sits down with her stuff.

Beat.

A CAR drives up and stops next to Libby.

Beat.

Libby looks at Michael. He doesn't look back.

Beat.

Libby gets in the car and it drives off.

Beat.

A SIREN.

Michael stands up and starts walking.

His heart is a bass line climbing to presto.

EXT. JUNK YARD - MORNING - THE NEXT DAY

Silence.

Michael wakes up on a dusty MATTRESS under TARP covered SCAFFOLDING. He is dressed in last night's T-SHIRT and SHORTS. Empty CHIP BAGS pile next to TRASH BAGS filled with CRUSHED CANS; a BACKPACK and trombone case is thrown with them.

Michael rises and makes his way through heaps of junk. He finds an EXTENSION CORD, plugs it into a LIGHT POST then kneels next to a dusty keyboard where he hooks more CORDS and plays back a TAPE RECORDER. His hands hover over the KEYS. Deep cords pull tears down Michael's face.

Ace's muffled breath and muted slurs are drowned out when Michael brings his hands down. Michael's ballad.

Silence.

(CONTINUED)

LIBBY
Michael?

Michael turns around, the tape recorder fades.

MICHAEL
What? Stalker much?

LIBBY
(Embarrassed)
...Well excuse me for wanting to
check in on you. (Beat) Look, I
know that yesterday was difficult/
but...

MICHAEL
/No.

Libby huffs out a breath and turns off the tape recorder.

LIBBY
But last year we promised we'd-

MICHAEL
I said no!-

LIBBY
No! You listen! You've been
ignoring me for a year, you're not
allowed to say no anymore. (Beat)
Look I know you're hurting, but
you're not the only one who lost
their family. (Beat) I can never
see my dad again, my mom wont even
talk to me. (Beat) You wont talk to
me.

The red car rests in front of red eyes.

LIBBY
Michael I needed you...

MICHAEL
...Sorry, Libby. I just...I don't
know if I can play anymore.

Ace sits behind the WHEEL. The polished car is a chaos of
PEOPLE. Ace yells.

A crash.

Michael walks over and picks at the chipped paint.

(CONTINUED)

MICHAEL

Ace painted it red as soon as it could run. Said we were gonna tour together. He already wrote all the songs, all I had to do is play along. (Beat) He was my brother, Lib. (Voice breaking) And when he...I wasn't ready.

Michael kicks the car. Libby frowns.

LIBBY

When I first joined band at Marc View, there was no other option but to be the best. (Beat) Now I don't know how to do anything else.

Libby sits on the hood. Michael looks her way.

MICHAEL

You miss it?

LIBBY

I hate it. (Beat) And I hate it here.

MICHAEL

We're never going to be like them. Got no funding. No legacy. We're *nothing* like your 5A school.

Michael sits next to her.

LIBBY

I know. But if we-

MICHAEL

-No. We both know we're done.

Michael pushes off and paces.

MICHAEL

But you're (Pained) right. (Beat) And I'm so sorry. I'm a jerk and I...I thought...

Michael looks everywhere. The trombone case holds a rest.

MICHAEL

I thought if I...did what he did. It would stop. (At Ace) But I hate it...I hate it! (At Young Michael) I hate it here too.

(CONTINUED)

LIBBY
...Your piano was beautiful. (Beat)
Hella rusty. And rough around the
edges. (Annoyed) But promising.

MICHAEL
(Breathless)
I loved it. I've always loved it.

Libby regards Michael's keyboard. A marimba beats off.

LIBBY
Okay. (Beat) Fine. (Beat) But after
this I'm quitting band.

Libby marches off. Michael stares.

LIBBY
You coming or what?

Michael looks around himself and then at Libby with furrowed eyebrows. The sky fades to red. A cadence.

INT. MARC VIEW BAND HALL - EVENING

The walls and ceiling are adorn with red NOISE ADSORBING
TILES. Rows of TROPHIES line the perimeter of the room.

PRACTICE ROOMS down false hallways echo private lessons. A
sweater clad DIRECTOR sits in a glass office pondering what
Libby is persuading.

Michael stands in the middle of the room in front of a
YAMAHA 5.5 OCTAVE MARIMBA and taps lightly on the blocks
with the ends of his mallets. A freshly printed etude
directs his hands while resting on a shiny black STAND.

Libby sighs as she walks in an immediately paces the
trophies. Second Michael stares at Michael.

LIBBY
(Distracted)
Start with one A and then the major
scale.

Michael plays and Libby pauses in front of a set of
trophies. Young Michael staggers besides Michael. Breathe
in, out.

LIBBY
One note.

(CONTINUED)

Michael starts and Libby reaches for one of the trophies. Second Michael tightly hugs Michael and then disappears.

Michael hacks out a fermata.

A wall of accomplishments crash onto a white tiled floor. Libby stands with a trophy in her hands and wide eyes.

Silence.

The door to the director's office slams open. Michael and Libby take off. Laughter and a lone marimba.

EXT. JUNK YARD - NIGHT

Michael hacks a rhythm on the hood of the car. Paint chips brake and fall off. Allegro.

Libby stands in front of a DUMPSTER FIRE staring hypnotically at the trophy in her hands. The hood rattles like a snare. Michael has fire in his eyes and a turned-up lip.

Libby throws the trophy into the fire; she can finally breath. Michael finishes on a tone that resonates.

Michael looks at Libby who stares back with her lips parted. She clears her throat and looks back at the fire.

LIBBY

That's one. (Beat) Again.

Ace stands far out in the distance and then slowly walks away into nothing.

Michael taps off.

One two three four.

FADE OUT:

END.