

Jump Cut

By George T. Marshall

(March 2007) What is the measure of a man? What is the value of a life lived well? What is the meaning of faith and belief in a power greater than oneself? These are questions that have haunted humankind for eons and the answers given today is as relevant as that posed by a host of philosophers and religious thinkers throughout the centuries.

New England writer, Andre Dubus, spent his life searching for answers to these questions and many more. Author and teacher, Dubus's life was marked by tragedies. His sister was raped as a young woman, leading Dubus to many years of fear for his loved ones' safety. He carried personal firearms to protect himself and those around him until the night in the late 1980s that he almost shot a man in a drunken argument outside a bar in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In his essay "Giving up the Gun", published in *The New Yorker*, he described that night as the point at which he decided to stop arming himself and to take a less defensive, perhaps hostile and paranoid, view of life.

Dubus experienced a far deeper personal tragedy late on the night of July 23, 1986 when he was seriously injured in a car accident. He was driving from Boston to his home in Haverhill, Massachusetts and he stopped to assist two disabled motorists. As Dubus was assisting the injured driver to the side of the highway, an oncoming car swerved toward the group and hit them. Dubus was critically injured. The impact of the collision sent him over the car's hood and roof and he landed on the trunk. As a result of the accident, both of his legs were crushed, and his left leg had to be amputated above the knee. He spent three painful years undergoing several surgeries and extensive physical therapy. His life would never be the same.

Even under these difficult physical, psychological, and emotional difficulties, Dubus continued to write and produced two books of autobiographical essays and a collection of short stories until his death on February 24, 1999.

Since that time, his story "Killings" was adapted into the movie "In the Bedroom" starring Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson. The film was nominated for five Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Screenplay based on "Material Previously Published." The 2004 movie, "We Don't Live Here Anymore," starring Mark Ruffalo, Peter Krause, Naomi Watts, and Laura Dern was based upon two of Dubus' short stories: "We Don't Live Here Anymore" and "Adultery."

Without question, Andre Dubus and his turbulent life begs to be told and reach a larger audience.

Enter local teacher/author/journalist, Edward ("Ted") J. Delaney, the author of the short-story collection "The Drowning & Other Stories" (1999) and the novel

“Warp & Weft” (2004). Ted has now added a new hyphenate to his name: filmmaker. The subject for his new documentary is Andre Dubus.

Ted's work has appeared regularly in The Atlantic Monthly magazine and many literary journals, as well as in the O. Henry Prize and a Best American Short Stories annuals. His novel received the 2005 PEN/Winship Award in Fiction. Ted is a Professor of Communications at Roger Williams University.

Delaney came to RWU from the newspaper industry, where he worked as a reporter, bureau chief, columnist and contributing writer at such publications as The Denver Post, Chicago Tribune, The National and the Providence Journal. His journalistic honors included a National Education Reporting Award.

Ted Delaney was born in Fall River, Mass. He earned a BS in Finance from Fairfield University and an MS in Mass Communications from Boston University.

We recently met at the Lobster Pot in Bristol, RI, a short distance from Roger Williams University. Over some Chardonnay, we spoke about his new work.

GTM: Why did you decide to produce a documentary on Andre Dubus? What is it about his works and life that you found a source of inspiration?

Ted Delaney: I had long been interested in making a documentary film, and as the technology became both less expensive and more manageable, I began to think of a subject I wanted to pursue. Because I was planning to work alone, and because it was my first major venture into this, I decided an interview-based project that I could mostly do locally would be my best bet. I first thought of doing something on a former student who spent six years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, but it turned out someone was already doing that film – it's called *After Innocence*. So I just tried to let something come along and interest me.

When I won the PEN/Winship Fiction Award, it was noted at the event that the first PEN/Winship had gone to Dubus, the acclaimed writer; I thought there was connection because when I first began the shift from journalism to fiction I had viewed Dubus's work as a model worth trying to emulate. It was as if he was something of a mentor to me, even though I only met him once, and only enough for handshake. Furthermore, the presenter of the award at that event at The Kennedy Library was Dubus's son, Andre Dubus III, and the idea came together that evening, the idea of examining how Dubus's life and art were interwoven. Dubus was badly hurt in a highway accident trying to help some people who had themselves just been in an accident, and story leading up to that moment in his life was quite dramatic. In other words, there was a story line to this rather than just people talking about the guy.

GTM: How did you go about deciding how you wanted to shoot this documentary and what footage you wanted to obtain?

Ted Delaney: We have a Canon XL1s Mini-DV camera at work, and nobody was really using it much, so I decided that I could do the project at very little cost. My first interview was with Suzanne Dubus, his daughter; the interview was so compelling to me that I decided I wanted to invest more in making the whole thing have a certain level of quality. So I went out and got a JVC HD100, which was their new high-definition camera. The quality was just so much better it gave a more polished appearance to the whole thing. I got some cheap umbrella lights on Ebay for about \$200, and borrowed some microphones. I re-interviewed Suzanne in HDV and moved forward from there.

I chose 24p, maybe foolishly, because it ended up giving me a lot of challenges and headaches. What I wanted was to do a series of interviews with his friends and family, most of whom were writers. My logic was that I was getting good storytellers to tell a good story. I knew from my newspaper and magazine experience that sometimes people with great stories don't tell them well. I also knew that it would be a talk-based production, more a thinking piece.

GTM: Tell your timeline in the evolution of this work.

Ted Delaney: I first thought of doing this in May of 2005 but finally started making calls that fall. I tried to reach Andre Dubus III, because he knew who I was and because he and Suzanne were co-executors of the Dubus estate and copyrights. I wanted to know they had no objections. But Andre, who wrote "The House of Sand and Fog," is a busy guy with many people coming at him, and we didn't connect by phone for some time. I finally got him in February of 2006. He liked the idea --- he is devoted to keeping his father's works in the hands of readers. I started shooting the interviews in 2006. It's funny that when I showed up at Andre's house somewhat looking like I had a sense of what I was doing, he was really surprised --- all that time we'd talked he thought I was just doing a hand-held camcorder kind of thing to show in class. We chatted and he realized I was hoping for something better. That was one thing I found about working alone --- if you don't show up with some sort of crew people apparently take you much less seriously even if the crew is not adding anything. I believe I got better interviews by getting as close as I could to the act of having a personal conversation --- I'd guess that doing an interview with a lot of people around would make the subject feel as if he or she was giving a press conference. I do honestly feel I got some genuine emotion I would not otherwise have gotten. I shot local interviews all through the summer of 2006, but realized there were a lot of people in other parts of the country I wanted to get. So in August and September I did a 9,750-mile road trip to interview people in North Carolina, Louisiana, Colorado, Montana, Seattle and in California; I was lucky enough to have a sabbatical from my teaching position; I spent summer and fall working on this project, my own short stories, and a magazine article.

I did a figure-8 of the country visiting old friends, working on some other print-journalism things and doing some still photography for fun. It was a great trip. Some of the best interviews, in my opinion, were on the trip --- the writer Tobias Wolff out at Stanford University, writer James Lee Burke in Missoula, and Dubus's

sister Kathryn in Baton Rouge. Kathryn also pulled out boxes of photos, and I had brought along a scanner to get a lot of that. Linda Cluxton, a former student of Dubus's living in Asheville, N.N., is a photographer; she had lots of photos she'd taken in the 1970s.

I returned in late September and started the editing, while continuing to do interviews. I wrapped up shooting by finally visiting Dubus's grave early on New Year's Day. It felt appropriate. I finished the edit in mid-January.

GTM: How was this production funded?

Ted Delaney: I funded it on my own and with some help from my institution. I was on sabbatical, so my time was my own, and I paid for equipment out of pocket. Roger Williams University has a faculty research fund and I applied for a travel grant for the trip. They gave me what amounted to gas money for such a lengthy drive. Friends along the way put me up so I didn't spend a lot of money on hotel rooms. I got a magazine assignment that gave me money to put into this. I paid for the music (I worked with a Boston composer, Stephen Buckman) and some photo rights.

I have a Mac G4 at work; it cost me some money to add hard drive space, memory and other performance-enhancers.

GTM: You essentially taught yourself Final Cut Pro to undertake this project. Was that difficult and what did you learn in the process?

Ted Delaney: Yes. Final Cut Pro is an amazing tool, with a manual that's about three times the size of the Bible. It can do so many things, but there are also hundreds of ways you can screw yourself if you don't know what you're doing, which of course I didn't. I did so in every possible way. I accidentally deleted stuff, screwed up sequences and botched captures. I come to look at the way you build something on FCP as being this very delicate mechanism. Small mistakes can have big consequences. The "Discussion" area of the support pages of the Apple website is like Dante's circles of Hell, with all these plaintive voices crying out for help. I would never claim I have complete command of the program, even after months of time. Toward the end of the project, I dropped in on some friends who have a small film-production company in Manhattan. As we hung out, I was watching their interns, a couple of kids from NYU, putting together their projects. I felt like I was a guy who can juggle tennis balls watching the Flying Wallendas. I think that the iPod generation has more intuitive grasp of these kinds of things.

But part of my mission here was to learn how to do it reasonably well, and I gave myself enough built-in padding on the timeline to anticipate the many mistakes I'd make. Also, that was another reason I chose to do a project with no absolute timeliness or news hook. My goal was to do as much as I could by the end of 2006, but if I'd worked hard and only gotten a portion of it done, that would have been fine, too. I would have just kept on.

GTM: Tell us why you decided to shoot this on HD and in 24 frames vs. the standard video of 30 fps?

Ted Delaney: I chose 24p because the progression of complete still frames is like that of normal film, rather than like the interlacing of television. I do think there's evidence that the eye/brain picks up the difference, and I think that the difference between 30frame DV and 24p HDV was remarkable. It simply adds a more professional look to it.

I was somewhat naïve about the idea that using 24p would be as easy as simply changing the camera setting. I have some experience in still photography, but understanding the whole “group-of-pictures” concept of HDV was something I was not well-versed in. The single biggest problem was that the 24p HDV footage coming out of the camera could not be captured directly on FCP. Apple's ads said FCP 5.1 could “edit anything” but it just wasn't true. It could capture HDV (at 1080i), and it could capture 24p (in standard DV), but it couldn't capture HDV at 24p. So the solution, since I'd already shot interviews in 24p HDV, was to use a third-party program called Lumiere HD to convert 24p footage to XML files in the Apple Intermediate Codec. It was complicated and ridiculously time-consuming, and Lumiere's support was virtually nonexistent. In October, after I had converted 95 percent of the footage through Lumiere HD, Apple upgraded FCP to version 5.1.2 which does allow you to now capture 24p HDV directly. If that upgrade had come four or five months before, I would have saved countless hours. But that's always the issue of technology being something people have to grapple with. The HDV was also very demanding on the computer's abilities. In any given four-or-five-hour editing session, the G4 would crash two or three times, because I was throwing too much at it to do, rendering HD. I learned to hit “Save Project” obsessively.

GTM: If you were to do this over again, what would you do differently?

Ted Delaney: I would have been somewhat more controlling of the interview environment. Because I was doing this as a first project, I didn't want to come on too strong – I was thankful people agreed to do interviews at all, and that probably had more to do with my credentials as a writer than as someone doing a film. But I learned as I went along to politely and somewhat firmly ask for things. For example, when I was interviewing Dubus's ex-wife Peggy Rambach, her daughter Cadence Dubus was in the kitchen making herself something to eat, and I was picking up the sounds. I asked her if she could stop, but she was hungry so she did it more quietly. But when I captured the footage, there were a variety of clanks and clangs that messed up some stuff I might have otherwise used.

Also, I'd think about having alternate options laid out. In Montana, I scheduled James Lee Burke to do the interview on his ranch at the foot of the mountains, late afternoon. The weather was gorgeous, the background was gorgeous, but then a forest fire broke out down the range. Burke had to go bring down some

horses he had grazing up that way. Then he was so starving he took me out for Mexican food. By the time we got going, it was quickly getting dark. I went ahead because I had made arrangements to be in Seattle the following evening. I might have been wise to have built in more padding, which would have allowed me to consider asking him to do the interview early the following morning.

Small offices where I could set up properly were a common problem. I remember seeing the documentary *A Brief History of Time* and marveling at how well they lit the people's homes for the interviews. I read later that they weren't actually the homes of the subjects, that they were all sets built at great expense specifically for the film. On one hand, that's nice, but on the other hand, I think people watching that film had little or no different reaction than if the backgrounds had been less gorgeously done, as long as what the subjects are saying is interesting.

GTM: What would you like to see happen this work?

Ted Delaney: I knew already that Andre Dubus was not only a great writer but a really interesting person with a strong following among writers and people who teach writing. I was hoping it would be of benefit to anyone who wanted to know more about his own creative process. So many biographies I read of writers leave that part out. So I was hoping someone seeing this gets a sense of why he wrote what he wrote, and why that writing has such resonance. Part of my interest in doing this is that there is no biography yet written on the man, so I wasn't working from some preconception.

I'd like to see it get to people who have as much interest in Dubus, and in the process of writing, that made this project so enjoyable and valuable to me.

GTM: What did you learn about Andre Dubus that you did not know when into this project?

Ted Delaney: I think the main thing is the manner in which he moved toward the stories he told. I think a misconception among writers is based on the old cliché "Write what you know." That's true in terms of settings and details, but less so in terms of what you might call 'theme.' Dubus was something of a tortured guy --- someone who was a devout Catholic and an inveterate sinner, someone who hurt people then hated himself for hurting them --- and writing his short stories were, for him, apparently like picking at painful old scabs. His great work "A Father's Story" is something you'd think was produced by a writer who himself was loving, devoted and selfless. In fact he wasn't at that time. His writing was about, in many ways, what he wanted to be but couldn't get to.

GTM: Has this documentary inspired you to do another project? If so what would that be?

Ted Delaney: I tend to split my work evenly between fiction and journalism, so I am interested in the story of people telling stories, if you will. I'm thinking about doing a new project about the advertising industry.

GTM: Anything else you'd like to add for our readers and your fellow filmmakers?

Ted Delaney: Only that I think the nature of doing so-called "film" is that it can be much more of an individual art than ever before because of the way the technology has developed. In many ways, this project was not unlike doing a newspaper or magazine article, because the technology is more transparent in the process.

Lower cost allowed me in the game. For example, magazines that publish fiction and poetry get tens of thousands of submissions because just about everyone who wants to write has full access to the technology – a manual typewriter gets the job done fine --- and that means the emphasis has to be on the quality of the story or poem itself. Film always excluded the vast majority of people who might otherwise have something to say, strictly based on expense. Way back when I was in grad school I had a strong interest in documentary film, but it was impossible for me. It was just too expensive and required too many hands in the process. So I became a newspaper reporter, then a columnist, then fiction writer. Part of the reason this was fun to do at the advanced age of 48 was that the technology finally allowed me to do something that had, before this, simply been out of reach.

About the Author:

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