

How Not To Make A Short Film

I had the opportunity to sit down with Roberta Munroe, author of the new book [How Not to Make a Short Film: Secrets from a Sundance Programmer](#), in the Filmmakers Lodge right after Obama's Inauguration on Tuesday. We were both in good spirits and it was inspiring to talk to someone who is so passionate about short films. Roberta was a short film programmer at Sundance for five years. She has also been a member of many film juries, mentors students at Inner-City Filmmakers, and is a filmmaker herself (*Dani and Alice* and *Happy Birthday*). So she knows her stuff.



Roberta has seen a lot of short films in her time and she often wishes that filmmakers were armed with the knowledge to make the sort of changes that would make a programmer really fight for their films. She mentioned this to fellow filmmaker [Tiffany Shlain](#) who told her to write this book. "And when Tiffany tells you to do something you do it, she's very persuasive." The book contains interviews with Shlain, as well as Mark Duplass (*Baghead*), Sara Pollack (*YouTube*), Cynthia Wade (*Freeheld*), Diane Weyermann (Participant Media) and others.

[How Not to Make a Short Film](#) covers both narrative and documentary and runs the gamut from funding and casting to festival and distribution strategy. The book contains a nifty appendix with a sample budget and a list of resources. It also includes a very funny (and very true) list of Top Short Filmmaker Clichés to avoid, written by the excellent Mike Plante, another short film programmer at Sundance. Here are a couple of my favorites:

Is there a Japanese tea ritual opening scene?

Is there a ninja in your film?

Does your protagonist drive down a foggy road, all of a sudden seeing a child in a white nightgown who mysteriously disappears on the reverse shot?

Do you have a character in a bathtub just under the water?

Is there a close-up of a clock ticking?

Are there four guys driving to Vegas and one of them accidentally dies?

Don't do it people!

For Roberta it all comes down to filmmakers realizing their personal vision. "You develop an innate sense of what works and how the filmmakers have, or haven't, remained true to this vision. It's not whether it's good or bad but whether they have managed to accomplish this, whatever the budget."

So what advice would Roberta give to filmmakers starting out on a short film:

1. Surround yourself with a team of people who know more than you do.
2. Make sure you have an original voice.
3. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish with the film (and ask this early, not when the film is finished).
4. Your film should not be longer than 15 minutes, especially if it's narrative. 10 minutes is a good length to aim for.

Roberta is excited about all the changes happening online and she sees short filmmakers as being in the perfect position to take advantage of this. "Attention spans are shortening and bandwidth is growing. There are so many different avenues to make money, or at the very least to get exposure. It makes me happy that people can make, publicize and distribute their films through the web. People are creating communities in this way and these communities are not limited to where you live."

So check out the book and here's Roberta with a few final words for y'all.

<http://shootingpeople.org/festivals/2009/01/26/how-not-to-make-a-short-film/>

[Roberta Munroe's Tips on Making Short Films](#) from [Ingrid Kopp](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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1. [Erin](#) Says:
[January 26th, 2009 at 8:24 pm](#)

Fantastic, I can't wait to read this!