DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT
FOR THE *DEBATE TEAM* DOCUMENTARY
BY B. DOUGLAS ROBBINS

Before I made this film, I had no fucking idea how to make a film. Unlike other filmmakers, I didn't go to film school, I didn't make cute little super-8 movies as a kid, I didn't shoot a short film that got into the SXSW Film Festival. I wasn't that I didn't understand how to make a film, I didn't even understand how to shoot a film. I mean we didn't even have a camera. And when we bought a camera we barely knew how to use it.

By the winter of 2004 I had been laid off my job for nearly a year. It's not that I was bad at my job, at a high powered law firm in Silicon Valley, it was that I was just didn't believe in the program. You can't just *work* at these firms, they want you to believe too. And admittedly, I was completely naïve about how to navigate the jackassery of high-octane office politics. I don't blame the firm, I blame myself. The firm is what it is. Just like other high-powered firms that pay their young associates way too much, the deal is this: they own your soul. And if you think they don't then ask yourself: why the fuck are they letting you drive around in a Porsche? Because they love you? Is it for love? No. See? I was naïve.

And I didn't completely understand the Faustian bargain I had gotten myself into. I thought it was a 9 to 5 job. I didn't want to work on the weekends. I didn't want to review documents in windowless offices until my eyes ran out of fluid. This is not hyperbole. I didn't want to be fucked in the ass by the senior associates. Like I said, I just didn't believe in the program. I did not care if I made partner. And it showed. And then I was laid off. The severance package was tremendously generous—way more generous than I deserved. And that's what I lived off of for about 18 months. Oh yeah, and I had to sell the Porsche.

From my perspective I wasn't even sure if I had a future in law. Without actually making an overt decision to do so, I began to prepare myself for another career. In the ensuing year I taught myself Final Cut Pro and practiced my craft on recutting reality TV shows. One of my favorite was recutting a season of *Average Joe*, a "Bachelorette" type show, where average looking contestants compete with male models for the heart of a superhotchick who clearly does not need any help dating anyone ever. The show was genius. It was basically **hot chicks with douchebags** crashes into hot chicks with not so attractive nervous guys. At the end of these shows, the superhotchick would always choose the male model. So I would recut the show so that the superhotchick ultimately chose the average joe guy instead. And she would cry and he would cry and they would live happily ever after. It was beautiful.

Joe Walling, my best friend and producer on the documentary was also unemployed at the time. He had just quit his job as a research psychologist at Stanford. So we found ourselves in the winter of 2004 with no formal employment and no reliable income. So we bought a mound of video equipment and put it on credit cards. It seems cute to look back on it now, but at the time things seemed really bleak. After working

toward certain careers our entire lives it turned out that things did not turn out like they were supposed to. The fantasy did not match the reality. And now we're unemployed and going into debt on this thing don't know anything about. I figured the chances of the documentary working out were 50/50, which seemed like better odds than trying somehow to be happy practicing law.

Then we spent a month trying to teach ourselves how to work the equipment—books, classes, online tutorials. How hard could it be? After all, we had the owners manuals and everything. I stole a shopping cart from IKEA and Joe modified it with closed-cell foam from Craigslist and plywood from my Dad's garage (he'll never miss it): instant dolly.

In December, I contacted Gordon Stables, coach at USC, and we got permission to shoot their annual debate tournament, held during the last few days of the year. Joe and I drove the 400 miles from the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles. On the very first day of shooting, the USC campus was wet from rain. Joe and I pushed the stolen dolly piled high with equipment through campus until we found Gordon under a three-story concrete awning outside a building hosting the USC Tournament.

It was a miracle it happened at all. The whole thing was ridiculous. On no money we bought a bunch of equipment that we didn't know how to operate in order to make a movie we didn't know how to shoot. And somehow we had made it. Four hundred miles and three months later, we made it. It's raining. But we made it. And here's Gordon our USC contact, a totally cool guy. And we're about to do our first day of shooting. This might work. This just might work.

And then Gordon tells us we can't shoot.

Apparently, at some point after speaking with me, Gordon had spoken to his boss, the Director of Forensics ("DOF"), who told Gordon that we needed all kinds of approval from the USC administration to shoot on campus. Since we didn't get the approval from USC and since the administration was shut down for Christmas break, there was no way he could let us shoot. All of this would have been useful to know before we left San Francisco.

Gordon was very apologetic but it was pretty clear that we had been fucked and that there was nothing to do for it now. When Gordon's boss, the Director of Forensics ("DOF") eventually showed up, Joe turned on the charm. Joe can be very sweet when he wants to be and we were laughing at how absurd the situation was. Come on, you can make one exception. We drove so far. We only drove down here *because Gordon told us it was okay to shoot*. I was really burning up inside, doing my best to appear friendly and calm. Instead I began twitching like a lunatic. Eventually the DOF asked, "Okay, so how much insurance are you guys carrying?"

So here's a funny thing about the insurance. We didn't have any. I looked into getting $2 million general liability policy, which I was told was the standard in the industry for independent productions like ours, but the quote was something like $700.

That was crazy money. The whole week-long trip was going to be cheaper than the cost of the insurance (remember, this is back when oil was cheap; and we were crashing at a friend's apartment). So Joe and I resolved to just tell everyone that we had the $2 million policy. We just wouldn't mention that it was imaginary. Straight-faced, I told the DOF, "We're carrying a $2 million general liability with $4 million in the aggregate."

The DOF replied, "Well, that's light. Normally we need a $5 million policy, minimum." I was blown out. Here we were being told our imaginary $2 million policy was "light." No only did we not know what we were doing as moviemakers, we didn't even seem to have come equipped with the right kind of fake insurance. Joe and I later considered reporting back to the DOF that we had increased the policy to a jillion dollars to see if that would have made any difference. But for now we where shut down. After a lot of arm twisting they agreed to let us shoot outside. But we couldn't shoot indoors and we were not permitted to shoot the debates. Kids could get hurt. Someone might be burned on a light. Girls might go wild. The risk was too much to stomach.

So on that first day, we shot outside while the rain periodically whipped around. We shot the previous year's national champion, Greta Stahl, and her coach from Michigan State, Will Repko. Joe shot while I interviewed, holding the boom pole like I had seen Nick Broomfield do in his documentaries. I sort of felt like a fraud, but the funny thing is, when you point a big fancy camera at people, they completely take you seriously. After all, why the fuck would you be hauling around $10,000 in video equipment unless you knew what you were doing? It turns out that no one asks for resumes. They do not need to see your card. The camera wasn't just a camera. It was instant credibility. So people would show up for an interview and they would just assume they'd be on HBO next week. Amazing.

We interviewed Whitman's coach Joe Carver, Berkeley's coach Greg Achten, and Wake Forest's coach Dr. Allan Louden. We even shot Gordon. The truth is we didn't shoot these coaches because we thought they were the key to the documentary (early on, I believed that the documentary would be entirely about the debaters not their coaches), we shot them because there was no one else to shoot. Also we figured that in order to get close to the squad we would have to get coach approval. So the interviews were more of meet-and-greet than the acquisition of footage we thought we would ever use.

By the second day of production, new year's eve 2004, the tournament narrowed to the octofinal round, and then quarters. We had come all the way down here and had not shot one debater. Not one debate. It was slipping away.

I had a last heart-to-heart with Gordon which I was fairly certain would fail. I do not say this for effect. I really had no reason to think that Gordon had the authority to override his boss and let us shoot, with no authorization from the administration, and with our "light" insurance policy. I do not remember entirely what I said but I must have guilted the living-crap out of him because he let us inside to film the last two rounds, the semifinals and finals. And that's where we met Klinger and Tarloff from Harvard. And

where we met Calum Matheson then-coach for North Texas. All three ended up being crucial characters in the film.

Joe and I ended up shooting four tournaments in total, the USC tournament, the California State Fullerton tournament, the UC Berkeley tournament, and the National Championship held in 2005 at San Francisco State. But early on, Joe and I discovered we had very serious problem: very few people wanted to tell us on camera how they really felt. The debaters were highly protective of their interior life. After a while I came up with a term for it: "Fortified." The students were like medieval castles with high walls, moats, crenellations, sometimes hot oil. Joe and I filmed and did interviews for about a year and captured very few truly revealing moments. We were worried that there was no emotional hook for the story. The debaters would say what they were doing but not why. They would talk about theories and ideas but not personal motivations. Sometimes they would even let slip a little bit of debate gossip but they would never admit vulnerabilities.

I really didn't know what to do about this problem. I figured either that I wasn't a very good interviewer or that these students were just the kind of people who didn't feel comfortable revealing anything about themselves. Because we lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, I put a lot of time and energy trying to get one of the debaters from UC Berkeley to let me follow them around in their daily lives, at school, at home. But none of them granted us access. Fortified.

Joe and I even gave a presentation to the San Francisco State squad about how they should let us film the them. There was a very lively debate about who the fuck were we and why the fuck should they trust us, and what guarantee do they have that they won't end up looking like ass clowns. They wanted final cut. They wanted promises. Of course we couldn't do any of that. In the end, they said thanks but no-thanks.

It's hard to blame them, of course. There's no way in hell I would ever want a documentary made of me. Documentaries are invariably someone else's vision of who you are. There are going to be parts of it you don't like, not because they are not true but because they are. Emphasis will be placed on aspects of your life that you wished were not. The things you don't want to talk about, the documentary will. The way you see yourself is not how the documentary will see you. And the dissonance will be upsetting.

In any event, the production was sort of fucked. We'd put all this energy into it, gone to all these tournaments and all we got was a bunch of kids talking really fast. Without some more meaty interviews, even I wouldn't want to watch this documentary.

This changed in a big way the next summer when I did an interview with Mike Miller, a debater from the 1960s who discussed his suicidal ideation and life long struggles with personal identity as a result of what he perceived to be certain failures he faced during his career as a college debater. All the more remarkable was the fact that these perceived failures were accompanied by perhaps the single greatest record in the history of debate: 22 tournament wins over the course of his tenure, including final round finishes in every single tournament he attended during the 1968-69 season. I heard about Miller from James Thomas who told me about one of **Miller's eDebate Postings** in

which Miller recounted the story of his college debate career in cringing detail. The depth of Miller's revelation is remarkable. This passage is typical:

> Bill English frequently used the term "debate bum" to describe people on the squad who had no life but debate. Looking back, I think a more appropriate term was "debate addict" or "debate junkie," but whatever you call it, it was pathological.

A number of other debaters have described debate as an **addiction or a disease**. It is easy to pass over these comments as mere exaggerations but when so many people are saying the same weird thing, it begins to make you think.

Miller also spoke about his deep self loathing upon losing the national title to Harvard in '69. Miller's postings really intrigued me. And I could completely relate. I wasn't obsessed with debate exactly but I was quickly becoming obsessed with making a documentary about debate. And why was that? I think it was because I saw it as a path redemption for what I felt was my own great failure . . . .

In some ways the documentary really began about fifteen years ago, right after I graduated from college and I began to think about writing **a novel**. To this day I'm not entirely sure why I wanted to write a novel. I think part of it had to do with this idea that it was boring to live a 9 to 5 life, to have 2.1 kids, a minivan and a mortgage. Not just boring, it also seemed cowardly, evidence of a failure to grasp the vital emergency of our dying every second, to squeeze marrow, to live your life full-throttle, and willing to give everything you have in pursuit of the thing you want the most. I was romanced by the idea of the writer's life. The intellectual's life. This was a period of time in the early 1990s when the idea of the great American novel was dying but it was not dead. I was deeply influenced by a number of writers, but most notably, Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac, Tom Wolfe, and Henry David Thoreau. To me it seemed both impossible and also miraculous to have written a novel. I could not really imagine doing it. So I decided to try.

But the more I think about it now, there was also a darker, more needy part of my motivation to write a book. I think I basically hated myself in too many ways to ever admit aloud. I hoped that by writing a novel that I might be able to prove to the world how deeply talented I was, how special, how very important. Maybe this aura of importance would eclipse any suspicion others might have about how small and ugly I truly was. Even now, I have to admit, the idea has a plausible logic to it: that you can overcome your inadequacies, or at least overshadow them, through sheer prestige.

In the spring of 1995 I took a five-month road trip in my bright red Volkswagen Microbus all across the country, dropping in on debate tournament after debate tournament, researching the novel. I interviewed debaters and recorded rounds on a hand-held Panasonic tape recorder. And one day, parked out in a Nevada dry lake in the middle of an expansive desert, began writing about college debate. During this trip I met

a young Will Repko who was coaching his sister, Biza, at Michigan State to a national championship.[*] And so began my three year quest.

Every day on the road, I wrote. While living in an A-frame cabin up in the Lake County forest, I wrote. The one novel turned into two, into three, and ultimately into almost four—although the fourth one never got completely through a first draft. I wrote all the time, every day, for almost three years. I went through five drafts on three different novels. I lived in poverty in Oakland with a band of jazz musicians, taking weird jobs that let me write during the day. I was a VW mechanic for a while, then a dishwasher and later a waiter at a macrobiotic restaurant in Berkeley called Organica. I went deeply into credit card debt. And I wrote. And I imagined what it would be like to be an important novelist. I would have to go to book tours and give lectures. Maybe *Fresh Air* on NPR; maybe Letterman. I'd have no choice. My fans would demand it.

But as the years passed, it became clear to me that the book was unsellable and my writing maybe wasn't good enough. After so much energy and commitment and focus, the project turned out to be a failure. So many girls I didn't date, so many other projects I didn't pursue. And in 1998 I went off to law school. I really did not know what to make of it. So many years of my twenties were spent writing a novel about debate and in the end it went nowhere. I wanted it so bad. It was completely crushing to have to admit that it wasn't just a failure but a life-quest failure. It was the kind of failure that kills you a little every day until you are numb because the numbness is the only way to get some quiet from this monster that you swallowed (and now rumbles around in your ribcage as if behind bars).

To this day, it is difficult to make sense of it. What was the point? It significantly damaged my sense of fate and place in the world. After all, if you can commit yourself to years on a quest that turns out to be meaningless, that goes nowhere, and does nothing, then it is difficult to continue to believe that you are a part of some larger scheme in which you were meant, according to the structure of the universe, to do the things that you do. The waste of it all belies any notion of a grand plan.

But then the idea of the documentary came along. Ahhhh. Interesting. What if the reason why I wrote the debate novel was to prepare me to make a documentary about debate? And if the documentary worked, then in some way, all that time and energy on the novel would not be just a pointless waste. It would be part of a larger continuum. In many ways the documentary became a way to redeem myself for the crushing failures of the novel.

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[*] After following Biza, Will, and MSU around the country for a few tournaments, I had never witnessed Biza lose a round. Will developed a superstition that Biza would never lose as long as I was watching. Sometimes he would plead that I come and watch some important round. In the end, I followed Biza up through the final round of the CEDA National Tournament in San Diego, which I then watched her win. The following year I watched Biza climb through outrounds of CEDA Nats, rung through rung, until (through the protestations of the MSU staff) the quarterfinal round, where I left to watch some other team debate. Biza lost that round, and because it was her senior year, she never debated again.

And all this obsessing about success and failure, about fate and redemption, about self worth and self loathing was reflected, like a mirror in Mike Miller's story. I needed Mike's interview because I felt that in chasing his story I was chasing my own. Ironically, as the documentary itself slowly turned into its own obsession, I found myself not just chasing a story, but simultaneously living it. The Miller interview was the turning point for me. It was then that the central theme of the documentary emerged. This was a documentary about competition, but more importantly, what it meant to succeed and fail and the potentially very painful consequences of rigidly internalizing a high-risk/high pay-off ethic. I mean wouldn't I have been better off in some sense had I not ever started on the novel, and just found myself a girlfriend to obsess over? Maybe so. Maybe it's better to be happy than a winner. And that was the question I began to ask.

I asked Dave Strauss and Greta Stahl, 2004 National Champions from Michigan State, if there was anything in the world for which they would trade their 1st place trophy. **One said $10 million** while **the other said no way**. When I asked Will Repko, their coach the same question he thought about it for a while until **he eventually settled on true love**. I asked a variation on that question to a set of four high school sophomores who were attending the Michigan State Summer Debate Camp in 2006 (called the Spartan Debate Institute). It was interesting to me that although they **eventually agreed that it was not worth giving up your true love for a national title**, it took them a while to reason it out. And it appeared to be a pretty close call.

To me that's one of the bigger questions of the documentary: What does it mean to win; **what does it mean to lose**; and how much are you willing to pay. Everyone pays something. Even the winners do not get out for free. Which in my mind brings me back to the story of Mike Miller.

Mike is one of the biggest winners in the history of debate. He did things in debate that no one had done before and no one has done since. Yet when he left the activity he **felt like a complete failure**. What to make of this? I think there may very well be a very ugly aspect to competition. It provides what many perceive to be a forum for redemption. You need never love yourself, come to grips with your past, navigate the painful straits of growing up, develop empathy, or think and meditate on who you are and who you want to be just as long as you win. At something. Anything. And if you win, no one looks further into your heart. No one cares.

In the last parts of an essay like this I begin to feel compelled to state some larger point: some abstraction about the nature of competition, about America's obsession with winners, or maybe about the importance to just remember that win or lose all you need is love. This is the part of the essay where I say that I've learned something, and Mike Miller has learned something, and the debaters and coaches in the film have learned something, and we're better, wiser people now, and we're marching toward a brighter tomorrow.

But the more truthful statement is this: I cannot recommend writing a novel or making a documentary. It is unclear to me that I am any happier now than I was before I started these projects. I am not sure if they were worth my time. Worse yet, I imagine an alternative past in which I did things differently, got married early, had kids. And even then I imagine myself as restless and frustrated that I had not at least tried to reach for **something higher [Repko].** And so it seems to me like a double bind.

Some people are happy and they are happy no matter what they do. I am reminded of the **Dartmouth team**—fresh scrubbed kids, smiling the whole time—who were happy to be in the final round of the National Championship, and who lost, and went on, undoubtedly to be happy in their lives regardless of their second place finish; satisfied, justifiably so, to have been in that upper echelon, even if not custodians of the top trophy. You will not find them sitting in a La-Z-Boy twenty years from now lamenting the past.

And there are some people who are strivers and they'll always be strivers and they may never be satisfied. If they win, it's pleasant and they're constantly looking to do it again. And if they lose, it is as if the sky has crashed in. I might be one of those.