

Production Notes: *By Hook or By Crook*

“This was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And I’ve done a lot of hard things.”

—Harry Dodge, Director, Writer, Actor, Editor and Co-Producer

“This thing was a monster. A beautiful, fucking monster.”

—Silas Howard, Director, Writer, Actor, Producer

“*By Hook or By Crook* nearly broke my marriage, swallowed my savings and fried my every last nerve. Long live *By Hook or By Crook*.”

—Stanya Kahn, Actor, Contributing Writer, Wife of Harry Dodge

(Laughs and shakes head) —Steak House, Producer

“We really wanted to take some risks. We wanted to see what we could get away with imaginistically but also with language. In theater and performance, I’ve been able to push limits and create unusual spectacles if I want to. I wanted to see how much we could do that with a movie. I’m most inspired by people who stray from the pack and take chances. I’d much rather see a piece of art fail trying to do something I haven’t seen before, than succeed at doing something that’s already been done. And underneath all that, or maybe right on top—I want to make work that touches people’s hearts. Corny as that might sound, I’m interested in the human spirit. I want to do things that make people feel something. And that could be ugly, hard, uplifting, completely tragic or hilarious. Hopefully all of the above.” —Dodge

“We’ve always hoped this project would reflect the creativity and actual valor of the community of people we came from. And I think it does. From the get-go, this movie had its roots in our extended family of weirdos in San Francisco. Harry and I ran our own café and art space for seven years, and it was here that so many outsiders and freaks found a home. And regular guys too for that matter. We started writing our first script on cigarette breaks. And in the end, it was a lot of the people who had supported the café and participated in the events we sponsored, that came through and signed up. Signed up for what, none of us even knew. We had never made a movie. But we never really thought we couldn’t. I guess we’ve found that thinking like that doesn’t get you very far.” —Howard

“Three days into shooting, we’re huddled in the soggy living room of a sacked out house on the edge of a dairy farm, a couple hours southeast of San Francisco. No heat, no working toilet, broken windows with freezing rain coming in. Bovine flatulence, stale urine and mold is all we can smell. Glamorous. I come in with a paper plate full of sandwiches thrown together in the RV (even our craft guy bagged out on this location) and squat down next to Harry. There’s nowhere dry to sit. Harry is crouched in front of the monitor, which is propped precariously on a 5-gallon bucket. Gagging intermittently from the mildew and damp, Harry calls directions in to the tiny room where “Shy” (Silas Howard) paces, revving into an emotional scene. There’s only space in the room for the DP (Ann T. Rosetti), the boom operator (Brian Dettor) and the sound mixer (Jen Covens). Every now and then the monitor shorts out and Harry and Jen swap positions, so that Harry can watch the scene through Rosetti’s LCD on the camera. Only a few of us have really done this before. It’s cold and it’s quiet and everyone’s working their knuckles off. Bill Basquin, our gaffer-extraordinaire, is dodging puddles and running cable from the RV, while camera B (Sarah Kennedy) is hopping cow patties with second AD Sini Anderson trying to catch a bull and heifer humping on Super 8. Beth Ferguson, the first AD is chain smoking with fingerless gloves. She can’t get in to the room where the scene is happening and every time we hear “Cut”, she rushes the door and hollers “C’mon you guys, wrap it up.” If it wasn’t for Beth, we’d probably all have caught pneumonia. Steak House, our work-horse producer, made sure

hot coffee arrived somehow. And spaghetti. Finally risking a seat on a saggy mattress, I find a rusty rifle underneath, forgotten by a ranch hand who seems to have left in a hurry. No mind. Rubbing our fingers and grumbling, Sini and I squish together in front of the monitor—we've been called on to stand in while Harry and Silas do scenes together. Apart from this, technically, I could stay in the slightly warmer RV. I don't have any scenes to do at this location. But we've come this far, working and re-working the script, gathering the funds, handing our lives over to this film, and we are now like a small machine. There aren't really enough hands to do the work. If you aren't acting, you're hauling lights, fetching coffee or holding the boom. Or scouting emergency locations, sewing torn costumes, and puffing shiny noses dripping in the cold. Ok, bring on the violins. But really, it is deeply moving to look around and see all these sturdy people, focused and working for free. I was on set for just about every scene of this movie. It is truly a love child. A love/hate child." —Kahn

"When Harry and Silas first pitched the project to me back in 1998 it was obvious they were going to make a film that was utterly unique," says Jenni Olson, director of entertainment & e-commerce at PlanetOut Partners, Inc. "I jumped at the chance to be a consulting producer on *By Hook or By Crook* knowing that people would walk out of movie theaters around the world saying, 'I have never seen anything like this!' It's a powerful, character-driven movie, a spectacular showcase for the charisma, talent and inventiveness of Harry and Silas," she adds. "The film is chock-full of brilliant details, and these guys are cinematic heroes for a generation of gender misfits who have never before been represented on screen."

In order to support themselves during the years spent writing three scripts, Harry Dodge and Silas Howard left the coffeehouse/[performance space they had been running, and became garbage men; professional haulers to be precise. Messiahs of junk removal. "Contractors would call up 'S&H HAULING' expecting a couple of hulking musclemen to show up and we two little scruffy daggers would jump down from our huge '62 Chevy pickup. The guys at the dump loved it, they had never seen anything like us." explain Dodge and Howard. "Although, at first, unable to afford dump fees, we drove around industrial lots late at night, after writing all day, looking for "free" places to leave our non-toxic garbage."

When they finally finished the first draft of *By Hook or By Crook*, the dot com craze had firmly gained hold of San Francisco and the few artists who hadn't been evicted were now making money. "They wanted to do something meaningful with their cash and we provided them with that opportunity. The timing was crucial: We were pre-"dot com-post." In a sense Microsoft, a company whose name means small and not very hard, funded our movie. In reality, it took a small army of San Francisco artists, rock-n-rollers, queers, hairdressers and business owners to actualize the making of *By Hook or By Crook*. This was raw, down-home filmmaking made possible by a scintillating, generous and talented community," the two explain emphatically.

And every resource was tapped. Working bi-coastally between San Francisco and New York, Dodge and Howard's previous experience in the art and music world landed them a cameo from rock-n-roll hero Joan Jett. Joan read the script and called offering inspiration and support. She agreed to be a part of the film, to appear in a "stolen" shot, and showed up "on set" (the parking lot of a Brooklyn Costco), bald with a suitcase full of wigs. "As long as you don't make me wear a dress," Joan said, cutting up as she put on actor/writer Stanya Kahn's shirt and leather jacket. Dodge: "We got set up and started shooting but this little security guard guy kept buzzing around on a golf cart yelling at us, 'You can't shoot toward the building! You can't shoot the Costco sign!' Joan would just smile and wave and act like we were gonna shoot toward the street, but as soon as the guy buzzed off, she would jump back into place laughing. Every so often she would say, "Oh god here he comes again, let's move." And she would act innocent and smile at the guy. No one tried to get special permission by telling him who she was." Howard: "Truly a star for the people." Dodge: "Joan is punk rock to the core."

"The first time I read the script, I thought of *Midnight Cowboy* and it's gritty realism," says Ann T. Rossetti, the DP. (GO FISH) "*By Hook or By Crook* presents a world that is usually invisible, a world that lives and breathes and co-exists alongside, or under the ground of mainstream culture. It's about people creating their own cultures. And about the desires and needs that move all people."

For Dodge, Howard, and the team behind *By Hook or By Crook*, the process of making the film mirrored the story in it's against-all-odds triumph. From day one, the crew was a rock-steady bunch, hard workers with a lot of good faith. They braved all-nighters and the unforgiving San Francisco damp with pastries and good humor. They climbed abandoned supermarkets in the pouring rain to hang a huge, unwieldy, homemade "Cost-Lo" sign. The actor playing the security guard had to explain to the real cops that it was a student film. Another night, Brian the boom man had to explain to the cops that nothing was missing, when a crippled guy on one crutch was caught trying to steal the sound equipment at a remote location. At a new location, Dodge had to confront six giant teenagers and ask them to stop playing basketball in the gym above the "set" which the crew only had access to for a half-hour. On yet another notoriously late night, House and associate producer Cross stood in a thicket, in the rain, in the dark with a shoddy flashlight waiting to catch the flying bowling bin "Billie" would hurl out the open window. Similarly, super-trooper and ultra crafty prop master Cindy Mah huddled behind the façade of a soda machine at 3:00 AM, blowing on a cigarette and lighting non-dairy creamer to make the change slot crackle and smoke while the actors tried to "rob" the thing with super soaker squirt guns. With no budget for a real soda machine, Mah rigged lights behind the front of one. When the "Shy", "Valentine," and "Billie" manage to short the thing, Mah pushed hundreds of quarters through the change hole with frozen fingers while the actors squealed with glee.

From a dusty diner in a farm town to a Doggy Diner in the middle of the city, location manager Shannon Amos wrangled free permission to shoot, with her warm southern twang, trustworthy grin and steel-trap determination. Stalwart producer House organized the 64 locations (and moves), with still enough spark left to plunge clogged toilets and nail down insurance in place of permits. "Which came in handy on day two, when the borrowed, cherry black '69 T-Bird skidded across three lanes of busy freeway with two actors, the DP and a sound person inside!" House reminisces with a nervous laugh. "Seemed like everyday there was something pulling us all closer, even though the stress could threaten to rip us apart. People really stepped up to the plate, which you have to do on such a renegade project."

People doubled up, even tripled up on work loads and roles. "Stanya Kahn, our other star and contributing writer," says House, "also acted as fill-in director when Harry and Silas were both on camera. She was a stylist and even boom operator. We were blessed with good will."

And all the good will is paying off.

After the San Francisco premiere of *By Hook or By Crook*, Howard recounts, "This very young punk girl came up to me and said 'I've been waiting my whole life for a movie like this!' It touched me so profoundly, I felt like saying 'Thank you so much for telling me that, because it took us practically your whole life to make this movie'."

"It practically COST our lives!" Dodge adds, prompting a final, harrowing story of near disaster on the evening of picture lock.

Dodge and Howard tell the tale, tag-teaming easily, with their trademark charm and emphasis:

"OK. It's warm night in urban Oakland, California. The crickets are dead, the tires are screeching and a supernatural wind is rattling not only the windows but the entire decrepit little house where we've been editing. We're hunched over the Mac Slab, finishing our edit. We're

finally almost done. Our pals next door, who've loaned us this empty apartment-cum-editing-suite, are waiting for us to finish so they can start the sound mix. Killer Banshee Studios, makeshift and high-tech, these guy-girls are all wired up and ready to go. We're pushing past eleven and gaining on midnight when we finish the cut. Picture lock. The Banshee geeks are asleep by then and we're amped up. So we go back to tweaking of course, laboring over the make-or-break minutiae of fine-cut editing. Then we smell toast burning, think nothing of it. Silas says, 'What's the burning smell?' I'm like, 'Uh, I don't know' I go back to work. Silas goes to the back door says, 'Harry. It's a fire. Look.' I trot in, crouch at the window, see tall, wide flames slow dance through the windows of a massive construction site across the street. The flames swell. They're fucking tidal waves. 'Call the fucking fire trucks man, it's gonna be big! It's gonna be fucking big man!' Harry starts repeating 'ohmyfuckinggod' and I go for the phone. Silas is pacing with the receiver smashed up to her head and I start madly saving files, saving the fucking movie. I shut down the computer, wondering if I'm overreacting. Silas runs in. We look at each other, start talking in bullets. 'Should we take this out to the car?' 'Yeah, yes I don't know. Take the tapes too.' By the time one of us got back to the window the whole city block was a wall of flame and the sirens hadn't even begun.

The night sky was bright orange. We called and woke our sound pals next door and ran out to the car with the G4, while forty-mile an hour winds whipped baseball sized embers into a very literal firestorm that raged around us. We threw the box of DV tapes in the car and ran back to help our sound people hose down their little house. The whole place was heating up, the walls were hot and the fire trucks were just pulling up. We we're hollering, waking unknown neighbors. Everyone was wandering onto porches, spacey and bewildered, and then freaking when they saw the inferno. We plucked a little girl in a pink robe off her fire escape and shouted alternate evacuation routes to panicking families. We helped people climb over walls and squeeze through fences. The sky and air were unbearably hot. Everything was orange, the tops of our ears and arms were burned and blistering from flying chunks of red-hot embers. The wind sucked our yells into a vacuum of ash and fear. We wondered if whole buildings would begin to combust at once. Fire balls lobbed through the air, across whole city blocks. Other houses started to catch and blaze. Soon the firemen forced us out of the area. We drove away with our movie and tapes while the trucks pounded water into the apartment that had minutes before been our editing suite. It was a six-alarm arson fire exacerbated by gale-force wind that would consume not only the construction site but nineteen houses up to twenty blocks away before morning came. No one was killed.

We were shaky and counting our blessings at dawn. It was a hauntingly apt climax to the broiling years of work we'd put in to our low-budget project. Thank god we were awake, toiling away like we had been every night that week. Hard work pays off? Independent film saves lives? Whatever the lesson was from that one, we feel like we were thrown just about every curve in the game. And we managed to make this thing, by hook or by crook.

Pause.

("Aw, shut up man, that's hokey." "Hey, it's true, what can I say?" "It was your idea for a title anyway." "I thought it was yours..." "No man I distinctly remember...")