

# INDEPENDENTCRITICS.com

Movie Reviews, Columns & Top 10 Lists by TC Candler, Richard Propes & Jacob Ha

## MENU

- [Home](#)
- [Review Archive](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Top 10 Lists](#)
- [MessageBoard](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Links](#)



## LINKS

- [TC Candler](#)
- [Tenderness Tour](#)
- [Coming Soon Mag](#)
- [Everyone's a Critic](#)
- [IMDb.com](#)
- [Roger Ebert](#)
- [James Berardinelli](#)
- [Yahoo Movies](#)
- [Ebert & Roeper](#)
- [MetaCritic](#)
- [Filmcritic](#)
- [Box Office Guru](#)
- [Box Office Mojo](#)
- [Ain't it Cool News](#)
- [Apple Trailers](#)
- [The Movie Box](#)
- [Official Oscars Site](#)
- [The Razzies](#)
- [Amazon DVD](#)



## UNDERSTANDING ALYSON: A CHAT WITH ALYSON SHELTON



"Alyson Shelton Quenches Her Thirst For Cinematic Success"



Photo Courtesy of Open Plan Films



## A Richard Propes Interview

October 3, 2006

I feel sorry for Alyson Shelton, the writer/director of "Eve of Understanding." She couldn't have known what she was getting into when she agreed to an interview about her life in film and her award-winning feature film debut. The life of an independent film-maker carries with it many risks...not the least of which

is an inquisitive film critic who was deeply moved by her film. As the interview unfolds, it becomes clear that Shelton is approaching this interview the same way she approached writing the script for "Eve of Understanding"...with intelligence, thoughtfulness and uncommon sensitivity.

**RP:** In reading through your press materials, I learned quite a bit. You realized you wanted to work in the arts in high school. What happened to trigger that realization? Did something inspire you? Were you active in the arts in high school? What was the family response? I read that you received your Bachelor's in Theatre from Northwestern...was your family supportive of that line of study? My first thought was "That's an awfully expensive school to study something that leaves most people waiting tables."

**AS:** Ha. Well I don't think you're the only person to have that reaction, but what a lot of people don't realize is that I earned a Bachelor of Science in Communication in Theatre, so I actually paid a lot of money for a fantastic degree. I could have gone on to pursue my JD or MBA straight from college. I absolutely loved Northwestern and the Theatre program there; I would not have traded that experience in for the world. I learned so much and met a number of incredibly talented individuals. I can't say enough positive things about it, to be honest. And as far as family support goes, I've been fortunate to have a family that believes in me and supports my decisions, even if they weren't exactly what they expected.

I decided to pursue the arts in high school. I'd been toying with it all my life, but thought I should pursue something more realistic/reliable/traditional, like medicine or the law. I always did well in school, so these were both logical choices for me. But between my junior and senior years of high school, I had a realization that this was my life and I should go after my dreams, regardless of how unconventional they were. They are dreams after all. I've never regretted that decision. I've doubted it at times, but so far, no regrets.

**RP:** You graduated from Northwestern, then it sounds like you headed out to Seattle to figure out your path. You did a little bit of everything at Northwestern, it sounds like. What do you think made you realize that film was going to be your path?

**AS:** In college I studied Theatre and I was also part of a program called 'Creative Writing for the Media.' We had to apply to get in and there were 10 of us in program. We spent 2 years together, writing screenplays, teleplays and plays. I always felt I was a writer, deep down, but fiction didn't feel like a fit for me. The first time I wrote a script, it was a revelation. So in college I started thinking, maybe I want to be a screenwriter.

In Seattle I quickly realized that the actor's life was one that was going to drive me to the brink of my sanity. I was horrible at waiting for the phone to ring. I hated being judged on my looks or body or things that were pretty much beyond my control. I liked creating characters. I loved acting class, but I didn't care so much about being in front of audience. Sure getting applause was great, but it wasn't the driving force, the driving force was creating characters that made people care, think, and question themselves. I started writing more, and seeing more movies. The idea of film school started becoming very appealing.

**RP:** It sounds like you were very intentional about going out to get training and experience once you decided to do something? Your time in Seattle seems like a very intentional period of gaining experiences and training in areas that were to become very important for your work now.

**AS:** Seattle was a place where I was figuring myself out. I graduated college. I had a plan and then life happened. Plans don't happen. Life does. I was wading through ideas of myself in Seattle and I came out on the other side by letting go of a lot of limiting ideas I had about myself, figuring out what I really cared about and what I was willing to do to have those things – both personally and professionally.

**RP:** Then you went to USC Film School. I ask this question a lot, but I think it's important and I love getting different voices talking about it. What did film school do for you? How well did it prepare you for the realities of film? What were its strengths and weaknesses? Was there anything that was a complete and utter surprise once you started working on "Eve of Understanding?"

**AS:** Before I went to USC, or even applied to USC, I spent a summer at NYU taking 'Sight+Sound' I think the class is called...anyhow, I had started to wrap my head around the idea of becoming a writer/director. I had directed a bit in college and had enjoyed it. And I loved writing. But I didn't

feel that anyone was going to take me seriously as either without some training. It's hard enough being a woman director, but I felt like if I was going to be running a crew of 100+ people and telling them exactly what I wanted, I wanted to know what that meant, how to post it, shoot it, edit it, score it. I wanted to understand it inside and out. I wanted to believe in my own skills, I didn't want to think I was good. I wanted to know it.

But as we all know film school costs money, serious money. So I thought it would be worth the time and money to see if I really liked this filmmaking thing as much as I thought I would. So I spent a summer at NYU, loved it and applied to film school in the fall.

I got into USC and spent the next 3 years there learning an incredible amount about how films are made. I had a concept before I got there, but film school gave me a much deeper understanding of all the pieces that have to come together to make a successful film. I spent a lot of time studying and pouring my energy into cinematography, as well as writing and directing. I'm thrilled I learned so much about cinematography, because it was the area I felt most intimidated by before attending USC, and now it's just another aspect of filmmaking that I love.

I met many people I still collaborate with today, including my husband, Cody Shelton and producing partner, Jen Prince. I also had a group of supportive professors that encouraged me to keep doing what I was doing, Robert Gardner, Mary Jansen, Stephen Lighthill and Bill Dill, among others. I found USC film school rigorous, challenging and expensive, but the more distance I get from the program, the more I feel it was worth every penny. The atmosphere was a strange mix of criticism and support. I strengthened my voice, but also questioned it. I had to get some distance from that environment to become confident in what I was saying with my films and why.

There are a lot of politics in film school, and I think many people say that's one of its weaknesses, but I think it prepares you for the realities of making movies. There are politics in every career and the same is true of film. Even the experiences that left a bitter taste in my mouth at the time have shown me things about the industry that feel valuable to me now, but hey I do try to look on the bright side of things, and honestly when I'm spending that much money and time on something, I think it behooves me to see the experience as valuable.

Most importantly, USC prepared me for making *Eve of Understanding*. Nothing that happened on *Eve of Understanding* totally surprised me. Jen and I talk about how we wouldn't have felt capable of making *Eve of Understanding* without going to USC. We stayed on schedule and under budget, which is saying something with so little money and so few days. USC gave us the skills to know how to budget and schedule and what pitfalls to be on the lookout for, before they happened, and knocked us on our butts and out of the game. We also noticed on *Eve of Understanding* how all the USC crew members shared a language. We saved valuable time and energy because of that shorthand.

At the same time, if you had a group of people you made a series of short films with and grew together with as artists, I'm guessing you'd develop a similar language, trust and comfort. I liked the formal education of film school. I like school. And I like having a degree, because I would like to teach at the university level at some point, and I feel like having an MFA will help me pursue that goal.

That being said, I do not think film school is for everyone, and I think it is extremely important to research the programs, schools, facilities and what you're going to get for your money before you spend it. Look at the alumni, what they are doing, see if they teach what you're interested in, talk to some current students, professors, some alumni, do a lot of research – please. I only applied to 3 film schools, I felt that I didn't want to spend the money, go into that much debt, because of film school if I didn't get into one of the top 3. It's personal, but that's how I felt. It's an investment; make sure you're investing in the right thing.

**RP:** As I was reading through your history, it suddenly occurred to me that many filmmakers really do get a start doing short films. Are short films important to filmmakers? The film industry?

**AS:** I think they are important. They serve as a practice run. I really cannot imagine making a feature film before making a short film, I don't think I would have known where to start, I would have been overwhelmed. I learned a lot of lessons from my short film and from the other ones I worked on, the lessons varied, and many of them, were things not to do, but I deeply value the experiences I had on the shorts I worked on.

**RP:** Almost simultaneously, it seems that you got some

"business" experience. This seems incredibly wise to me. You were an assistant to the President of Gracie Films. What does this mean? Should I be picturing the film version of "The Devil Wears Prada?" What was this experience like? That seems like a great way to start in the film industry...how did that happen?

**AS:** The basic story is I needed a job. Getting out of film school is a rude awakening. No one really prepares you for how difficult it is to get a job, any job, in the film and television industry. We were all hoping we'd get repped and start making movies. Little did we know we'd be scrambling to get jobs as assistants and p.a.'s. We were. I was lucky enough to have a friend of a friend who was leaving the job and got me an interview, I met with Richard, the President of Gracie, they checked my references, and I got the job. Thank God.

It was a great experience for me. Like anything, it had its challenges, but it taught me a lot about the realities of making movies and TV shows. There are a lot of people, dollars and egos involved in making anything, and to get a sense of the enormity of it all is something I would not trade.

**RP:** Suddenly, you find yourself producing...why producing on television? can you explain what a producer really does? For someone who worked on the creative side for so long, was it hard shifting your focus to the business side?

**AS:** After I left Gracie I ended up doing basic cable TV shows, also because a friend of a friend needed someone to fill a position and so I ended up there. I wanted to get out of being an assistant or working my way up in development, so I was happy to try something new. I started as a researcher and then moved on to producing. There are so many types of producers, with varying levels of power, creative input and responsibility. I had very little of the first 2 and some of the last one. I helped make the shows happen. In varying degrees, that's what every producer does.

**RP:** So, you have this stable career in the industry of your choice. THEN, you decide to go out on your own it seems. You start your own company and envision this first film. Are you nuts?

**AS:** I did have a stable job, gee, thanks for reminding me. Am I crazy? Well, I am, a little. I had a realization, much like I had in high school. I saw my life stretching out,

filled with jobs that paid the bills, but didn't really fulfill me in any way. It made me sick to think of all the time, energy and money I'd funneled into being an artist and yet, all I could think was - I'm not an artist. At all. I may as well have been a lawyer; at least I'd be making more money.

I had been writing more and I knew that this job/career would slow that down or completely stop it. I read about people who have jobs and write from like 5am – 7am and I admire those people deeply. I am not one of those people. When I write, I write for hours at a time, for days at a time. I felt like I had a choice to make and I made the crazy one. The one that felt right and made absolutely no sense.

**RP:** How did this first film come about? I read you wrote the script in five days...was there a decision to make a film first...then the script....or did you already have a production team started and were looking for a project?

**AS:** Jen Prince, the producer of *Eve of Understanding*, and myself were already working on putting together money and a team or people for another script I'd written, *Everything in Between*. That film was going to cost a lot more money, more like a million dollars and while I think we were going to get there eventually, we wanted to make something now. I knew we could get a small amount of money together quickly and I wrote with this in mind. I knew our restrictions and where we could get locations, services and crew for free and those places became a part of the world of *Eve of Understanding*. Our lack of money was a fundamental part of the creative genesis of the idea.

**RP:** You put together "Eve of Understanding," then, on a low budget (if my understanding is correct), with a quickly produced script...What do you think helped it all come together? You assembled a strong cast, a solid production team...and, at least initially, nobody's getting rich off this deal. How do you do it? In fact, WHY do you do it?

**AS:** This is where film school really comes into play, this is where it starts paying dividends. Jen Prince, the producer; Cody Shelton, the editor, production designer and production sound guy; Liz Santoro, the DP; Peter Senchuk, the composer; and Joe Dzuban, Gabriel Serrano and Marcelo Teson, the post sound team. And myself. We all went to USC film school together. All of us had worked with someone else on the team at some point. We knew each other. We know and admire each other's work. We respect each other. We want to make movies...with each

other. Honestly, it was relatively easy to get these people to make this movie together. We were excited to make this movie.

I do this because I love it. It feels like the thing I should be doing, sometimes I feel like I have no choice. It's fantastic. It's hard. It's crazy. It's perfect for me.

**RP:** I was honestly a little overwhelmed when I read your website. In realizing your budget issues, I'm aware of how much one person can support independent film. So many times, we have these \$50 million Hollywood blockbusters. It's enough to intimidate potential investors, even small, amateur film-makers. You did amazing things with very little and I couldn't help but think what even a \$1-2,000 investor would mean for your film...or, likewise, how incredibly important a financial prize at a film festival can be for a film such as yours. How does a first-time film-maker attract investors? supporters?

**AS:** Our whole approach was very grassroots. All of our investors are family, friends or friends of friends, people who believe in us and wanted to be a part of this movie. That's the benefit of making a movie very cheaply, you can get people involved who normally couldn't invest in a feature film and they are so passionate and supportive. I've loved this experience, it's all been so personal and meaningful, and challenging, but well worth it.

And yes, \$1,000 means a lot to us. We are completely out of money, so we're not submitting to any more festivals or setting up screenings. We got a lot of mileage out of our money, but now it's gone. So there is definitely a way to support indie film, any filmmaker I know personally would be thrilled to receive a donation, every single dollar helps.

**RP:** Your film has received a lot of support from the film festival circuit. Are film festivals important? What role do they play for a new film-maker like yourself?

**AS:** think film festivals are incredibly important. The community they create. The fact that people I've never met have seen *Eve of Understanding* and been moved by it. I've been encouraged by the diversity of the audiences who have loved *Eve of Understanding*. Through the festival circuit, I've realized what broad appeal the movie has, without festivals, I'd have an inkling that was true, but I wouldn't be sure. Now, I'm sure.

**RP:** You've stated in other interviews that the film is not

autobiographical (happy to hear that!). You have this incredibly powerful script about family...and I couldn't help but be deeply touched that within 24 hours of posting my review I had an e-mail from your mother. How important have family and friends been to your journey as a film-maker?

**AS:** Invaluable. I wouldn't be doing this without the support of my husband, Cody, and family. Period.

Making movies can drain you of your energy, self-assurance and funds. Without people in your life who believe in you, I honestly don't know how people do it.

**RP:** What's your vision for "Eve of Understanding?" It's still on the festival circuit, with a festival coming up in Florence, Italy. Are you targeting distribution? How hard is that for a new film-maker like yourself? Do your previous connections help?

**AS:** It's very difficult to gain a decent distribution deal for an indie film when there is no name talent or crew. I think someday 'a film by Alyson Shelton' will mean something commercially, but right now, it doesn't, not yet. Distributors only want to spend money on a product they believe will make them their money and then some. I know *Eve of Understanding* would make money, given a limited release and a grassroots publicity campaign or a TV release on a network like Showtime or HBO. Survivors of sexual and domestic abuse respond strongly to this film, as do recovering alcoholics and other 12 steppers. The film catalyzes conversation and hopefully action. I think people are starved for a film that tactfully and artfully handles this content. I think this movie would find a large and supportive audience, it would just take a little time, because of the lack of 'names.' But the audience is there, I know it, I've met them.

**RP:** Why didn't you act in "Eve of Understanding?"

**AS:** I figured I was taking on more than enough writing, directing and producing my first feature film. I didn't want to split my focus between directing and acting.

**RP:** You produced, wrote, directed...do you have a favorite role? Do you find yourself a natural writer? Producer? Director? Any other scripts? Films in the works? Would you like to do some acting?

**AS:** I love directing. I feel very natural at it. I love the

collaboration, working with the actors, the DP, the composer, the editor, everyone really. I feel like it uses every last inch of my brain, which make me feel satisfied.

I also love writing, in a very different way. I love the solitary nature of it, spending time with myself, figuring out how to make a story better, more believable, more unforgettable.

I feel the most strongly connected to writing and directing and would be happy if I was paid to do these two things for the rest of my professional life. I also love producing. And acting, though it's been a while since I acted. I sort of let it go when I decided to attend film school, but that's not to say I wouldn't do it given the right opportunity.

I'm definitely working on things. *Everything in Between*, we're working on putting together a teaser to work on getting funding together. I've also written many other scripts, one called *Bright Side* that we would shoot in Sedona We have that out to a name actor, which would be fantastic. And I'm working on another script right now, in fact, that would be another low budget film, along the lines of an InDigEnt project, digital, quick shoot, etc. I would love to make another film in 2007 – that's my plan and hope, now we just need to get us some money!

**RP:** You spent a year (if I recall, in Seattle) absorbing film. Tell me about your film tastes...favorite films? genres? actors? actresses? Has there been anyone who inspired you or supported you?

**AS:** I did spend some time soaking in film, mostly between my time at NYU and USC. When I was at NYU, my professor, Nick Tanis, gave us a list of the most important films of all time. I watched hundreds of them. They changed my life and the way I see film. Watching all those films, one or two a day, made me realize that film is art. Without a doubt. It can be, if we want it to be, but the onus is on us, the filmmakers, the studios, the artists.

So many filmmakers inspire me; Krzysztof Kieslowski made me want to make movies. *Blue* changed my life. Ingmar Bergman, I've seen almost all his films and he's profound, especially *Cries and Whispers*, and god the films are gorgeous, all the craft is stunning, the performances are beyond compare. His films show the importance of collaboration, and he helped me understand that my training as an actor would be one of my most important tools as a director. John Cassavetes, *A Woman Under the Influence*, his influence still ripples through my

work, I feel his presence in *Eve of Understanding*, quite strongly, in fact. He's an actor/director who took his destiny into his hands, admirable, that's for sure. And John Hughes, because if I make a movie as perfect as *The Breakfast Club*, I'll die happy.

**RP:** What else do you enjoy doing? hobbies? other arts activities?

**AS:** I love my family and friends, spending time with them, cooking, playing games, watching TV and movies. I take hikes, go for a swim, whenever possible. Travel. I read voraciously. I enjoy it because I've written very little fiction, so I can totally immerse myself in the world of the novel, without analyzing it. Reading gives my brain a break.

**RP:** What was the best part of making "Eve?" The biggest challenge? Is it hard dealing with reviews? Even the most positive ones mention negatives...do you ever want to call someone up and scream "You just didn't get it?"

**AS:** The best part of making *Eve of Understanding* was working with all the incredibly talented and wonderful people who were a part of the cast and crew. It was a privilege. A gift.

The biggest challenge, hmmm...a lot of it was challenging, but not too surprising, it's been so gratifying, I guess right now is the biggest challenge. Selling it. Because it takes someone big, someone with power to make that happen, and so far, it hasn't happened.

And as far as reviews go, we've been very fortunate, people have liked the movie. And reviews are reviews, they are one person's opinion, you try to be real about it and not take it too personally. And honestly the criticism I received in film school was far more scathing and unforgiving than anything I've received in the 'real world.'

**RP:** How is it for a TRULY independent film-maker these days? It seems like every major studio has their independent arm...and that's what fills up a lot of the theatres. I think of your budget...a lot of actors wouldn't even show up on the set for it.

**AS:** It's really hard to get money for it. Once you get the money, if you have a good script and good leaders, the cast and crew fall into place, but it's all about the money. And without names or a trust fund, it's hard to get a good chunk of change. And then once you do, and you make the

movie, and it's still challenging getting attention, separating yourself from the pack. There are a lot of good films out there, but how do you get people to see them? Audiences are drawn to the familiar, so it's difficult to get them out to see a movie they've never heard of, with unknowns in it. It's a tough sell, but like I said I believe the audiences are there, but it's got to be more grassroots and slowly building. It can't always be about the opening weekend, it's more complicated than that.

**RP:** The typical question: What advice would you give someone who wants to direct a film? or write a script?

**AS:** Oh god. I think it was...hmmm...now I've forgotten, but I was reading some interview and he was like, my best advice, don't listen to any advice, which is so true, because we're all so different. But here's the advice I would give myself: Why? Ask yourself that question. If it is for fame or accolades or money, don't do it. The chances of those things happening are slim, and the process might very well break your heart. Don't assume you are a genius, a unique individual, or the best thing since sliced bread – none of us are. Find people you trust, critical people, and work with them, make this script/project good, really frikkin' good, kill yourself making it the best it can be, show it to more people, make it better. Repeat. Repeat again. And then think about making it. Be as hard on yourself as possible, because other people really enjoy being hard on you and you better be able to take it. You better know yourself and your work well enough to know when you take their criticism and when you ignore it. And have some fun! Please.

**RP:** Tell me a bit more about Open Plan.

**AS:** Open Plan Films. I started it with Jen Prince, producer of *Eve of Understanding* and Cody Shelton and Gordon Prince, our husbands and collaborators. We started it when Jen and I realized we should be making movies together. We figured out that we had specific stories we wanted to tell and that we wanted to create a certain type of environment, collaborative, with each of us being respected as filmmakers, regardless of title. And we look forward to making more movies together in this way. And soon.

**RP:** Actor's Studio Question: Your favorite word?

**AS:** Love.

**RP:** What's the most important thing to you as a filmmaker? as a human being?

**AS:** Waking up every day and being the best person I can be, which means a million things to a million different people, but to me it means, laughing, loving, reciprocity, forgiveness, being accountable, getting better everyday and trusting the best in each and every one of us, cause that's what's going to make this world somewhere I want to be.

**RP:** One of the things that I realized at the end of "Eve of Understanding" is how balanced you were in your character development. For example, in films with similar themes there's often a tendency to either: 1) male bash, 2) paint characters with broad strokes as "good" or "bad," or 3) sugar coat certain characters. You avoided all these things...

Males and females are treated very equally here... flawed but human. I would say there's even a slight "understanding" with the father. It's undeniable that most "perpetrators" are male, but your film does a nice job of looking at the entire community that "supports" abuse, domestic violence and even our adult dysfunctions.

Even your sympathetic or more "clean" characters are assembled with shards of humanity evident...Not just Donna, but Aunt Ruth, Cassie, Lisa. I identified very much with Lisa, myself. All that is a lead-in for a simple question...How did you approach writing this story? Obviously everyone takes something different from a film such as this one, but what was it like for you writing this story? Was the balance intentional or just darn fine writing?

**AS:** It was both, you're a genius! It was very important in *Eve of Understanding*, to make the movie real, to me. And when it comes to the cycle of abuse, everyone is accountable. I think sometimes people like to paint someone as the villain, hate them, tie it up in a nice little bow and move on. But hey, it's not that easy. People are complicated. I am. You are. And the more I see of that in movies, the happier I am. It can be challenging, but I think in the end it's very satisfying for an audience to be confronted with complex characters that make them think and question their beliefs or assumptions about people or situations.

And it was also important to me to show how abuse rips

apart lives, not just the victims, but everyone involved. No one escapes untouched That's why healing matters, why it's worth pursuing, though it's painful and really frikkin' hard. It's worth it.

I'm happy to hear you identified with Lisa. I love her. I really love most of the characters in *Eve of Understanding*, because they are struggling to find their way. They are active. They aren't just sitting around hoping life will make it right. Lisa is fighting for peace and I think she'll find it. I think what Donna says to Russ is true... now that Eve is out of the picture, Lisa is going to find a part of herself that she needs to be whole.

And yes, all the characters in *Eve of Understanding* are flawed. That was certainly intentional. We all are. And that's what makes us fascinating and human. No one is perfect. Or beyond redemption.

**RP:** Anything else you'd like to say?

**AS:** I think I'm good, but if you have any other questions, let me know. Oh, check out our website, [www.EveOfUnderstanding.com](http://www.EveOfUnderstanding.com) and our blog, [www.openplanproductions.blogspot.com](http://www.openplanproductions.blogspot.com)

Become our friend on Myspace,  
[www.myspace.com/openplanfilms](http://www.myspace.com/openplanfilms)

We started the blog because we felt there was a dearth of resources about how to do the truly low budget indie thing. It's been a great learning and communication tool for us, and it's kept our family and friends up to date on what the heck is going on with us.

**RP:** Well, Alyson, I truly appreciate your time. I feel like I've put you through another Master's Thesis here. Truly, thank you.

**AS:** Thank you for the opportunity. I've enjoyed it.

© Written by Richard Propes - **[Email Me!](#)**



### **TC Candler's Comment**

n/a

**Jacob Hall's Comment**

n/a



---

TRJ Enterprises © 2005  
[Privacy Policy](#) - [Terms of Use](#) - [Contact Us](#) - [Legalities](#)

---