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Tom Jacobs

“One Battle After Another” editor, alum Andy Jurgensen, to discuss the political thriller on campus

Of all the Hollywood clichés, perhaps the oldest is “What I really want to do is direct.” You hear it from actors, writers, cinematographers, even interns in the mailroom.

Andy Jurgensen is a notable exception. The 43-year-old UC Santa Barbara alum finds deep satisfaction in a different role, one he finds intellectually stimulating and creatively fulfilling: film editor.

This month, he reached a new peak in his career. His latest project, [which he will screen and discuss at the Pollock Theater, Saturday, Oct. 4,](#) is the critically lauded hit “One Battle After Another,” starring Leonard DiCaprio and Sean Penn and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

A politically charged action film about a retired revolutionary who haltingly returns to the fray when his white supremacist nemesis kidnaps his mixed-race daughter, “One Battle After Another” feels amazingly of the moment. It’s also a rare film that feels shorter than its actual length (two hours and 40 minutes).

That has a lot to do with pacing — “the need for both peaks and valleys,” as Jurgensen puts it. Deciding precisely where to insert a bit of droll humor or a brief, tender moment to break up the otherwise relentless action is key. So are the

countless subtle tweaks that result from Jurgensen's meticulous finessing of the material.

"Some people would tear their hair out doing this job," he said in an interview. "They couldn't sit there for hours and hours and hours. But I love it.

"I enjoy going frame by frame, playing with the rhythm, adding a little bit of space here, and making the scene more exciting or suspenseful, if that's what's intended. You're always trying to find the best version of what you have.

"There's also a lot of problem solving," Jurgensen continued. "There was a camera bump here, or someone forgot their line, but it's a great take. How can we salvage this? It's like a puzzle. It's finding what you need and piecing it together."

Bit by bit, as Stephen Sondheim would say.

Born and raised in Orange County, Jurgensen was introduced to the film world by his aunt and uncle, who worked as archivists at the Motion Picture Academy. "They would show me old movies, and take me to different events," he said. "That's how I got into film."

It was during his time at UCSB — he graduated in 2004 — that he discovered the artistry of editing.

"Editing is absolutely a skill that we emphasize in our students," said Carsey-Wolf Center assistant director Miguel Penabella, who will moderate the post-screening discussion with Jurgensen. "Editing is not just a technical skill that connects one scene to another, but a creative process that produces meaning and emotional impact.

"Just as a sculptor chooses what to remove or emphasize, an editor similarly shapes from the raw footage the film's rhythm and structure, working with the director to make something precise and meaningful. Students often find their artistic voice in the editing room."

That seems true of Jurgensen.

“I remember an editing class taught by Kwame Braun where they gave all of us the same raw footage of a short film, and everyone had to edit the movie in their own way,” he recalled. “Doing that, I realized this is how my mind works — that editing is what I’m good at.”

Upon graduation, Jurgensen got a job answering phones at a production company. Two years later, he became a post-production assistant and started working his way up. He met Anderson on the 2014 film “Inherent Vice,” where he served as assistant editor. He moved up to associate editor on “Phantom Thread,” and finally editor on “Licorice Pizza.”

As that trajectory suggests, Anderson tends to work with the same people on film after film. “It’s always a fun reunion when we come back together for another movie,” Jurgensen said. “There’s a kind of shorthand between us. Paul has a very distinct voice and sensibility. We all are working to serve that.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Jurgensen tends to tag along when a film shoots on location, although he spends little time on the set. “We’ll have our own office separate from the production office,” he said. “This way, you feel more like you’re part of the crew, and you have a better understanding of the movie.”

For “One Battle After Another,” that meant traveling around the Southwest, since the film was shot in Sacramento, San Diego and El Paso, among other places, including near Lompoc, where the convent scenes were filmed at La Purisima Mission. That gave Jurgensen easy access to Anderson, and on evenings and weekends, the two of them would screen the daily footage, assessing what they had and starting the process of picking out the best takes.

“Paul is unique in doing daily screenings of the raw footage during production,” Jurgensen said. “That’s a luxury, but it’s very important to Paul’s process. By the end of the shoot, since he has watched everything, he knows that the material is there. We just need to distill it down into a movie.”

The editing process picked up speed once the shooting was finished. Rough cuts were screened for producers, studio executives and the film’s stars, all of whom offered feedback. Jurgensen would often take those suggestions and make new edits to see if they were effective.

“A lot of it is trial and error,” he explained. “If an idea doesn’t work, that’s OK. Sometimes it leads to another idea. It’s a process.”

Asked how he keeps straight in his mind what is in and out of the final cut, Jurgensen chuckled. Computer files help, he said (all his work is digital). But he admitted that after working on a film for nearly two years, “I’ve seen so many incarnations of it that, by the time you release it into the world, you ask yourself, ‘Is this any good?’”

In the case of “One Battle After Another,” with its Metacritic score of 95, the answer has come back loud and clear.

All reserved tickets for the 2 p.m., Saturday [event at the Pollock](#) have been claimed, but a stand-by line will be formed at the door.

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