

The Rhythm for Editing Movies with Film Editor Matt Villa

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino Society with Owen Shapiro. In today's episode we have Matt Villa, a film editor whose commitment to the filming process has approved him the opportunity to collaborate on some of the finest International Film Productions. Matt won both the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Award and the Film Critics Circle of Australia Award for Best editing on his work on Baz Luhrmann big screen adaptation of the classic The Great Gatsby. Welcome to Kino Society Matt, would you mind telling us a bit about your background and what attracted you to do editing above other industry jobs,

Matt Villa 00:47

I think as a as a child who grew up in the 70s and 80s. And now it's a huge cliché to say that Star Wars was a big influence in me getting into the into storytelling, I think, I was always interested in our as loved films, or at Star Wars was the thing as you know, so many people before me who said that, you know, the, the bringing together of picture music and sound in such an extraordinary way really just do the mind with it as a young as a young sort of seven year old or eight year old or whatever. And, and I've just just loved it. And from that point, you know, I skipped over the whole, wanting to be an astronaut and wanting to be assigned in stage, and I've just always wanted to be in film. Because I've always loved storytelling, I've always been passionate, creative water. And I just was really attracted to the visual medium of film. As far as as far as what got me into editing, specifically, I just, you know, I always had a dream to be a director or writer and director, which, you know, that hasn't happened yet. I mean, was always thought to be that the closest thing to to have control over the storytelling process where you, you took all the elements and, and put them together in a in a in a narrative, which was always what I was really most interested in. And while I have the dreams that one day, the director's chair might be filmed by film by me, right now in the news is, that's what I'm on the most. When I when I first went to my other films, school I went to here in Australia, we, the first part of the course was was sampling doing a little sample of sound or cinematography or editing, we had to try them all. And I really loved them all. But, you know, as I say, similar telegraphy are very specialized thing. And sound is a very specialized thing. Whereas editing, if it feels like you're taking all of those elements, and and you get to kind of, you know, weave the story together. And that was what I was most interested in. So that's, that's, that's how the direction I mean,

Owen Shapiro 02:56

so what skills in particular needed to be an editor,

Matt Villa 03:00

probably the first thing that's the most important is a sense of rhythm. And by editing, there's very much a musicality to editing, that music obviously changes because you, you know, depending on what sort of film you're working on, what's the scene you're working on, the rhythm changes, but, but there's, there's a, there's a real need to be aware of what's propelling the scene forward. If it's an emotional scene, obviously, it's, you know, it's, it's not as as fast paced, but you really need to know where the emotion is. And, and, and what what gives you that emotion would be, you know, you might be on you

might be holding on a shot of the person talking, but just as importantly, it's holding on a shot with the person listening and seeing what the reaction is, and so on. In a similar sense, if it's an action scene, obviously, things get a little pricier, but you're always having to sort of grapple with that sense of, of keeping the audience engaged, without overwhelming them, but also without boring and, and I think, you know, you can, you can have courses, and you can have books and so on, but there is a certain sense of that, that just is within within the person that lets sense of rhythm. And that sense of timing, I think is is, is what helps sort of construct a story. The other the other big thing about being an editor, which is, you know, kind of unfortunate, I suppose, but it really is a lot about the the the political handling of arm, there's a lot of always a lot of big, big egos that are cutting room with producers and directors and so on, not necessarily bad egos just just, you know, big egos. And a lot of the editors job is is is arbitrating, you know, opinions and, and taking the best of the best of everyone's opinions and applying them so I'd say, Yeah, I use the word unfortunate. It's unfortunate. It's just a part of the job where it's probably, you know, 70% talent, and 30% probably called mouse nuts as to how to sort of handle the handle the, the various various characters that make their way into a cutting room.

Owen Shapiro 05:13

So what's your favorite thing about being an editor

Matt Villa 05:16

very much. So there's a thing that happens when you're cutting a film. Probably that probably right, if I can start with my least favorite part is the initial assembly, when you've got a load of footage that's just coming through the door from from the shoot. And you it's just that initial slog of, of putting together that first run, as similar to writing a first draft of a story, or even even when you sit down to write an email, you know, there's that kind of pretty, not, there's nothing more scary than being faced with a blank page. And similarly, there's nothing more scary than being faced with a blank screen, I guess, our blank timeline. But but one set slug is done and you've got everything kind of down. That's when the that's when the fun begins. Because you can go through and really start honing and refining the the live performances. And that's my, that's the most fun part is is is really exploring the performance of a character or an actor or scene or whatever it may be. And just honing it down until you you really confident that you've, you're telling the story in the best possible way. And then the other thing that I love is when you've got an editorial problem that you can't solve, and, and I call it my aha moment, and happens, there's lots of fields that happens where, you know, you're trying to solve a particular problem, or convey a particular piece of storytelling, and it just eludes you. But then, you know, we'll just come to you. And you'll realize that the, there's a perfect pair of shots that click together, or a perfect sequence of shots that sort of go together. And that's when you really go, aha, that's how I do it. And that's what I, that's what I love, that's what I cherish. And that always happens. There's always a difficult scene, and there's generally speaking out a way around it and just sort of sort of sitting, sit and explore it. And as long as you have the time to do so, you know that the right solution may not necessarily really, I was definitely would never be the only solution. But but the hopefully the the right solution will will come to you. And that's what I love. I love those of those basic photos, love the the conveying of the best story that you possibly can tell.

Owen Shapiro 07:35

So you already mentioned the Star Wars movies A while back. But do you have any favorite movie in particular? Oh,

Matt Villa 07:45

there's so many. I would probably say I'm for it. My problem I go to if I can say a couple. I'll say that Back to the Future to me is almost the perfect film. It's the perfect combination of performance, and action and storytelling, a pace and heart. And I just think it's just a it's it's very, very close to being a perfect film, I would have to say that I love and this meant there's so many bits. I love stand with the film stand by me. Because I think that I think one of the keys to having her favorite film is something that really speaks to you personally, and the film, The Rob Reiner film stand by me, really, the heart of that really speaks to me and some of my experiences growing up even though even though it was an American film, and I'm an Australian, but there was this Yeah, some of those sort of childhood angst and childhood sort of concerns and friendships and stuff are pretty universal. And I really love that film and other films that springs to mind is, as I mentioned to you before the Shawshank Redemption, that's, that's the film that really strikes me as as how you can be very, very considered, and not necessarily fast paced in your storytelling, your editing, but really just striking, extraordinary balance of, of, of emotion and an engagement in a film. But there are just three here and there's so many little ones that are even ones that springs to mind right now.

Owen Shapiro 09:24

So you're a fan of Stephen King.

Matt Villa 09:27

He played a Stephen King. Yeah. Big fan, Stephen King, actually. Yeah, right. Yeah. To to Stephen King films right there. Yeah, very much so.

Owen Shapiro 09:36

So what does the movie need for you to say what a good job of editing

Matt Villa 09:41

funnily enough, I would have to say that if you can't see the editing, you consider that a great job of editing. And by that I mean if you feel if you feel emotionally fulfilled without feeling you like you've been sort of pushed in a certain direction. Or in the case of say, like an action film and actually feel if you feel geographically grounded. Now there are so many, a lot of a lot of the, a lot of the sins of a lot of editors these days is a good editing means fast editing. And that's just not true. And, you know, I think of any number, and I'm not dissing on Marvel Marvel films, or any of those sort of, you know, Transformers films or anything like that, but a lot of those films fall into the trap of, they cut so fast, and so busily, that you've got no idea where you are geographically, and you can do that. So you can sometimes take you out of the movie and, and, and confuse you, I think, if you walk away from a film, having felt that you knew exactly what you were doing, or where sorry, where you were, and what you're feeling, and what you needed to feel without being pushed in any of those directions. I think that's a that's a great thing. And, and so that's, that's why my answer probably is, if you can't notice the editing, that's, that's the sign of a low cut film. Because it means that you've been completely immersed in the story. And you've been, you've been obviously taken for the ride by the editor and the director and the filmmakers, but not

felt that you've been, you've been sort of left sort of wanting for more or felt confused, or jarred as to how you're meant to meant to feel.

Owen Shapiro 11:22

Yeah, I absolutely agree about modern blockbusters or like superhero movies, so it's one of my biggest gripes with them is just how fast they go. And it's annoying. It's very annoying. Are there any editors that you admire, follow?

Matt Villa 11:37

Again, so many? I've got a lot of close friends that are that are wonderful editors, but probably the is those people that spring to mind with that who formed collaborations with directors like Robert Zemeckis often used he's retired now, but he often used Arthur Schmidt as a as his editor. For all of those films that I love so much Back to the Future and for Roger Ebert and Forrest Gump and Castaway and so on. They had a great collaboration. Obviously, the Steven Spielberg Markel Khan collaboration is a wonderful one. There's a very, there's a wonderful editor who I also considered to be the friend is Paul Hirsch. He cut Yes, you cut star or one of the analysts on Star Wars, he'll say cut Ferris Bueller's Day Off and some of those great films of the 80s and before the first Mission Possible film, he's he's a wonderful editor. There's so many there's results of Australia and he does Gil bulcock is, is who I know, personally is a great editor as well. Yeah, isn't there's there's a few, but they're there just to name some of them.

Owen Shapiro 12:41

What about directories, you have any favorite ones of those,

Matt Villa 12:44

I will probably definitely have to say Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis again, I feel like a broken record, sorry. A quote, I really like Rob Reiner, as a director, Christopher Nolan, obviously, you know, baseload and having a voice was based on a number of times. And I think, apart from getting on very well with him and working well together, and I think he's one of the few guys that not not rare by any means. But one of the few real otters that sort of heavies, a distinct style and a very recognizable style. And, and I think that's so that's so that's a good thing, you know, you know, you don't necessarily have to have a director, distinguishable star, but it's nice when that when they they George Miller's another one, you know, who have that kind of sort of unique vision,

Owen Shapiro 13:30

I guess, is there a project that you would consider your best work, there's

Matt Villa 13:34

probably a few for different reasons, but I think I share and I've loved every job I've ever done. There's, there's very few times where I've walked away from a job not having had a great time with both the people on the audit or the project. But I think that one of the film, one of the films that I'm most proud of, I think, is a film that you may or may not have seen called predestination. It was a spirit Brothers movie with Ethan Hawke, and Sarah snook in it. And it's a time travel film. And I think what I'm the most proud of with that film is it was a, it was a wonderfully written script by the Spirit brothers. But there are some

challenges in the cutting room, just with its with the nature of the film, and if you haven't seen it, and you're gonna see it, I won't give too much away because it's, it's got a massive, massive spider at the very end of it, which is, which we give too much away, but it involves time travel. And it was very, it was quite a challenge because there was there was parts of the story that needed to give away enough so the audience were confused, or there you needed to hold back enough so they weren't ever ahead of the game. And that was quite a challenge and another sort of rare you know, several films you know, would face that but there was the one that I've worked on that there really needed that kind of correct balance to make it work and, and I feel really proud of that of the way that came out. Yeah and other film that I'm there's a couple of other As I read Great Gatsby I'm quite proud of just because it was such a big job and to sort of wrangle all that into a into a manageable film, I think it was, was, was a challenge, which I really enjoyed, what a diviner which was directed by Russell Crowe, you know, some, some directors are particularly collaborative and let you do what you do best. And Russell was a very, very wonderful collaborator, but very generous collaborator. So he was very, he was very sort of, even though he definitely it was off his vision, he very much handed over and allowed me to sort of make a lot of creative choices, which I'm really proud of. So yeah, there's a few I mean, but I'm proud of every film that so there's just a couple of sort of highlights, I guess.

Owen Shapiro 15:46

Do you ever go to the set of a movie?

Matt Villa 15:49

Yeah, quite often, generally speaking, you're nearby when they're shooting. So you can just to sort of visit set, even if even if for no other reason to say hello but But often, to show the director some some rough assemblies of what he's shooting so that you may, you may assemble a scene and realize that they need to get something further to shoot something further, so you can go down and talk to them about that, which I really love the hustle and bustle set. In fact, the film we're working on right now the bears is Elvis movie is being shot in another state to where I am, and our borders are closed down here in Australia, so I can't be up there. I'm working remotely and I'm kind of missing it. kind of miss being certain you said

Owen Shapiro 16:32

that hustle and bustle said, you have any future projects that are coming up?

Matt Villa 16:36

I will I'll be involved in all this. Now the obvious biopic for for a while, we've just about the English shoot, we've got one more month of shoot to go will be that a year in post production. So it's kind of filled the dance card for now. And then what lies beyond that?

Owen Shapiro 16:53

A while back, I asked you about what things you like you'd like to see in movies in terms of editing. But are there any movies in particular that made you think this is bad editing?

Matt Villa 17:07

Oh, yeah. Wow. Um, I will I think probably Yeah, similar to what we both mentioned earlier, just versus just those films, and they're becoming more and more Now, unfortunately, where, you know, I would have to sort of, say, the Transformers films for as an example not not to pick them out, singularly. But as an example of things that you, I, you're watching this on all the recent Justice League film, where you just watch them, and you kind of get to a point where it's, it's sensory overload, editing is a lot of editing is about finding ebbs and flows in stories. I think, as we both kind of mentioned earlier, when talking about bad ending, and I don't want to be insulting to the people working on these shows. But I think things like transformers, or, you know, the last Justice League film as an example, where we're just the, you watch them, and you've just, you're exhausted, like the business, there's a sensory overload, that just happens. And the trick with anything is, you know, it's all about everything, you've got to find ends and flows. And you can't just be ramped ramp up the energy 211 and read it there because the audience gets tired, and they get exhausted. And they they've got no idea what's going on. And, and I think, yeah, you leave a lot of these models for superhero films. Again, not to pick on them, but that they are sort of guilty of it, where you, it's just you've got no they have these fights, and you have no idea what's going on, you don't know where you are geographically and and it's just too fast. And you've got to, you got to help the audience alone. Don't feed the audience, what you do is your responsibility to let them be able to give them the tools to follow the story. And a lot of those forms failing to me that you've got no idea where you are, or it's just so chaotic, that it's just exhausting. You tend to tune out after a while. So I think yeah, definitely is bad. When you you're not giving the audience the chance to to keep up.

Owen Shapiro 19:08

Yeah, a lot of times those movies just look like a mess of CGI everywhere.

Matt Villa 19:13

Yeah. The third act of any third act of any of those superior films is just to CGI blobs fighting each other generally.

Owen Shapiro 19:21

And so what advice would you give to an aspiring film editor?

Matt Villa 19:27

I think probably it's a difficult one because these days back in the old days, not to sound old. But back when I started, it was it was a little easier to to ask an editor. Can I come in? And can I, you know, sit behind you and just watch and watch what you do and learn because you were you were sitting in front of a Big Film Editing steenbeck or Kim. And there was you could sort of sit and watch and engage but these days it's so special closed in and you know, sort of computer driven, so there isn't that sort of, it's a little bit more difficult to find engagement with an editor, if you're, if you're just sitting in the room with them. That having been said, I think the best thing to do if you can is to, is to cut stuff, it's so easy these days to shoot something on your phone or shoot something on your, on your camera or whatever and, and just sit in and Tinker away with it yourself will sort of get you involved on a personal level and, and sort of practice practicing the craft, then on a professional level, you know, seek out films, seek out editor's and see if you can, if you can get an internship with them, it's very, it's very difficult these days to immediately say, Can I come and be your assistant because that that's a skill set unto itself. But if

you can get onto film as an attachment, or as an intern, or even even contacted in editor as a mentor, just to sort of talk to them about how they got into the business. And it's such a small world, even even on this international scale that that you and I are speaking on now, you know, even then, like there's lots of lots of editors and lots of assistant editors that I've met over the years who are in America. And, and so it actually is quite a small world, the editorial of film production, what our film feature film world. And so it's, you know, if you ring someone up and make yourself known to them, and you know, you you remember those people, then people will ring me and say, Do you know of any assistance or any interns and if, if someone's rang me up, have their name and I can put them forward. So so you know, go out there and, and, and make yourself known and Ring ring up people and and see if you can find an internship with her on a film or whatever, that's sort of the best the best advice I can give him. Yeah, unfortunately, you know, again, there's a lot of great assistant editors out there who are who are looking at becoming editors. So there's, there's always someone who's trying to move up. But if you can get yourself in the door, then you'll you'll be part of that circle and you can move on with them. Definitely on a personal level, if you if you want to practice cutting really easy to do these days, you can, you can shoot whatever you want on so many different formats and cut them on your laptop. So um, so the practice is that's the best way to practice

Owen Shapiro 22:19

by Emily works, my listeners find you and connect with you.

Matt Villa 22:22

I'm not a big Facebook user or social media user To be honest, I do have a website on Matt vila.com you can see what I've done and contact me through there as metadata.com

Owen Shapiro 22:36

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