

## SAFFRON BOROUGHS

by

Alec Whittle

It was the summer of 1999 and I had just moved back to Seattle after studying at the Northwest Film Center in Portland. Among other things, I practiced screenwriting under the eye of the unapologetically blunt Roger Margolis, who wrote the original *Death Race 2000*. He used to stand in front of the class and chain smoke with the windows closed while dropping gravelly insights in our laps. Every student was to submit five pages from a script and be subjected to the fucking gauntlet! The thing is, I didn't have a story. I wasn't sure what to write about. I only knew I was drawn to creativity and to people who expressed themselves in the manner of a peacock with their brain feathers out in the wind. Maybe they thought about life on a deeper level than myself and I wanted to know how to access that electric viaduct.

I had dropped out of college a few years earlier after earning a football scholarship. A decision I still question heavily to this day, but my 18-year-old self was never going to stay in that place. I was grateful for the chance and the half-decent athleticism I was gifted with, yet I couldn't help but feel that the valor we attributed to players was somewhat misplaced, overshadowing other important measures of success. One dude used to walk around and spit on everything as he got bricked up for a game. Huh. I'm not sure this is for me. Also, for students of the gridiron, our offense used the tight end as a motion man, then sent him up the middle as a lead blocker for the running back. I was tall and skinny in relation and consistently got trucked by big, neck-roll-wearing, snot bubble-inducing chaps, so I went on my way.

Back to Mr. Margolis. I penned a scene involving a man and woman entangled in an insurance fraud scheme; something about the floor of the grocery store slick with olive oil. Profound shit. I was dismantled by my peers and Mr. Margolis as he heaved a haze of burned tobacco and insults in my eye. I once heard Prince tell a person who stepped on stage to play guitar with him that he was "Good. Good and terrible!" That resonated at that moment, but it galvanized me. I decided I fucking loved the idea of becoming a screenwriter.

After my return to Seattle, I found myself waiting tables at Umberto's, an Italian eatery nestled in Pioneer Square, just across from the soon-to-be-demolished Kingdome. The night they brought the old grey grampus down remains etched in my memory; an unforgettable evening spent sipping bourbon with a spirited Bulgarian, but that's a tale for another time. It was during this stint that I crossed paths with Mike B., a fellow server hailing from Jacksonville. He lived in a tiny studio on Broadway and John, right across from the iconic Rite-aid; its neon lights dyeing the night. He had a resilient rubber tree plant and a 12-inch black and white TV that played VHS reruns of classics like *Seinfeld* and *The Sopranos* on a loop.

At Umberto's, we'd serve up truckloads of cannelloni that fell a bit short of gourmet. I mean it was shit, but our patrons, fervent Mariner fans, didn't seem to mind. On a memorable occasion, Alex Rodriguez rapped on our door just before opening, craving a pre-game Caesar salad. I didn't hesitate and disappeared into the kitchen before the staff was fully geared up, determined to make one myself.

I was in uncharted territory but knew this was a narrative I couldn't pass up. I've always been curious about his opinion of my unscripted culinary creation. I think I went heavy on the anchovies. My bad, Alex.

Post-shift, we'd venture off to Temple Billiards, chain-smoking Dave's Lights, while Mike invariably beat my ass in nine ball. I should have been drawn to the likes of darts or ping-pong, no gladiators and all, but I lacked the concentration. From there, we'd ascend to the Jade Pagoda on Broadway, hammering vodka cranberries at prices that matched the ambiance. You could have lively discussions with the locals about the disappearing charm of Seattle, (little did we know) or you could go full wallflower near the jukebox and let the dinge wash over you.

Mike would effortlessly command attention from the crowd, reciting lines from a vast repertoire of films ranging from classics like *A Place in The Sun* to *Shampoo*, from *East of Eden* to *Serpico*. This skill fascinated me, as my own memory functioned quite differently. Perhaps it was a matter of comprehension skills, as a few teachers had pointed out along the way, but unless I had just watched a movie moments before our conversation, I couldn't recall one shard of @#&?.

Mike B was wiry and high-energy, his quirks added a unique allure to our friendship. As I mentioned earlier, I always found myself drawn to those who perceived the world through a different lens. He introduced me to the works of Henry Miller and the evocative poetry of Kenneth Patchen. He held a fervor for Jeff Buckley and Rimbaud, Patty Smyth and Nick Drake. He had one picture on his wall, and that was of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, and I couldn't help but feel he might have been better suited to the nineteen sixties. He embodied the spirit of a monk or a beat in his own unique way. We both shared a disdain for the notion that material possessions defined accomplishment. He once punched a guy for telling him that he needed more "stuff," in his apartment. So, maybe not a monk.

Despite a college degree from Florida State and having delved into the financial world for a stint, he grew disenchanted with the clutches of capitalism. He embarked on a trip to the Bay Area, a quest for the expansive beauty of Big Sur, perhaps. Eventually, he found his way to Seattle, reuniting with a band of old friends from the southern lands who were well-versed in the art of dissipation.

I wish I could have conveyed at the time my appreciation for works such as Robert Shaw's monologue about the Indianapolis going down in *Jaws* and the gritty realism of *French Connection* or the stomp-on-your-neck energy of *Mean Streets*. But honestly, I liked *James and the Giant Peach*, and that one movie... with... you know... Harvey Keitel... *Smoke*! But I knew I wanted to be involved in movies. One evening, at a bar on First Hill, called Vito's, the notion struck Mike and me: let's create our own film.

Why not? I'd dabbled with Super 8 reels in Portland, and Mike's creativity knew no bounds, so the stars aligned. Jesus. Let's think about this for a moment... ahh fuck it. Pooling our resources from the restaurant, we scraped together enough to acquire a hi-8 video camera, setting the stage for our venture. Our chosen script, Mike's brainchild *Polyphony*, would serve as the foundation. Yet, there remained a pivotal question: where to find the actress crazy enough?

A co-worker of ours happened to know a girl who had acted and was on the verge of graduating from the University of Washington, although her plans leaned towards an overseas adventure propelled by literature. Despite this, she graciously agreed to meet with us. That's when Anna entered our story. The initial encounter took place at Charlie's, nestled at the intersection of Harvard and Broadway.

Mike, armed with his Southern, Irish-Catholic charm, engaged Anna in a discussion that traversed realms from Anais Nin to classic cocktails. Their connection solidified over the course of that first *old-fashioned*.

We went big that night--we were making a movie after all. In my mind, the people around us were all talking about it! I guess I was going to shoot the thing. That feels right. Fuck me. I had no idea what we were getting into. Her spirit was infectious, and she and Mike talked about a loose affiliation to a love story that was basically a Patchen poem. He had a way with words, and she matched his flare and intelligence. It was fun to watch.

Anna went on her way and Mike and I got good and pissed. A chance encounter with some haughty acquaintances further propelled us forward – we proudly announced that we were in the midst of making a feature and had just cast our lead actress! The promise to email Anna a copy of the script hung in the air, but there was a small problem; Mike lacked a computer, and his script existed solely on a wine-stained, yellow legal pad. Undeterred, we returned to the apartment with the rubber tree and a timeworn futon salvaged from the building, to forge a plan.

Our decision was unanimous: we'd commence with the party scene! You may wonder, what party scene? Precisely. The particulars were insignificant; Anna's willingness to dive in headfirst prevailed. Mike assumed the role of the male lead – a character we had yet to define. Fortunately, a cohort from Pioneer Square graciously offered her apartment as the backdrop for our “little video.”

I spent \$500 on renting a sound recorder, and some essential lighting equipment, and armed myself with a handful of Hi-8 tapes along with a trusty tool bag. In my own eyes, I felt the part – ready to take on the role of filmmaker with gusto. The night of the shoot, Mike perched on the apartment ledge, quietly contemplating the script. He was embodying the spirit of Brando in *On the Waterfront*, but his eyes told a different story. He'd never tried to memorize lines before, let alone act.

At that moment, I sensed a mutual realization that we had crossed the Rubicon. About five minutes later, we collectively decided to toss the script aside, never to resurface it again. We were going all in on improvisation, not only for the party scene but for the entirety of the film. When we shared this approach with Anna, she took it in stride, exhibiting the poise of a true rock star. Little did we know her status would soon transition to an actual star, a full-fledged one, a few weeks down the road.

About thirty people showed up to be extras for some free booze. I hung a few lights with some red gels to give the place a sultry vibe, at least that was my intention. We were making it up on the fly. Over the ensuing hours, a dance of flirtations unfolded. Mike and Anna engaged in their own charming film version of a pas de deux, while other revelers tried their hand at wooing Anna. In between “takes,” Mike observed from his corner, puzzled by the preoccupation with appearances—though I must clarify, this pertained to the film's narrative, not reality. Or perhaps the lines between the two had begun to blur. We orchestrated a moment where all the partygoers gazed into the camera, asking the perennial question, “How do I look?” in order to keep them engaged. As the night wore on, restlessness swept through the crowd, discerning our lack of a concrete plan. One by one, they headed for the bar.

The following day, disaster struck as my trusty, albeit beleaguered, Toyota Celica decided to stage an engine fire. I miraculously coasted it into a friend's driveway in Ballard. Adrenaline way up, I barged through the house--scrounging up a pitcher of orange juice from the fridge. With equal parts determination and urgency, I managed to douse the flames, though not without sacrificing my leather jacket in the process.

That night we reconvened, our backdrop was an empty warehouse, and our crew had whittled down to a tight-knit quintet, featuring Mike, Anna, myself, my friend Jay on sound, and our friend Antra, whose role was to question what in the actual fuck we were doing. As for the specifics of our nocturnal escapade, they remain a mystery to me. But, true to form, Anna approached the creative process with unerring trust. God bless her commitment to the cause.

As the initial shooting fervor waned, a moment of truth arrived. We sat down with Anna, laying bare our artistic naivety. She told us that she had known all along that we had no idea what we were doing, but appreciated our... um... "passion?" Undaunted, we rallied and sketched out a storyline: a tale of a young man and woman, savoring the dwindling days of summer before she embarked on a European odyssey as a budding writer. What a stretch. Furthermore, we opted for a role reversal, with me stepping into the shoes of the male lead, a decision that, in retrospect, only compounded the complexity of that inaugural weekend of shooting. Regrettably, the footage from that fateful night never saw the light of day, vanishing into the annals of time shortly thereafter.

We slipped into a kind of enchanting reverie. Scenes sprang to life, featuring sunflowers, quaint churches, and even the grandeur of an actual stage--stepping onto the scaffolded boards of the Egyptian Theater, Anna effortlessly launched into some stone-cold *Shakespeare*. To the workers' eyes, we seemed like we belonged. For a few moments, we did not feel the effects of the world. There was a Patchen poem that we were trying to emulate that went: "She knows it's raining, and my room is warm, but she is proud and beautiful, and I have no money." There was a little hand-drawn picture on the page of a chair and a bed in a warm room surrounded by rain. I would come to understand that this one page embodied Mike's outlook on the entire world.

Our days were filled with spots of Anna and me, engaged in games of cards, glasses of wine, spontaneous dances, strolls through the arboretum, and improv dialogue that wasn't always great, to say the least. Anna's patience with me, a novice in this realm, was a true blessing. In our minds, we managed to craft moments of cinematic beauty, a testament to Mike B.'s reverence for the film *Contempt* - a masterpiece he'd revisited a staggering forty times. Mike's appreciation for art was anything but casual; it was a deep, impassioned affair. This blissful creative flow persisted until a pivotal day, when Anna reached out, urging us to visit her parents' home.

I picked up Mike, anticipation coursing through our veins as he held our trusty camera, eager to capture any potential moments. Upon our arrival in Edmonds, Anna shared her recent triumph - a short film that had caught the eye of a discerning casting agent. This fortuitous turn of events led her to Los Angeles, where she would audition for a role in a bona fide Hollywood movie. And not just any movie, mind you, but, precisely, a *Scary Movie*. Anna had clinched the lead role of Cindy Campbell and come morning, Keenan Ivory Wayans himself would dispatch a town car to ferry her to the airport.

Mike and I found ourselves in a state of mild disbelief, but deep down, we were genuinely thrilled for Anna. With a sense of purpose, Mike flicked on the camera, capturing a poignant farewell scene. It was a moment of art mirroring reality. We expressed our heartfelt gratitude for her kindness. After all, she had spent time goofing off with two big-screen dreamers armed with nothing but a video camera and boundless enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Anna Faris was on the cusp of a burgeoning career in the professional film world, a realm far removed from our experimental pursuits. As dawn broke on her departure the following day, reality bore down on our whimsical story.

After a few days of contemplation, we resolved to see our film through to the end. Moreover, we set our sights on achieving a runtime of at least 70 minutes—an essential threshold for consideration in the feature category at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival. Yeah, I said Sundance. Why think small? This ambitious goal led us to infuse the project with even more experimental elements. Over the course of several weeks, we hunkered down at my brother's place, where he generously provided us access to his editing software. With surgical precision, we trimmed away the really weird shit, leaving behind a remarkably lengthy film devoid of spoken dialogue—a fact that both baffled and inspired us. To infuse dynamism, we incorporated an extensive nine-minute tracking shot featuring Anna navigating the bustling Pike Place Market, entirely unaccompanied. Then it was just a bunch of montages, collages of montages, and yet more montages, occasionally punctuated by the resonant voice of Kenneth Patchen, reciting his poetry against the backdrop of a black screen!

We reached the 70-minute mark and submitted our creation to Sundance, buoyed by a genuine belief in our chances. Reflecting on it now, that memory still brings a smile to my face. The time had come for the premiere! We secured the Little Theater tucked away on Capitol Hill and extended invitations to around a hundred attendees. However, a scheduling snafu arose, as the venue had inadvertently double-booked, hosting the eminent screenwriter Stewart Stern for a discussion on his acclaimed work, *Rebel Without a Cause*. Fate would later lead me to study under Stewart, and I'd regale him with the tale of that evening. His signature side grin and the spark in his eyes remain etched in my memory.

The second attempt went off without a hitch, and we unveiled the film in its entirety—70 minutes of uncharted flow state. Surprisingly, people seemed less restless than one might expect (again, free booze). Post-screening, reactions were a mixed bag. The more discerning crowd, including the person who graciously lent us her apartment for the shoot, appeared visibly taken aback. She departed without a word. Their expectations had been set for a "real" movie. A few of our friends offered encouraging pats on the back before leaving, their expressions tinged with bemusement at what they had just witnessed.

My family was supportive, yet they pondered the meaning behind it all. Anna had deputized a friend to watch the film on her behalf, and her feedback was succinct: we had misspelled her name, echoing Ferris Bueller, not Faris. A momentary pang of regret, but we soldiered on. That night, we raised our glasses at the Jade Pagoda, toasting to--well, I'm still not entirely sure. But we reveled in the fun, shared some delirious laughs, and savored moments of inspiration. Technically, we had birthed a motion picture. Perhaps they simply weren't ready for us? Ha! Oddly, we were rejected by Sundance, but we regrouped, and oh, how could I almost forget...the film bore the title *Saffron Burrows*, yes, the very name of the actress. It made as much sense as the rest of the trip.

In time, we shaved it down to about 20 minutes, and it actually found a home at a couple of lower-tier film festivals. Anna managed to make it to the Los Angeles screening after wrapping *Scary Movie*. It was a midday showing, and if memory serves, there were all of eleven people there—a fitting turnout, in a way. Anna expressed her appreciation, though it was evident she now inhabited a vastly different world. Our paths would cross only one more time after that day.

Mike maintained contact with her for a while. Years later, he and I penned a campy comedy centered around two intrepid souls determined to track down the actress who had departed in the middle of their film, and finally finish it. I still believe it's a good concept for a movie! We even managed to make some headway with the assistant to the assistant to her agent at the time before hitting a roadblock.

The moral: Just create! If you don't have a story, smash something into existence. If it turns out to be an absolute aberration, then the story behind it becomes the thing! So, get out there and let your peacock brains fly! Of course, a well-crafted script certainly helps if film is your chosen medium. Oh, and don't stop. I'm forty-nine and just optioned my first feature script a year ago.

That cherished little window of time will forever hold a special place in my heart. And one more footnote: only a handful of individuals ever glimpsed the 70-minute version after that fateful night, and it, too, vanished into the ether, along with the footage from the party scene. As I sit here, gazing at my reflection on the laptop screen after all these years, I'm left pondering a simple question: "How do I look?"