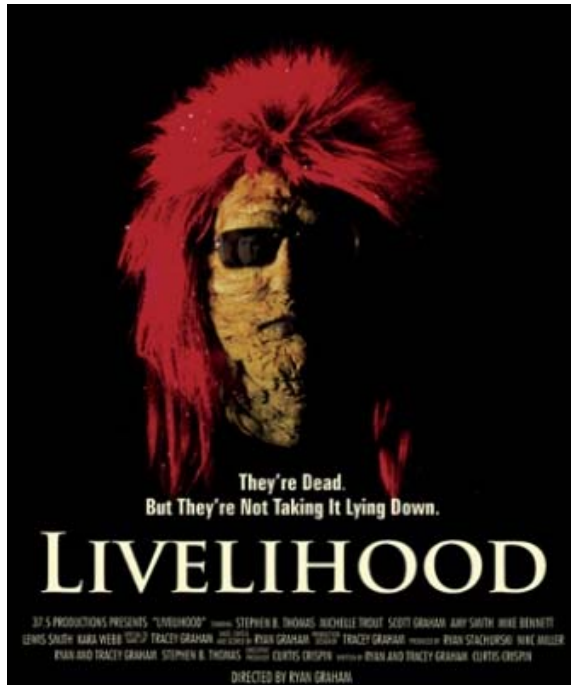


BLOODY INTERVIEWS: Livelihood: Interview with Ryan and Tracey Graham

Author: **Armando**
 Published: 2005/12/5
 Read 225 times
 Size 52.50 KB



LIVELIHOOD: Interview with Ryan and Tracey Graham

by Armando Valle

This past October, as reported previously [here](#), the premiere of Ryan Graham's LIVELIHOOD took place in Baltimore, MD. You can read our review of the film [here](#). Also premiering that day were Armando Valle's RENTAL and Erik Kristopher Myer's CEREAL BOY. Sometime after the great premiere, Armando Valle sat down with Ryan and Tracey Graham for an insightful, passionate, and lengthy interview about their film, independent filmmaking in general, and the blossoming filmmaking scene in Baltimore, MD.

Armando: Where did you get the idea for Livelihood? How did these three stories come about?

Ryan: Well, we wanted to make a movie. We wanted to make a low-budget movie. And we thought: Zombie movie.. automatically. But what we thought was, why do zombies always have to eat people? Why? What would happen if they didn't eat people? That's how the general idea came about. And then we started brainstorming from

there what would be some funny situations. People would just come back to life and have funny things to do.

We had a bunch of other ones too besides the ones that we have. We had a little kid. What would happen if a 4-year old came back to life?

And a lot of it was because we were kinda thinking how we thought of zombies as minorities. In other words, they would be the new minority. So we were thinking that every negative stereotype you've ever heard about a minority would have to apply to these zombies. You take the worst thing that you've ever heard about any minority, that you heard anyone say, and they could say that about a zombie.

Armando: That's one of my favorite things about the film, that it has that angle to it. That it's just not about zombies, but it has this sociological comment to it--the zombies are a minority.

Tracey: That comes from our love of (George) Romero, because he always has that sort of an angle. That's why they (his films) were so amazing. And that's why we love them so much. It wasn't just because there was the ripping of heads off... but we also love the social part of it, and that was like a huge part of the reason we did it; this is what we really want to cover.

Ryan: And it basically comes down to the fact that, in the end, most people don't realize that zombies are just like you and I except they're dead, whereas that also applies to minorities. They're just people, except they have a different skin color, a different language. Maybe they can speak English as well as you and I can--

Armando: Or their arm falls off.. Or their penis falls off. (laughs)

Ryan: But still, they are people just like you and I. And also we wanted to pay homage to a lot of the 80s films we love, and also a lot of the silent films we love.

Armando: What are some of these films?

Tracey: A lot of John Hughes' movies. We were really big on John Hughes. The whole script verbatim--

Ryan: Pretty in Pink... Weird Science...Sixteen Candles. There was also a lot of 80s TV things--Alexander Keaton.. that's just Michael J Fox's character name in--

Armando: Family Ties.

Ryan: Endicott was from Benson... played by Rene Auberjonois--the guy that played Odo in Deep Space Nine. Larry Tate, who was from 'Mother In Law Zombie, the boss... Tate's the boss in Bewitched. And that's who were thinking when we were originally casting



that--a white-haired, old guy with a moustache. We ended up casting Davon (Hall) because he was so incredible in that role. There's a lot of pop culture references.

And with the 'Rock Zombie' thing, we paid tribute to the heavy metal, 80s Hair metal bands--

Tracey: We're big Metal bands fans. Yeah, it's pretty bad.

Armando: You're a fan of the 80s bands... Poison? Motley Crue--

Tracey: No, no, no.. We're fan of those in a way--



Ryan: But I actually have videos from the 80s that I owned in High school. Like Yngwie Malmsteen, Def Leppard, Stryper. And before we shot the really big rock scene, we sat down and watched these videos.

Ryan: You see that guy. You see how he's twirling that around there. See how he's shaking his ass. See how he's jumping off that thing. That's what you gotta do. (Armando laughs)

Tracey: Yngwie Malmsteen had a keyboardist--

Ryan: Malmsteen, his bassist, and his keyboardist did this funny thing when they run around the keyboard player.

Tracey: And that's the grand finale for Billy Jump. And the Steve Vai thing where he holds the whammy bar like--They learned it all from old 80s videos.

Ryan: And then for the 'Corporate Zombie' section, we wanted to reference a lot of silent films--Chaplin, old Keaton movies like 'The General'. We had a clip from 'The Gold Rush' where (Chaplin) is doing the thing with the rolls. Luckily that's public domain. So is 'Charade', the Cary Grant movie we showed in that scene--

Armando: Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn.

Ryan: Yeah, we wanted to pay tribute to some of those classics, specially those 40s romance, comedy classics.

Tracey: This is what we both love so much. What brought us together--The love of all these films.

Armando: I definitely caught those references. You have the Fatty Arbuckle joke... which people at the screening actually got that joke. I wonder how many people nowadays know who Fatty Arbuckle was.

And how did the last story came about? The mother-in law?

Ryan (looking at Tracey): Well, you should tell that story.

Tracey: She was based on my grand-mother. Her name was Vida. She was very, very Joan-Crawford-kind of woman. She wasn't THAT awful, but she was pretty awful to my mom and dad. So it was sorta of a payback thing--just to be like, well she always wanted to be a movie star. Now she is, ladies and gents!

Ryan: We kinda thought of her as a general character and then ran with it. Nothing in the actual plot is based on anything that she actually did.

Tracey: It's just based on the idea that she wasn't a very nice woman.

Armando: And the actress that played her.. Michelle Trout. She did have that Joan Crawford look to her.

Tracey: I swear that out of all the makeup I did for the whole film, her eyebrows are my proudest moment. I was like: 'I did it!' The eyebrows had to be perfect 'Joan Crawford'. She didn't look a think like that woman.

Armando: I saw her at the premiere. She didn't look like that at all.

Ryan: I know... nice-looking lady. And with the acting, costume and makeup, she becomes this evil woman.

Armando: Some of the actors in the film... Steve Thomas is really good as Billy Jump. You mentioned that you saw in a play, and that's how you got him.

Ryan: Just down the street at the Top Floor theater which is about two blocks from here. We used to go there just to watch plays. I saw him in 'Tape'. My first vision of him: the opening scene in 'Tape' is just him jumping around in his underwear. Then we saw him in another play--

Tracey: But he was spellbinding. We were spellbound from the moment he came onstage to the moment he went offstage. I hoped one day we could work with him.

Ryan: I saw him in '12 Angry Men'. He was great. So we pretty much wrote the part with him in mind, hoping that he would be able to do. Little did we know, as he told me later, that a) always dreamed of being a zombie in a movie and b) always wanted to be a rock star. So, his total dream was this role.



Armando: You just combined his two dreams into one.

Tracey: Oh, three. The Samurai. He got to play a Samurai.

Ryan: That worked out really. He's become a great friend. And he ended up as one of the producers in the film. Once his section was done, he really went above and beyond the call of duty. On the other two sections, he kept coming back, helping out, doing whatever needed to be done on the set. And he really believed in the film.



Armando: Some of the other actors also came from the Top Floor.

Ryan: Bradley, who plays Stevie Sierra, the flaming gay guy. He came from the Top Floor. Scott Graham, who plays Alexander, used to be at The Top Floor. Who else?

Tracey: Laurie, also from the Top Floor. Dana Peterson also, but she was cut; not because she was bad but because of time-length issues. A lot of extras came to that concert scene... because that scene was shot at The Top Floor. So we had a lot of extras from that company.

Armando: And some of the other roles in the film you filled with your family. Your father's in the film.

Ryan: And I wrote that for him. He's always doing these dramatic roles in these plays I've seen. But whenever he does comedy, he's over-the-top and funny. He gets angry.. his face turns red; it's awesome. So we wrote this specifically with him in mind. Here's a role where he can go so over the top. No one else will want to go there, but he'll do it.

We would have him doing these things, like you would see in silent movies, when you see something, and you almost hear the sound 'Boing!' and his eyes would bug out, his hole head jumps.

Tracey: We wanted him to be like he was so overacting.

Armando: What his name?

Ryan: Scott Graham, also. He's related to me. The other Scott Graham isn't.

Ryan: He did a great job. One of the reasons I thought it would be cool to cast him was like... I think I never heard him curse before. (all laugh) I made him curse like a sailor in the movie and it was hilarious. I was just sitting there watching my dad going 'Fuck This and fuck that!' It was awesome.

Armando: Did he actually... There were some pictures of him in the film wearing some diapers. Did he actually wear those?

Tracey: No, that was my photoshop job. My photoshopping skills.

Ryan: We didn't submit to that humiliation, but it's not like anyone it's going to know that. For all anyone knows, he posed for pictures in a diaper.

Armando: Some of the other actors that are really good in the film, Mike Bennett, who plays the deaf keyboard player. He's hilarious! He's hilarious in everything I've seen him in.

Ryan: And his brother John Bennett, who played the record executive, Kris Kashgrab.

Armando: That's his brother! I didn't know. He was very funny too...during the end credits.

Ryan: We met them through the Camm Slamm. 2003 Camm Slamm. They did 'Why Did You Kill Me, Mommy?'

Armando: I was there for that.

Tracey: We were impressed.

Ryan: We won third place for 'Aaron Burr Vs The Space Aliens.' And I think they came in right behind us, in fourth place. Mike had something on his blog. We typed in a search for Camm Slamm and found it. We emailed him and said 'Hey, we loved your movie and we should get together sometime.' They were going to be at Microcinefest, so the third prize for the Camm Slamm that year was a pack of Newports and a case of Natty Boh beer. And I was like 'You guys really deserve to win something.' So I brought them half a case of Natty Boh to Microcinefest. They drank all that beer within an hour! (all laugh) I remember giving it to him, and, you know it was kinda awkward meeting him... 'Hi, how are you? We've never seen each other before. Here's some beer!' We walked out at the end of the MCN screening and there were cans littered all over the place. And he was like 'Heeyy, thank you for the beer!'

Tracey: And these are the geniuses behind Better Hollywood Productions (laughs). I mean... they're so talented.

Armando: And Nikc Miller who played Buckets.

Ryan: And Mike, who played the deaf keyboard player. John, who played Kris Kashgrab.

Ryan: Nikc (Miller of Better Hollywood Productions) and his girlfriend, Erika, wrote and directed the commercials.

Armando: Before we get to the commercials: How about the actors in the last story. Not the mother-in-law. The actress that played the daughter-in-law.

Tracey: Amy Smith.

Ryan: Amy Smith and Lew Smith (who plays Vida's son) are actually married in real life. They came in to audition and they were great. Amy is just incredible. Lewis is a good-looking guy and we really had to dork him up for this.

Tracey: It took a lot to dork him up.

Ryan: It was like one of those 80s movies where the girl's got the stringy hair and the glasses, and people go 'She's so ugly' but later on she's pretty. That's what we wanted for Lou. When he comes back from vacation, he's 'Mr. Slick'. And you look at him and go 'Oh my gawd, he's so slimy. What a jerk!'

We were really lucky with him. They were really husband and wife. And they would practice their lines at home and stuff. They came prepared to the set everyday.

Tracey: She was pregnant on that last day. She was saying she felt funny.

Armando: Now, tell us about the fake commercials. How did those come about?

Ryan: Basically, we had these three sections of the film to intercut. So we had an option to stop with one section, fade to black, then fade up to another section. We didn't want to do that because we thought it would be boring. We wanted something interesting. Also, we wanted to keep the social commentary going about the zombies and how is pretty much immediate that people come back to life and all of a sudden we've got the media swarming to pick up the new demographic.

Armando: That's very smart.

Ryan: Thank you. We said 'Hey, what kinda commercials will they make for zombies?' We came up with a list of ideas. I think we had 12 ideas. We gave them to Nikc of Better Hollywood. He had a class that he was taking (at Towson State), an independent study class, and he had to make something for it. So we said 'Look, we really think you do great work and it would really cool if you could help us with the movie'--because I didn't have the time to do those at that point--'Go and run with it. Here are some ideas.' So he came up with the scripts. We looked over them and made a few changes. But really, he did all the editing for those, and we helped him shoot them.

Armando: So those were shot by Nikc Miller and Mike Bennett and company.

Ryan: The only one that wasn't was the Zombie Rest Home which was done by Curtis Crispin, our executive producer. He shot that down in Atlanta.

Armando: Those are hilarious. I specially like Pit Wax and the Intestine Tract one.. where the zombie goes to the bathroom and his whole intestine tract--he craps it out. And I like Dallas Shelby (Pasquinade Films) as the Michael Lesko character--'Free Cash for Zombies!' That was very timely. I think a lot of people when they see the film, they will get that. I've not seen Matthew Lesko spoofed anywhere until this film.

Armando: How did the film music come about? The Dirty Marmaduke Flute Squad and all those pieces of music for the commercials.

Ryan: For the commercials particularly, most of them were lyrics written by Nikc. He would come here with his acoustic guitar. He would just sit here and record it. I think he sang in most of those. Well, it was like half and half. He did a lot of them. The rest of the music was done by me.

Same with the score. I kinda freaked out there for a little bit. It was getting close to press screening time, and I didn't have a score for Corporate Zombie and Mother-In-Law Zombie. And they had to be orchestral scores, as opposed to Rock Zombie, which was rock music which is easy for me. I'm good at guitar and I can sit there; that's no problem.

Armando By the way, your cameo in the film, playing the drums is hilarious.

Ryan: So I actually put up a bunch of ads, trying to hire some composers.

Armando: Did they come out of the woodwork?

Ryan: Yeah, we got about 8 submissions. There were a lot of people that were interested. I sent them the Corporate Zombie scene.. the whole drawn scene with the caterers and my dad and Alexander getting his head punched out. I asked them if they could do a quick score for that. Half the people never wrote me back. They requested the scene on DVD. I sent it. Never wrote back. That was disappointing. And the people who did send stuff back, none of it was right. It either didn't sound like a real orchestra, or they were not hitting the right keys, or there was music where there shouldn't have been, or there was no music where they should be music, or they didn't get the mood--it was all melodramatic or it was all funny.. all action. It was kinda of a nightmare to be honest. So I said--I will have to do the music.

Armando: So you ended up doing the music?

Ryan: I took a week off work, and I work from 9am until 8pm, scoring the entire time. And at the end of the week it was done. It was great week! It was fun. All I did was write music! But I took a whole week off.

Armando: You did a great job. One of the lessons I took from 'Rental' is that in many occasions you have to be the one to step in and do it. Specially as an indie filmmaker, when you can not afford to pay someone else to do it at that point, you have to put on that hat, and do it. You had to put on the hat, and compose the film... on top of everything else you did.

Ryan: If I would have had more time, I would have worked with the musicians. These were people who were obviously good musicians. And if I could have sit down and spot the film with them.. and really go over all the individual motions and run through the scenes, it would have been a fun process. But I already had it (the music) in my head. I knew what it sounded like. So it was just a matter of sitting at the computer with the keyboard.

Armando: Another aspect of the film I want to talk about is the special effects. Because you guys did a great job with the special

effects. They looked good. And nobody would get any idea that they were done by Tracey... and many people in the crew that had no experience with special effects. I was impressed specifically by the machete to the head, which was a nice tip of the hat to Tom Savini. I also liked the decapitation. How was the decapitation done?

Tracey: We made a body. We wrapped duct tape around Ryan, who was wearing a loose sweater--and this is a great to make a stunt body--we just duct taped it all around, and cut him up the back, and taped it shut, and stuff it full of stuff. It makes the sturdiest, nicest body.

What we did then, we got a heart and lung machine--a 10.5 heart-lung machine--and the blood when into it so we could be able to pump it out like a heart would.

Ryan: It was a bug sprayer.

Tracey: Yeah, it's just a big weed sprayer. We stuff it with all that stuff. Put a tube through the neck. And then I made with some latex and some real meat and pieces of bone a spinal column. And it just happened that the hose went through the spinal column. So when it came time, we, digitally--this is the beautiful thing--we have the joy of making things half the Tom Savini way and half Ryan techno-wizard way. Ryan said to the actor, 'Stand here, I'm going to take your picture.' We took the picture; got the guy's head. We can do a still frame. That guy moves out of the way. Steve swings the Samurai sword, and it gives the illusion that the head's falling off. So Ryan moves the head to the side (in post).

Ryan: Basically, the body was just lined up exactly where the actor's head and shoulders where. We just had the video of his head, which I kinda cut up and pasted it over the torso. And then, (I) animated the head when the sword flies in, the head flies off.

Tracey: The fact that you see what happens next...is that the head bumps, it lands, and the blood pumps out. It gives the illusion of what you see. If you just were to see the head flapping to the side, people would go 'uumm'. The head would have looked fake.

Armando: Another one that was nicely done was the scene where you digitally erased the actor's head when it gets punched out. You had to go in frame by frame. You explained that it was like 300 and something frames.

Ryan: Yeah, there's 24 frames a second, so it had to have been about 30 seconds of it. So that's about 600 frames. And I shot a background plate of it, but for some reason we hadn't put a green cover over his head. So I couldn't Green-screen his head out. I ended up having to erase his head frame by frame, so that the background would show thru. And it's really a pain in the butt.

What you don't think of, I guess, is that... if you were to be doing an erasing thing, it ends up looking like animation, you would see squiggles juttering all around. You really gotta do a good job. You kinda have to let the computer do the work for you, with the key frames in between.

Armando: It looked great. It really gave the impression that his head fell off then the actress put it back on.

Ryan: I'm not sure there's an easier way to do that with those particular shots. We would have need a whole body with no head maybe with a puppeteer somehow. I'm not even really sure...

Tracey: Something really hard to think of at the time--

Armando: 'Too expensive and too time consuming. Let's just do it the easy way.'

Tracey: The one thing you can say 'We'll worry about it in post.'

Armando: Which brings me to the question--and you don't have to give me the actual figure, but how much did Livelihood cost?

Ryan: I tell people it's less than you could buy a used 1995 Ford Taurus with. (all laugh)

Tracey: Go check your Blue books.

Armando: It was like Rick Schmidt's book, 'Make your film for used car prices.' That's the good answer--it was made for a used car price.

Tracey: Well, our time was worth money.

Ryan: That's right. Actually, I boiled it down. I did the calculations, and I spent, me alone, over 2000 hours working on this movie; that's a year at a full-time job. So it was like having another full-time job.

Armando: That is commitment there. That is dedication right there.

Ryan: It was a lot of work. Literally, for those last 3 to 4 months when it got down to crunch time, I would come home from work--not even change out of my work clothes--and just start working on the edit. I would go to bed, wake up, end up doing some work at 'work'.. I would be responding to emails at my day job... and come back and do it all over again. Weekends, the same--work, work, work. So when you consider what I made doing my daytime job, what my time is work, yes, the movie did cost some money.

Armando: And, you definitely want to--when the film gets distributed--get paid for all that time.

Ryan: We would like to give all of our actors and crew a small check. So the first advance we get, everyone gets a check. Even if it's just a token. Even if it's nothing. 'Here's a token.'

Armando: I know how it is. I think one of the things you discover when you do this kind of indie filmmaking is that you have to reach levels of commitment and effort that you could not imagine before. There's a lot of people who want to make films. There's a lot of people who post in the internet that they're writing scripts, and they have all these ideas, but once they hit that wall--the amount of time they'll have to put up to realize that dream--I can imagine that the grand majority of them quit.

Ryan: That's exactly what happens. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of dedication. Keeping your mind focused on the goal, that final goal.

Keeping yourself motivated. On a Friday night, am I gonna go out drinking with my friends or am I gonna work on the movie? Most people that we found had that level of dedication.

Armando: I learned the exact same lesson with 'Rental'. Different levels of commitment... where people are at. It's the exact same thing--What do you do on a Friday night? 'I have to shoot... We have to make sure the effects supplies get ordered... We have to make sure the costumes are ready, and so on.' You have to sacrifice all that free time.

Tracey: And you have to do it because you love it.

Armando: Exactly, you have to do it because you absolutely fucking love it.

Tracey: Which we did... and we still love it.

Armando: I think it's one of the unspoken little secrets of Indie filmmaking is that--you will be challenged. You have to be extremely committed. And I don't see some of the great Indie filmmakers of our day, those who have made it big--like Robert Rodriguez--I don't see them say straightforwardly, 'You know what--you better say bye bye to your personal life and your free time to be a filmmaker.' I think it would scare tons of people away from the get go. 'I won't be able to watch the football game on Sunday.'

Ryan: And along the same lines, at least for me, I had a certain standard that I wanted our movie to meet. I didn't want it to look like it was shot on video. I didn't want it to look like it was thrown together by a bunch of high school kids. And I had a really strong perception of the quality that the movie had to have. I wasn't going to settle for less.

It's one of those things, that you say: You could have two of these three things--you could have it be Cheap. You could have it be Fast. Or you could have it be Good. You only get two of them. (Armando laughs) I think that in independent filmmaking you only get one of those. I think we got it cheap and I think we got it good, but--

Armando: It definitely wasn't fast. The film took you two years to make.

Ryan: About two years. From writing it to the end... And it still not done. I got to cut stuff out of it.

Tracey: We still have to send it to all the film festivals... try to get distribution.

Armando: What camera did you shoot it with?

Ryan: We shot on a PanasonicVX1000 which was the first generation of semi-pro MiniDV cameras.

Armando: Did that have 24p or?

Ryan: No, no, just regular 60i. That's all it had. Not very good in the low light. It was a pretty basic camera, but it makes a sharp picture. It has 3 CCDs. Actually, the week before the end of filming, it fell off the tripod and the lens snapped off--

Armando: Ooohhhh!! Nightmare scenario right there.

Tracey: Oh, the silence in that room!

Ryan: It was horrible. My people knew I was mad because thruought the whole shooting process, I'm like, 'What the fuck are you doing? What's wrong with you?' And the camera falls off and... Dead silence. Everyone is like: 'Holy shit, what is he gonna do?' 'Well, we're fucked'. So we had to take off for a month. And I went through my homeowner's insurance actually--God forbid anything happens to the house in the next two years because we're screwed if it does because we won't get renewed on the homeowner's policy.

They were really good about it. They were willing to reimburse us for the new model, so basically they were going to buy us a VX1000, which is cool. They gave us that option of giving us some money. We took the money and got a (Canon) GL2. So I think there's like a minute or two at the very end of the film that's shot with a GL2. The GL2 turned out to be a lot sharper. It's a lot better in low light. Great camera. I guess since it came out a few years after the VX1000 it had a better reputation. We had to almost dumb down (the new footage) in post: add some grain, lower the saturation of the colors, stuff like that.

Armando: Like I said, this is one the best-looking MiniDV films I've seen. The amount of post-production that went into it.. and the way it looked blown up at The Charles. I saw Steven Soderbergh's Full Frontal about three years, which he shot with a XL1s...and that thing blown up looked grainy, dark, and that film was released somehow. It had some attributes to it. It was decent. But it was blown up, the image fell apart. Your film--that wasn't the case at all. You can see the grain on the big screen. And it's very comparable to many indie films shot on film.

Ryan: That should give people hope. As far as, you learn After Effects, you learn how to use your tools... you could even go out there with a little one chip camera and make a movie that looks great on the big screen. That shouldn't be your excuse not to make a movie--'I can't afford a better camera'--that's not an excuse these days. Just go out and shoot it. Fix it in post.

Armando: You edited this on a PC with Adobe Premiere Pro.

Ryan: Homebuilt PC. I put it together with parts myself. Cut with Adobe Premiere Pro. Post-processed with After Effects. I was lucky enough to beta-test a program called Automatic Duck which lets you pour out all your video from Premiere and dump it into any other audio program, like ProTools and CakeWalk Sonar--which I've been using for years--It just a lot more. You can use DX programs as well as DX2 programs. Better cross fades. Just a lot of better control of the audio. So that was cool to be able to beta-test that.

Armando: This was sync audio that you would take into this program then put it back in.

Ryan: Yes, it takes all your cuts and dumps them into your audio program. It was pretty cool. All the music was composed through Midi in Cakewalk using some sample sets.

Armando: All these digital toys are now making it so much easier for people to just start making films. I mean--if you wanted to make films ten years ago, you had to learn how to shoot 16mm film. You had to learn how to cut.. edit. Send your film out to a lab. The high-standard which we all strive for is to shoot in actual film. But it can be a pain in the ass. When I went to school at UMBC, it was all 16mm.

Ryan: Again, that's another reason why there's no excuse why you can't just pick up and make a movie. I mean 'Aaron Burr', which we won the 2003 Camm Slamm with, we did that in a one-chip camera. We could have easily edit that in Imovie. And that was a cool little movie.

Armando: I want to get into the fact that you teach a class at Creative Alliance for DIY Filmmaking. You actually put together this very nice primer where you actually compiled how to build your own jig, which are just extremely useful. Seeing that you teach this class, Did you go to film school?

Ryan: No, I didn't go to film school.

Armando: No Film school at all. So how did you learn...

Ryan: When I was in High School, there wasn't a lot to do where I grew up. It was in the suburbs in Clearwater, Florida. That's where 37.5 Productions got started. It was Curtis, Crispin and myself and Ryan Stachurski. We decided to make a movie. It took about 4 years to finish that movie. In the process, I took a community access course to be able to use editing equipment, and that's where it started. It was an 8-week course that the community college offered, and it taught me how to edit. Back then it was linear editing; just tape-to-tape.

From there I went to Vanderbilt University for a Neuroscience Major, and Philosophy Minor--

Armando: Wow.

Ryan: Nothing to do with anything. And then I ended up running a TV station down there. Moved to Atlanta and worked at CNN; learn more stuff there. It was all about picking stuff up as I went along.

And to be honest with you, a lot of the stuff I learned, I learned just reading off the internet. And then going out and trying it, doing it. That and reading some books...

Armando: What are your feelings about film school? Do you feel that film school is necessary?

Ryan: I don't want to offend anyone that went to film school. I just think that the money is better spent actually making a movie. I mean, the money that will cost you to go to film school, dump it into making a movie; you'll probably learn just as much as you would thru trial and error.

Tracey: You can study films yourself; that's one thing you can do. You can take fifty films home every night and just watch them and watch them.

Ryan: That's another thing we used to do. We used to rent three films a night and watch them all--bad films, good films. You can learn something from any movie. If it's bad, learn why you thought it was bad. Take notes. A lot of film school is that anyways: film appreciation, analyzing scenes... scripts. You can do that on your own. You've to be motivated. You have to be a self-starter. You've to buckle down and do it.

Armando: I went to film school and the grand majority of stuff I learn was from books and from watching films. And a whole bunch of internet searching. Specially learning the programs.. stuff like Adobe Premiere Pro; it's all about searching the tutorials and getting them from the internet.

Ryan: I think if you go to film school you get a good basis really quickly, but technology these days changes so quickly that it's hard to keep up unless you do self-study. But like I said, you can spend the money and make your own movie.. it might not be that great, you'll screw up a lot, but you'll have something to show for and you'll learn a lot. I dunno.. I guess (film school) is good for some people. Specially if your parents want you to go to college and you don't want to study neuroscience.

Armando: It's that the advice that you have for up and coming filmmakers--be committed.. the information is out there.

Ryan: Yeah, though it takes a lot longer that way. Again, it's either fast, good or cheap. You can go to film school and you can learn it quickly and you can learn it well, but it's not going to be cheap. Or you can do it on your own, and it's going to take a lot longer for you to learn it, and it might not be as good, but it certainly will be cheap.

Armando: (laughs) That's a good formula. It applies to many things in life. Cheap, fast, or good--you can't have all three!

Ryan: Personally, that will be my advice. Just get out and make a movie. And I know there's a lot of high school kids who are interested in making movies. That's a good time to start. When you're in high school, get a little camera, and start making movies with your friends.

Armando: And many filmmakers started out a ridiculous young age: Spielberg. I know Kubrick started when he was.. like.. 11. He was making films in his backyard.

Ryan: I think (Robert) Rodriguez did too.

Armando: Rodriguez did the same thing. I didn't have that type of upbringing. I didn't grew up with a video camera, or 8mm camera. It was all when I got to film school.. that I got started. Was it the same with you? When was the first time you picked up a camera?

Ryan: I guess it was in 10th grade. It was in high school. And again, it was out of boredom. Stachurski's parents had a video camera. And I think it started with filming ourselves blowing things up... (laughs) because the camera had a high speed shutter on it. And he had a VCR that could play stuff in slow motion. So we would blow up G.I. Joe figures and then go run inside and watch

them in the VCR.

Armando: I used to do the same thing, except I did it with Transformers. (laughs) I would build all these cheap cardboard installations: 'This is the Deception base. And it's getting burn down nnnowww!' (laughs)

Tracey: That's how it all gets started.

Armando: It's that same era of the 80s. G.I.Joe. Transformers. He-Man.

Ryan: Yeah, it was fun. I think that was the first time we used the video camera.

Armando: So what are some of your influences? As far as what films... what filmmakers influenced you? We mentioned some of them...

Ryan and Tracey: Keaton. Chaplin. Sam Raimi, of course...

Armando: Raimi. You've that whole scene in the last story with the flying plates. Out of Sam Raimi's 'Crimewave'.

Tracey: You're probably one of the very few people in the world who recognizes it. (laughs)

Armando: I know you guys asked 'Have you seen Crimewave?'

Tracey: 'Has anyone seen Crimewave?'

Armando: And two hands went up.

Ryan: I'm not even sure it's out on DVD.

Armando: I don't think it's out on DVD. Sam is one of my influences also... because if it wasn't for 'The Evil Dead' I don't think I would be a filmmaker. Anyone who rolls their eyes about Sam Raimi, Sam Raimi is a top notch director nowadays. See where it got him.

Ryan: And Peter Jackson.

Armando: Peter Jackson. Another filmmaker who started with very low-budget, indie movies... with 'Bad Taste'.. and look where he's at now. I'm a big believer that you can't really discount people for the first couple of films that they do, because they might come around the corner, get better and better, and really blow you away. Sam Raimi and Peter Jackson are on the top of the heap right now.

Ryan: And with those guys, it was the same thing--the more money they got, the more professional their movies got. It was a direct co-relation. So you realize in retrospect that any problems that their movies had was because they were working with such limited budgets. Now they're going a lot further. They're still doing a lot with their budgets. Just look at 'Lord Of The Rings'--Peter Jackson hardly spent any money when compared to most big budget films.

Armando: I think it was something around like 200 million dollars. And those movies ended up making a buttload of money.

Ryan: They were huge movies.

Armando: And Sam (Raimi) with 'Spider-Man'. Those films exploded.

Tracey: I'm looking forward to Sam Raimi doing Horror films (again).

Armando: Yeah, I would like to see him do just another Horror film. No budget. Under 10 million dollars. I think that should be something that big budget filmmakers should do. I think there's this whole mentality that once you make it as a filmmaker, you have to continue to make 100 million dollar movies. I like this idea that, you make a 100 million dollar movie, but then you challenge yourself and make a movie with a tenth of of the budget (which you can keep artistic control of).

Ryan: I think one of the few people who has been able to retain control of his films is Robert Rodriguez. And that's 'cause he does it all himself.

Armando: In fact, one of the reasons why I applaud Rodriguez, and he's one of my personal heroes, is because of his ethic. He has managed to do films outside of Hollywood, he does them his own way, he has managed to get these studios--these hangars--outside Austin, Texas, and he shoots his films there. I mean, 40 million dollars--that was the budget of 'Sin City'. And I think that a lot of people who did not 'get' 'Sin City' didn't understand that aspect of that film. 'Sin City' would have costed over a 100 million dollars if it would have been produced in Hollywood on real sets. And would it have made that much of a difference. I disagree. I think it would have been the same film.

It's all about the digital revolution. And Rodriguez is a big independent. I admire his work tremendously.

Ryan: And he's shooting with those HD cameras... which is awesome. There's a new (HD camera) one that's coming out--a few new ones. Canon's got one. And Panasonic has a High Definition version of the DVX100A. It's not cheap.. it's like 10 thousand bucks... which is in the range of--

Armando: A credit card. (all laugh)

Ryan: And that literally takes the camera out of the equation. You seen what that kind of camera can do on the big screen. You have no excuse. If it doesn't look good on that, it's because your lighting's bad, your directing's bad. It's not the camera.

Armando: That's where all those skills come in. Your directing and your lighting and so on. What are your thoughts about the Baltimore/DC indie film scene at this time? What has been your experience in a nutshell?

Tracey: We feel like there's this core group around the Creative Alliance. I feel like there's something spring boarding from this. I'm sure there are people out there who have no idea who we are. But I just feel like it's trickling out. I feel something's happening. I feel there's a core group of us that--because we're supporting each other so much--that's going to make a difference. That's going to make this scene explode. It's like you said: There's going to be a point where people will have to take notice.

And I really believe it. There are a lot of dedicated people--

Ryan: There's a lot of people doing a lot of work. And good work. Pasquinade Films...

Armando: You got Better Hollywood. Nikc Miller and Mike Bennett--

Tracey: Red Star KGB. Grasshopper Philms. Mark Stansberry--

Armando: Who has this amazing animation studio in Highlandtown.

Tracey: Speaking of them--The Robinson Brothers--

Armando: The Robinson Brothers--Yes!

Tracey: I am so inspired by them. Ryan and I talk about them all the time: 'Look what these guys are doing.'

Armando: Working on a short film shot on a cell-phone camera!

Tracey: That is dedication.

Ryan: Those are guys who just went and did it.

Tracey: Those are guys who are going to make some films. You can look at them--you're going to do good things.

Ryan: There's Mob TV. They come to the Camm Salon every time, and they got something different. I think there's a lot of people around like that. And I feel bad that we don't know--I know there's more people out there. I think some people just stick to their own little groups. And I wish more people would come out to the Camm Salons. They are a great way to meet people. That's how we meet a lot of people who helped us with the movie, but a lot of friends.

Armando: I can't stress how important it is to network, to go out to these events, and just meet other filmmakers. I know there's a bunch of filmmakers in this town that don't come out. They don't come out to the screenings. They don't come out to the Camm Salon. They might have a small group of people that they work with. But I don't think they realized how much greater and bigger and how the possibilities for their films would be expanded if they were to network.

Case and point, you guys have this story--I have the same story--I was stranded in my little island wanting to do a horror film. And it wasn't until I reached out to Baltimore when I met all these wonderful people that I worked with. It was the same case with you guys.

Ryan: You end up finding out that it's a really small town. I mean, it's bizarre how you can walk down the street and someone will recognize you here just from having been to the Creative Alliance, to the Camm Slamm.. You mention your movie, and someone has heard about it from someone else.

Armando: And you have these film schools who have wonderful students coming out. You have Towson State University--Nikc Miller, Mike Bennett. Erik Kristopher Myers is coming out of Towson State. Andrew Gantt, the actor I mentioned earlier. Ali Lukowski, the actress in 'Rental'. You got UMBC, which has a Film department, which I attended. And I know they have a very strong film department. Villa Julie--Scott Kecken, who's one of the founders of Creative Alliance--he teaches there, and a whole bunch of student filmmakers came out this past May and showed their stuff.

Tracey: They did a really good job. I was happy to see them there. And I think they were really excited to see us. They were like 'Hey, we're in college.. but there's this city people getting all gritty and making films.' I think it's inspiring for them too.

Armando: John Hopkins also has a small film department, and their own film festival in April of every year.

Ryan: They need to keep coming out and meet new people. We got Hondance also, which is the film festival that we do. It's a great place for filmmakers to come out and meet each other. It's non-competitive. A good place to have a mutual appreciation society. And you find that you should not only not burn bridges when you're in a city this small, but when you network it's amazing how you meet people through other people, and so on. In a city like this, it's very important. Specially if you're looking for a job in the industry, and you're looking to get experience. Word travels quick if you do good work. Word also travels quick if you do bad work and you're an asshole. Mind your P's and Q's people!

Armando: What would you say are the lessons... the main lessons you learned making this film?

Tracey: We had to do a lot of things ourselves. All the stuff that Ryan did, and that I had to do--all the costumes and make-up. We would like to be able to concentrate in one or two things, so that maybe we can really, really try hard to find some quality people to work with. It's not hard--people want to work. There's a seamstress out there who really would love to work in a film! And then you've got the best costumes ever. There's people that will come out of the woodwork and help when it comes to films. And I think, had we had more time, I would have like to have found more people that could have help with those specific things, so that everybody's job would have been that much better. The quality just goes up when you've more time to spend on something.

Ryan: There's a lot of really good people that I wish I would have included. We could have included you (Armando) but we didn't get to know you until the movie was done shooting.

Armando: Which was a year ago.

Ryan: So, yeah, we learned that it's probably not a good idea to try to do everything yourself. We also learned, on the flipside, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Specially when it comes to locations, your actors--notoriously flaky. If you need them there at 9 am in the morning, tell them to be there at 7:30 am. (all laugh)

Tracey: And feed them something really nice. Feed people. We're big about feeding people. Fed people are happy people in the set.

Ryan: I learned that I should always have two beers before directing a hard scene. (all laugh)... because otherwise I end up freaking out and end up yelling at people, which doesn't make anyone happy.

Armando: And that's so funny, because I've never seen you freaking out. You've always been so mild-mannered and so quiet.

Ryan: It's only on set (that I freak out)! You know why-- it's because we had the locations for a very limited amount of time. Actors certain schedules; they had to leave at a certain time. And when you don't have a Production Manager, you don't have a Producer on set, and it's all on my head, I'm worrying about that.. I'm worrying about the direction, the sound, the lights, all that. If I'm not there drinking (my beer), I'm going to freak out. (all laugh)

And then I think we also learned, at the end, that there's no reason not to make a movie.

Tracey: And that it's so true. It wasn't two years ago that we were sitting on the couch like a bunch of lumps, saying 'When are we gonna do something?' Just do it! It's so true--Just do it!

Ryan: And even if this movie goes nowhere... even if it burned up today.. it wouldn't matter, because we have so many friends that we met through this that we didn't have two years ago.

Armando: That whole Nike slogan--Just Do It--did not make much sense to me until about a year ago. (laughs) You find out exactly just what 'Just Do It' means... and you meet a lot of people in the process.

Tracey: I use to joke about GSD--the people that 'Get Shit Done.' (all laughs) That's our new slogan--GSD. Get Shit Done!

Armando: So what's next for 'Livelihood'? And what is next for your guys as far as future projects?

Ryan: Well, we gotta cut 'Livelihood' down... about 15 mins out of the film. Just by watching audience reaction was really helpful as to what we should cut out. After that we'll be screening it more around Baltimore. I've actually contacted people at Gardel's. We'll show it at a few more places. Film Festivals. And hopefully, get a distributor. Get it out at Blockbuster... with all the other B movies on the shelves there.

Armando: Definetely send it out. I think you should send it out film festivals. It is a decent, good film. There's no reason why some festival out there won't show it. Seriously, there are festivals out there that will give it a home.

Ryan: And after that, we got other movie ideas. We got some treatments for some scripts. Tracey's working on some short films; totally different films from what I'm doing. She wants to do some kids' stuff--

Tracey: Stop-animation stuff.

Ryan: And I'm actually leaning towards more dramatic stuff, darker stuff, not the comedy stuff. And I got a big, big project: 'Die Hard meets McGuyver meets Revenge Of The Nerds' film. (Armando laughs)

Armando: That needs to be the pitch for the film: It's Die Hard.. meets McGuyver... meets Revenge Of The Nerds! Woohh!

Ryan: That will be my sell-out movie!

Armando: Ryan Graham sells-out!

Ryan: That's fine!

Tracey: He's hoping! Yeah! That's how we keep each other going--'Don't sell out, honey. Don't sell out.' And he goes: 'No, we are selling out!'

Armando: 'Cause you need to buy aluminum siding for the house. (all laugh) 20 grand!

Ryan: I can say one thing though: We will not live in L.A. Ever.

Armando: I'm the same way. I refuse to live in L.A. And even if it gets to the point that I've to do business over there, I'll go over there.. maybe I'll rent an apartment, but I'll come back here. Let me go back to Baltimore!

Tracey: We will always be in Baltimore, yeah.

Armando: Have you ever had an experience over there in L.A.? Have you ever tried to get over there.

Ryan: We've been to L.A. My grandfather lives in Irvine. And it's miserable there. I hate it. I do not like there. And the stories you hear--trying to go over there to make it. Eight people crammed into an apartment, each paying like some extremely amount of money a month for rent. Sounds completely miserable.

Meanwhile, here we have a nice, big house--

Tracey: It's like we're in a cocoon in Baltimore. We're the baby filmmakers. We're developing.

Armando: Which doesn't happen in L.A. Everyone's in such a rush to make it. They want to explode into the scene. They want to be the next big thing; there's no 'developing.'

Tracey: If you love films as much as we do then you wait to do your best. We still want to make a lot of money--but that's not what we're in it for. We hope.

Armando: I hear some any stories of people that graduated from local film schools. And they just go to L.A. and they're just like... waiting tables. And I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be another wanker trying to past my script to a producer that's having lunch; and there I am trying to push my script.

Tracey: Or I could be making movies. That's not a really hard choice for us.

Ryan: I like it here. I love Baltimore.

Tracey: I love Baltimore.

Ryan: And I can't say that about any other place I lived. I lived in Tampa, Florida and I hated it there. I lived in Atlanta, Georgia--hated it there. Lived in Nashville--which is a nice city, but I wanted to get out there to. Now, Baltimore just feels like home. So that's why I very much consider myself a Baltimore filmmaker. I may not been born here, like Tracey was, but it's home.

Armando: Excellent interview, guys!

(For more info and updates about the film, you may go to livelihoodmovie.com)