

# MOVIE MAKER

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

## Talbot Perry Simons Learns By Doing

by [Josh Elmetts](#) | Published February 8, 2010

“I have created a different way to make a film—a process that allows a first-time moviemaker (like myself) to be able to make a good film,” claims veteran actor and first-time director (with *Still the Drums*) Talbot Perry Simons. “For this movie, I shot 58 hours of exploratory footage that I edited into a one-hour video storyboard, which was used as a blueprint for shooting my movie. In the beginning, everything we shot was all wrong as far as proper camera setups go.”



This technique ended up working out exceedingly well for Simons, as *Still the Drums* has already won several awards on the festival circuit. The story features a group of Vietnam War veterans who reunite after the remains of an old war buddy are unearthed and identified 30 years after the war. The friends, in turn, are forced to confront memories that have been relegated to the repressed depths of their psyches.

In today’s politically charged climate, it is a feat in itself to make a war movie that is both relevant and entertaining, without being preachy. As a former Naval communications technician 3rd class petty officer, experienced theater actor and self-identified film buff, Simons created a unique and well-crafted narrative that has been uniformly appreciated by festival audiences. He was kind enough to answer a few questions with *MovieMaker* about both his inspiration and the experience of making his first feature length film.

**Josh Elmetts (MM): How did you come up with the idea for this movie?**

**Talbot Perry Simons (TPS):** On November 15, 1995, Richard Fulvio, George Simonelli and myself performed an improvisational scene in an acting class given to us by Pat Randall. At that time, she was our acting teacher and an instructor at the Lee Strasberg Institute in Hollywood and a lifetime member of the Actors Studio, dating back to the 1950s. The improvisation was performed at the Inner Circle Actors Theatre in Hollywood, California. This was one of many improvs performed within the class setting. The subjects of the improvs were usually heavy drama. It was done as an exercise where each actor would incorporate the use of three specific sensory choices during the improv. The improvs would usually last about 15 to 20 minutes. This particular improv went really well and there were some very positive comments made about the story idea and the work, so I asked Pat if she wouldn’t mind if I wrote a screenplay using her storyline from the improv. She said, “Do it!” It took me, in my spare time after work, about two-

and-a-half years to have my first draft. I made quite a few changes from the original improv. I had to create a beginning and an end and make it a complete story. Pat Randall and I share the “Story By” credit together in the end credits for the movie.

**MM: You served in the U.S. Navy during Vietnam. How much did this experience contribute to your film?**

**TPS:** Not to burst anyone’s bubble, but my experience in the military didn’t contribute to my film very much at all. I did serve in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam war. I was in the Navy from April 1965 until December 1968, but I never saw any action or even went to Vietnam. I assisted in the war in the communications field from afar, both on ship and from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. Many of my friends served and some died. [Whether] in or out of the service, you would have had to be on Mars to not know about the war back then. The truth is I own and watch a lot of movies. I’m a movie nut. I’m an actor and a writer, and what I learned about Vietnam I pretty much learned from great films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* and tons of war movies as a kid.

**MM: Given that the U.S. is currently involved in two wars, how do you think the public consciousness has (or will) affect the reception of your film?**

**TPS:** If the reaction from our two festival premieres is any example what to expect, I have a blockbuster! The public reception so far has been fantastic and overwhelming! Our two festival premieres in New York and in Los Angeles were both packed houses with people literally standing and sitting in the aisles and the back of the theater. Most that attended had seen the movie trailer playing on a wide screen TV in our booth at the festival opening two nights before at both festivals. That’s what filled the house! Afterward, many of the people that saw *Still the Drums* mentioned family or children or parents that have served or are currently serving and every one of them was quite affected by the film. They all gave us four to five stars, out of five stars, and two thumbs up! The story deals with post-traumatic stress disorder which seems to be in the news every time we turn it on. A good number of people said they felt the movie gave them a new insight and a better understanding of what a soldier goes through and may encounter during battle. Some wondered if similar things are happening today. So many of them had stories of a neighbor or relative that suffered from PTSD.

**MM: Did the political atmosphere of the past decade help compel you to get this movie made, or did it simply come to fruition during this time?**

**TPS:** The political atmosphere turned this project into a roller-coaster ride. I have been very conscious of it throughout the whole production and even more so now when pushing for distribution. After 9/11, my story suddenly became more relevant and this made me think more seriously about making the movie. I started raising the money for this film with a partnership. I keyed in on using controversy and an antiwar theme to promote the partnership and raise the money. I used the success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore’s controversial antiwar film that made \$222 million worldwide) to attract investors. My plan was to do the same thing with *Still the Drums* for 2008. But antiwar films were not doing well. [Brian De Palma’s] *Redacted* got crushed! So as a producer, I changed strategies again and didn’t mention the antiwar theme because of the political atmosphere. To date I have almost removed the word “antiwar” from the

marketing of the movie. It doesn't need it! It's not an in-your-face type of antiwar film, anyway. In my story, the villain is war and that alone has an antiwar message without ever stating it. So honestly, the antiwar theme grew out of necessity as a marketing plan and not out of benevolence, but as I got involved with a subject as powerful as antiwar and post-traumatic stress disorder, I started to care and the PTSD theme took over while I was editing the movie (I did the editing too) and the message grew even stronger. All war is bad and the men who fight in wars are changed forever!

**MM: Having previously worked in putting on plays, can you talk a little bit about the transition from the stage to the screen?**

**TPS:** I've been in about 25 plays and produced a few. Acting-wise, my theater experience has been invaluable and having produced a few plays gives you a little bit of courage, but the truth is the transition from putting on a play to producing a feature-length movie is a giant one. In my opinion, making a movie is a thousand times harder than putting on a play. There are so many more things involved in making a film and this was my first movie! There were obstacles at every turn. If I had known how hard it was going to be, I probably would have never done it. Ha! I laugh when I say that, but it's true.

**MM: What experiences were you able to draw on to help you succeed?**

**TPS:** A few years back, I worked as a broker raising money for other film production companies and I learned what they were doing; that is how I was able to write up the limited partnership for this film. I raised all of the money by myself. I've had help with production from my long-time friend and co-producer Richard Fulvio, who also plays Al in the movie and also performed in the original improv. So past experience is what made a lot of this all possible. The real inspiration to actually move forward and do it came from a phone call from Oscar winner Jon Voight. I accidentally met Jon Voight in a supermarket and I was able to persuade him to read my screenplay. About a week later he called me at home and raved about the story and the writing and told me to go make this movie. I figured if anyone knew a good screenplay when he read one it was Jon Voight (one of our awards is for Best Screenplay!). That was in 2005. I left my day job and started working on *Still the Drums* full time. The making of this movie has been my life now for over 14 years and looks like it may continue to be for quite some time.

**MM: *Still the Drums* has been well-received and won multiple awards on the festival circuit. That being said, a debut directorial effort must have provided many valuable learning experiences. Can you talk about what you learned, what you might do differently next time?**

**TPS:** That's a big question and it will take a big answer because our production process is quite a story and a learning process in itself. Briefly, I learned how to make a good movie and I have created a different way to make a film—a process that allows a first-time moviemaker (like myself) to be able to make a good film. I once heard that a good moviemaker has to make 25 bad movies before making one good film. For this movie, I shot 58 hours of exploratory footage that I edited into a one-hour video storyboard, which was used as a blueprint for shooting my movie. In the beginning, everything we shot was all wrong as far as proper camera setups go. It seemed like every shot was shot on the wrong side. A lot was learned from all the mistakes that were made on

that very first day. The most important thing that we realized was that shooting the video storyboard was a very good idea. The 58 hours of exploratory footage that went on the floor I consider to be my 25 bad movies!

**In the end, that video storyboard almost looked like a movie itself. The DP (Roy Kurtluyan) and the Steadicam operator (Jamie Northrup) both said they had never worked on a film that was so prepared. I now know that this process definitely works. It's a detailed pre-production process like no other. No film should be without it! The proof being that we swept the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival on both coasts and won a total of five awards: Best Movie, Best Directorial Debut, Best Screenplay, Best Actor and Best Song. I mean these aren't Oscars, but it's still quite an achievement in anyone's book. We also received the Platinum Reel for Standout Filmmaking from the Nevada Film Festival. I am very anxious to make my next film now. I have three very good scripts ready to go. *Planes, 1932* and an animated musical children's story, *The Feral King*.**

**MM: You wrote, directed, produced and acted in this film. Was it difficult to juggle all of these responsibilities? Would it have been easier or harder to delegate those titles to different people?**

**TPS:** I started studying acting in 1972. I have six acting awards for my performances on stage. I've studied acting for years. First at Orange Coast Junior College in Costa Mesa, California and then at the Lee Strasberg Institute with Pat Randall in Hollywood. Then with Vera Vlasova from the Moscow Art Theater. So I felt pretty secure about being prepared for that job. I consider myself to be a "Method" actor, writer and director. The technique works for any art, including music. So I felt that I was well prepared for each job. This is a relationship story and the three leads in the movie—myself, Bobby Figaro and Richard Fulvio—have all been friends for 35 years. I consider myself to be a perfectionist and I am hands on with everything! This particular film would have never been made if I didn't do it all. I had a tight plan and I stuck to it. I finished two days ahead of schedule and way under budget. The truth is, I did so much more for the making of this film that most people wouldn't believe it. I envy a producer who has the funds to have a regular crew to use over and over again knowing he can rely on them to do the job. That would be nice, but that costs a lot of money! I was lucky to find some very talented and dedicated people for my cast and crew. Throughout this whole production (other than the crew) we were a two person company: Me and Richard. Hopefully on my next movie I can afford to have people that I can delegate a lot more responsibilities to, but I will have the final word on any movie I make. Character actor Basil Hoffman, who is a friend of mine, called me an auteur. I kind of like that!

In October of 2009 Talbot Perry Simons, was recognized by Guinness World Records® for breaking Sir Charlie Chaplin's (Charlie Chaplin) 60 year world record in filmmaking. The record reads as follows: The most film festival awards won in different categories by an individual for one motion picture is five, achieved by Talbot Perry Simons (USA) who was recognized separately as Producer, Director, Writer, Actor and Composer for *Still The Drums* (2009).

Visit the website at [www.stillthedrums.com](http://www.stillthedrums.com).

See the TRAILER at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UICWkM60840>

See the PREVIEW at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxBCsC0aYM0&feature=youtu.be>

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