



# SEASONS IN THE VALLEY

CHATSBY FILMS

## Production notes by Adam Matalon

I had the pleasure of meeting Russell Holze at a holiday party hosted by my neighbor, Russ's soon to be new wife, Lola Richardson. It was December 2001 and we were all still rocking from the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

In careless chitchat I learned that he was an apple farmer and that his source of labor, namely Jamaicans was drying up and with it his livelihood. The government's shortsighted approach to a host of issues was making it impossible for those in agriculture to survive.

The truth is that on any other day I might have walked away with an interesting insight, a sense of distress and a keen knowledge that there was nothing I could do to improve his lot. But he did say Jamaicans didn't he, and my father was born and brought up on that wonderful island where many of my family, both close, and cousins I barely know, reside. I found myself ruminating on the conversation for several days and listening in my head to his description of the men as they arrive in early February. I was completely unprepared for what happened next. I picked up the phone and asked if perhaps I might come up and photograph the orchards and the men. I didn't really know what it was that I thought I would do with the stills, but as a keen photographer, it seemed to me that it would be visually stimulating.

I was at that time working as a 1<sup>st</sup> AD on The Book of Pooh, a big budget 3D animated series for Disney. I was feeling very removed from my formative years in theater where creativity was front and center. I had just started writing again after a period of five years, where I committed not more than phone numbers to paper. I suddenly found myself hatching a plan to make some kind of a film about this – maybe.

I had no infrastructure, no camera, no budget, and no crew. What I had was a feeling of fate and a drive that became overwhelming to me. I picked up the phone to Randy Treu who at that time was a close collaborator and said, "We have

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to make a film.” The decision was made before we ever stepped foot in the orchard.

The months that followed were an emotional rollercoaster. At first we appeared to the Jamaicans like aliens, these crazy guys with a camera walking with them trying to engage them in conversation, when their preference would have been for us to leave.

We must at first have appeared to be joy riders checking out the people who really work. But this IS our work and we returned again and again. Sometimes it was three of us, sometimes five, sometimes just myself. DP's Aaron Medick and Kevin Burke, both of whom were working with me on *The Book of Pooh* eventually became addicted to the orchards having succumbed to my requests for free services and would follow my wild goose chase around the various hills and dales.

One night as I flashed my DGA card for free movie tickets, Andy Smith, just out of college and an assistant manager at Hoyt's, decided to stalk me in order to ask how he could get into the business. He came on board as an intern and soon after was joined by his friend Tim Donovan who, by the time we hit post, had been working with us regularly and had evolved into the assistant editor. Both of them became integral and have graduated as full time members of this crazy film industry. Another who joined us at that time was Ashley Ritter who was a shy retiring girl in her first year in college who was scared to death by our hard-nosed production jabber. For some reason she inherited a loving nickname, which bares no resemblance at all to her physical proportions – chunky.

Muddy days, rainy days, snowy days, days when we could hardly feel our fingers and toes enough to hit record. The film barely registers these images but they were the foundation for the trust we built with the Jamaicans. It was through this visible commitment and tenacity on our part that we began finally to blend into the landscape and the fabric of their day to day.

Well over a year into the process Kevin Burke had already become a producer of the film when suddenly Russ was given a hammer blow by the weather and decided to bow out of the business immediately. The film, which started life with the title *A Final Season* looked like it would be dead in the water. All of our footage was predicated on Russ's story and now there would be no ending. Mother nature was laughing at us and we spent a few bereft days feeling like we had lost our film forever.

But just like farmers, I am blessed with stubborn tenacity, coupled with a self-doubt that enabled me to see that to quit outright would be an utter failure. I

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remember walking around my rural back yard staring and feeling like I'd been duped before finally picking up my spirits and the phone to assure the rest of the team that there was hope. To complete 'something' would be success, but what would that be?

We decided that we must look beyond the first story meet more farmers and start again. It was in fact the best thing that could have happened. We looked beyond the original subject matter and in doing so we created the film that it has become.

The new orchards and the new stories evolved and in the process we met Herriston Slater one of the strongest characters for me. The only thing we share is an exact age. Everything else about our backgrounds is different except that we are both committed to an attempt to control our own destiny. I felt close to him from the moment we met.

Our first trip to Jamaica was fraught with stress about how we would best approach the guys and the government interviews. We were financially strapped as our very limited grant money from NYSCA was not useable for production outside of the US.

I got on the phone and cut some great deals and Randy and I both sucked up the cost of our own airplane tickets. Later we would get support from Air Jamaica.

Once on the island we made good headway and cemented the relationship with Slater. We built the foundation for the second trip where we would make our strongest mark with meetings at the film office and with advice sessions from some of my family members many of whom were seeing me for the first time in years.

We had already made our first trip to Jamaica when Randy exited gracefully after two very tough and committed years on the project. Personal dilemmas and the financial reality of the film won out. While he has not been in the picture for some time his contributions as a producer and in helping me write the original narrative were tireless.

Our second trip to Jamaica allowed us to speak to government representatives as well as see the men at home, this time as trusted individuals. We even talked our way into an interview with Portia Simpson Miller who as I write is Prime Minister. She told me about Leaford Williams, who's book she had read in college and I am indebted for the introduction to this warm character who was one of the first to visit the US in 1943. Our only irritation was that the then Minister of Labor decided that we had not given him enough notice and refused to speak to us. I calmly told him that this was his 'shot' and if he wanted to say something good about his

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program now was the time. He offered us a nervous permanent secretary who did just fine. I secretly hope that the former minister will see this, and regret his arrogant stance. Del Crooks the commissioner of film was incredibly helpful in assisting us through the customs bureaucracy and was very generous in her introductions to press and other interested parties.

Kevin and I gave ourselves a single day off on this trip and spent a marvelous day at Lime Key with my cousin Janet Clunis.

Back in New York I was beginning to feel the pressure of time. We had already been making the film for three years and I was used to shooting film and TV in a matter of weeks. Yikes! I began to think ahead to post.

I brought on board two international creative partners Giacomo Ambrosini and Sam Sutton. Giacomo is an Italian editor. Sam is a British composer. I was very interested to work with them as neither had preconceived notions about the subject. Both had grown up very removed anything in the film and their objective view was something I sought. Both had great ideas about how to illustrate the story.

Giacomo started the long haul on the first rough cut in September of 2006. He was presented with about 75 hours of footage, which had been culled and noted over a period of 8 weeks by assistant editor Tim Donovan and several PAs.

Sam and I had decided from the get go that we didn't want 'Jamaican' or 'Hudson Valley' music as it appeared cliché to me. She started to work and began to send me rough melodic sketches. Some made it, others didn't. I am thrilled with what evolved and my only disappointment was that we never had the funding to record a truly orchestral and symphonic version of what Sam wrote. She and I have often spoken of a screening accompanied by an orchestra. We continue to dream.

The film began to find pace as veteran Hollywood actor, Elliott Gould, joined us. I had shyly asked him if he would consider doing the VO and he had agreed to see an early rough cut. He was taken with the bees in particular. Also taken with the rough cut was Jesse Peterson our post sound designer who had never done a doc and wanted to create an aural environment.

Our final interview was with George Pataki in February of 2007. I had been waiting for some time to ask for an interview. I didn't want to hear from a governor. I wanted to hear from the farm boy who grew up in the valley. I got a little bit of both, but I think there is a sparkle in his eyes when he talks about the blossoms.

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There are several fascinating interviews and people who never even made it into the original 2 hour rough cut. One of my favorites was with Robert Morgenthau who continues his duties as Manhattan DA. He spoke with glee about how as a 5 year old he was allowed to push the plunger as they would dynamite holes in order to plant apple trees on his family's farm. I guess I have an entire disk of DVD extras!

Giacomo and I went at it seriously over a period of the last 12 months and refined it to a 105-minute version, then a 98-minute version, and then to 93 that we screened publicly as a rough cut, and then finally, without any mercy into the 87-minute film you will see.

Seasons In The Valley has been a hard film to make. We have had support from several areas, NYFA, NYSCA, Air Jamaica, private contributions and the generous support of our own pocket books. It has remained throughout, a largely unfunded venture that appeared impossible on paper and was brought to life by a group of youthful committed and tenacious people who saw an adventure.

I think we all feel a bond with the Jamaicans and the American farmers, and the film was created in situations similar to the adverse conditions in which they exist.

Since we began with our mini DV camera six years ago, there has been a digital revolution, a continued reduction in Hudson Valley farming, a move towards more propagandist documentary styles, and a war the continues as I write.

The film has opened my eyes to a host of things. In making this film I have found and lost personal bonds, I have learnt to repress my own natural instinctive human propensity to make assumptions and judgments. I have had peace and nerve jangling frenetic moments. Most importantly it re-taught me to look in people's eyes and try to see who they are.

I love this film in the true sense, which is to say that there have been times I have hated it. It has supplied me with pain, intrusions, inconvenience warmth, laughter and joy.

In the six years we have been working on this Kevin and I have produced and sold a narrative feature, four Sesame St. DVD's, a 38 minute short which went to Cannes, award winning commercials and corporate pieces and we have cemented a strong alliance as co-writers but this film has remained a constant.

This is the film that made me a filmmaker and I will miss you.

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