

STIFLE

narrative feature film
psychological thriller / horror
written & directed by

BRENDAN PROST

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musical moodboard on Spotify

<https://bit.ly/stifleplaylist>



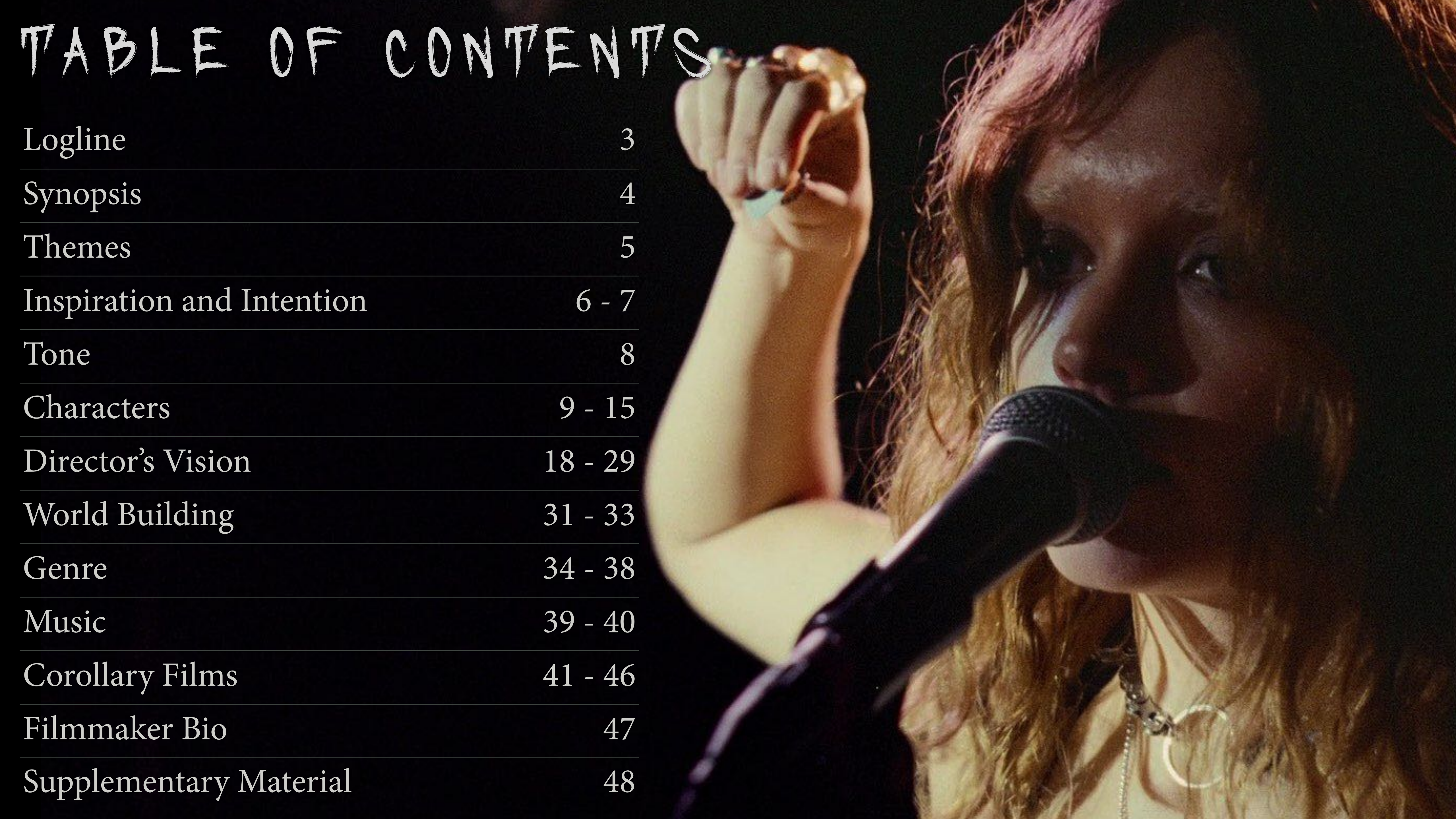
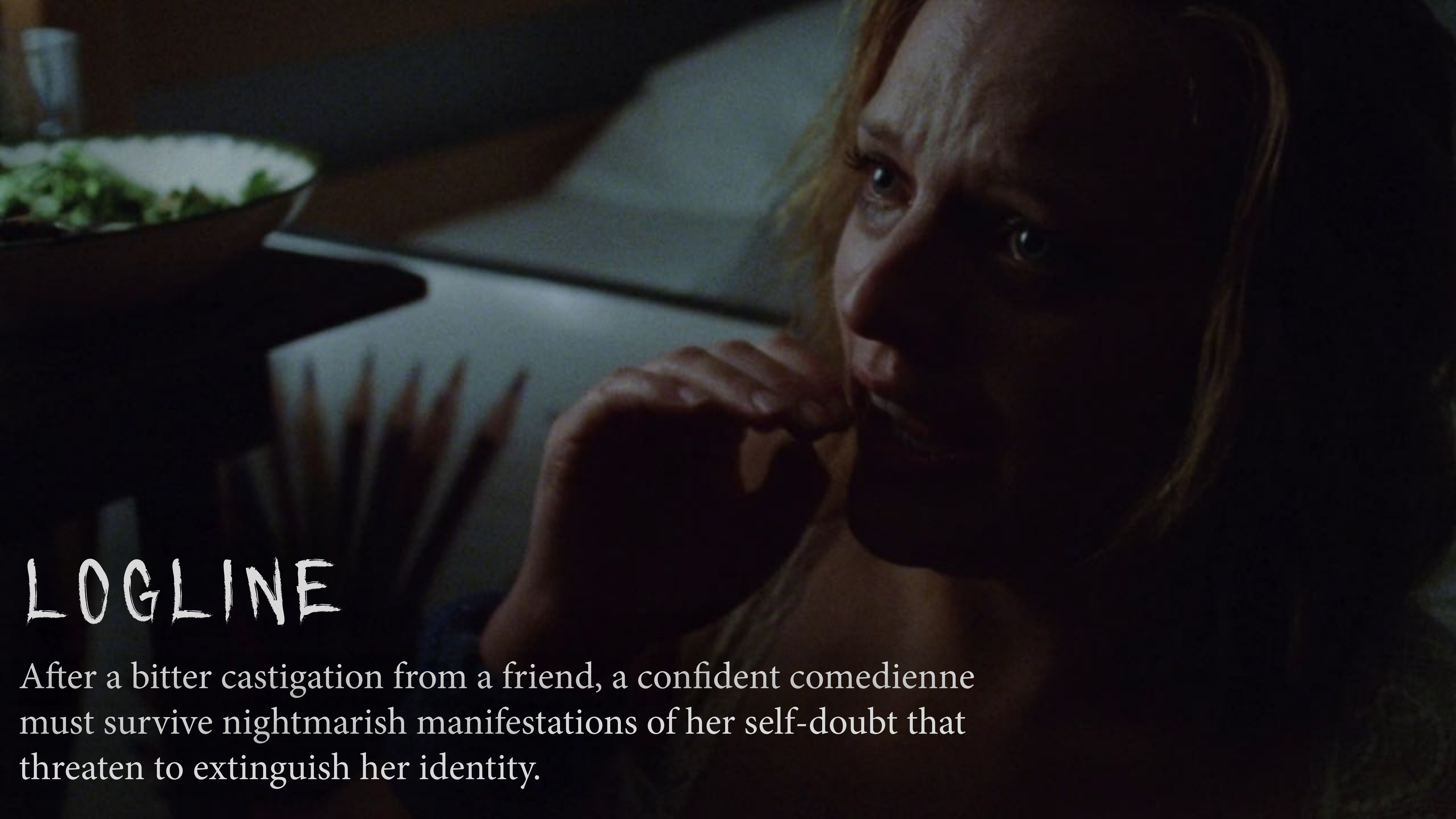


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LOGLINE

After a bitter castigation from a friend, a confident comedienne must survive nightmarish manifestations of her self-doubt that threaten to extinguish her identity.

SYNOPSIS

Zadie is a confident and impulsive rising star in the Toronto comedy scene, unaware that her friend Janelle is growing resentful of her success and alienated by her intense energy. When their long simmering conflict erupts into a bitter argument, Janelle seizes the opportunity to humble Zadie with a bitter, personal castigation.

As Zadie nears an important professional opportunity, she is haunted by horrifying manifestations of her latent self-doubt, which cripple her natural spontaneity and poise. Initially convinced she is being plagued by repressed mental health issues, Zadie desperately seeks treatment and support, but grows suspicious of Janelle's increasingly strange behaviour. Only when Zadie's psychological torment extends to physical disfigurement does she finally discover that Janelle has exhumed a neglected occult practice to infuse her words of reprimand with black magic.

Realizing that the insidious self-doubt that has possessed her is not of her own design, Zadie is able to summon the strength to confront Janelle, end their toxic relationship, and break the curse that has ensnared her. After recovering, she returns to her career in comedy emotionally and physically scarred— a more sardonic and trepidatious version of her former self.



THEMES

Self-Doubt, Insecurity, and Inhibition

Secondary Theme:
Mental Illness and Loss of Identity

Secondary Theme:
Vulnerability of Public Performance



Secondary Theme:
Performative Allyship and Toxic Friendship

INSPIRATION AND INTENTION

Stifle was born of a realization that all of my personal impulses had been re-wired over the course of a decade or so. Although I had begun my adulthood as a self-assured young firebrand, I was entering my thirties as insecure and desperate for external validation. As my lack of confidence began to depress and disorient me, I began to reflect upon the painful personal and professional rejections of my life, and how I wore them on my consciousness like scars that would never heal.

I realized that many of these wounds were the result of potent words of aspersion throughout the years, from people I thought were my friends, lovers, or peers. My self-doubt was really their voices of reproach continuing to echo in my mind. I was stifling certain things about myself because I was self-conscious about them, and the criticism I received from others had realized my worst fears.

This personal experience inspired me to tell a story about the horrors of self-erasure. *Stifle* is a film about what it feels like to have the essence of who you are torn away by malevolent forces preying upon your sensitivity. It explores the origins of the pernicious thoughts we all have about ourselves, and how they can come to possess and transform us. It confronts us with the terrifying prospect of seeing our reflection in a mirror and not recognizing who we see, and reminds us how vulnerable we are to being scarred by the people we hold close.



INSPIRATION AND INTENTION

I also wanted this to be a film about someone who is uniquely vulnerable to external threats— a performer and a woman, and one with a radical voice. Performing onstage to an audience takes real courage and poise, and to do so as a marginalized person with an unconventional perspective is nothing short of heroic. It's the precarious nature of that compelled resilience, and the enormous responsibility that allies and friends have in that scenario, that I think makes *Stifle* an aggressively contemporary story.

Although my previous film work has been mostly grounded and naturalistic, telling this story requires a more forceful and stylized approach. Being haunted by negative self-talk often carries with it the threat of violence, and the various individual crises that Zadie experiences in the film—obsessive self-consciousness, depersonalization, depression, paranoia—are already so much like a nightmare to anyone who experiences them. Giving myself permission to play within a genre context will make *Stifle* a uniquely harrowing experience, that couldn't exist in a conventional drama. The bold creative choices that will make *Stifle* distinct from the rest of my oeuvre are, in a sense, also an effort to reclaim the personal audacity I feel as though I've lost. Making this film for me is an opportunity to make visible the horrors of self-doubt, in order to begin to confront it in my own life.

I hope *Stifle* will be a film that awakens some to the responsibilities they have to the vulnerable folks around them. For others, I hope it's a film that allows them to safely engage with their own worst fears—about how your mind, or your closest allies, may turn against you.



7 TONE

Seizing upon the originality of setting a horror film in the world of professional comedy, *Stifle* is an uncanny and volatile experience that will keep people on their toes throughout. It begins feeling brusque and tense, but interspersed with uneasy laughter, as if there is a conflict brewing underneath the surface of this friendship and behind the curtains of these joyful performance spaces.

As Zadie unravels, the film's manic energy will gradually settle, replaced by a creeping sense of dismay. We will keep the audience in suspense, unsure whether Zadie is afflicted by psychosis or something supernatural, and breathlessly pile on unique new horrors that are rooted in recognizable forms of self-doubt. The audience's fear will always be infused with a feeling of defeat— they won't know whether to scream, or cry.

Although Zadie's deterioration has a familiar arc to it, the unique emotional identification and the context— the scenes of comedy, improvisation, and performance— will make for something fresh and totally unpredictable. In the end, the audience experiences the catharsis of Zadie surviving the curse. But, the scars of her experience will leave the audience with a lingering sense of dread.



CHARACTERS



ZADIE

Zadie is a confident and impulsive standup and improvisational comedienne whose fiery and playful manner make her the life of the party and centre of attention everywhere she goes. She's a polarizing person to be around, but her strong moral compass and compassion lends intention to her antagonism. And, she's bonafidely talented and hilarious.

She's developed a thick skin to deal with the challenges of public performance and an active online life, and is strategic about who she truly makes herself vulnerable to. Her self-assuredness is partially the product of having recently come into her own and starting to excel professionally, and partially a mask for latent self-doubt that few know about.





ZADIE



JANELLE

Janelle is a perceptive and shrewd woman who aspires to be a creative professional, but is temporarily floundering in part-time arts admin work. She's a bit circumspect, needing to maintain a sense of order in her life, and is increasingly frustrated by her inability to flourish the way Zadie has.

Janelle is still discovering herself, and pursues an eclectic mix of professional and recreational interests in the hopes of finding her way. She struggles with conservative impulses that have been ingrained in her from childhood, and doesn't always find it easy to fit in with her uber-liberal friends. Janelle has neglected a malevolent occult practise from her teenage years, which she exhumes when her resentment boils over.





JANELLE



MAMOUDOU

Mamoudou is Zadie's affable and impassioned boyfriend who works as a delivery driver for a local microbrewery. Although he sometimes lacks the emotional vocabulary to support Zadie in the way she needs, his heart is always in the right place and he excels at romantic gestures. Mamoudou has no trouble being present, and finds satisfaction in the simplest pleasures.

Mamoudou loves a woman of great conviction, but he's a peacemaker himself and knows how to charm people into consensus. Zadie admires these things about him, but they also drive her crazy sometimes.





MAMOUDDOU





ZADIE'S COLLABORATORS

Although the television show Zadie's been working on is her baby, she has partners that work with her. They are an energetic and eclectic group with different personalities and rhetorical styles, but a shared sense of humour and absolute adoration for Zadie. They're all talented writers, but need someone to organize and drive their efforts forward, and are grateful that Zadie has been the one to bring them all together. Through the development of their show, they've come to know one another well, and have no trouble talking over one another and making jokes at each other's expense.



SADIA



IZAD

ZADIE'S
COLLABORATORS



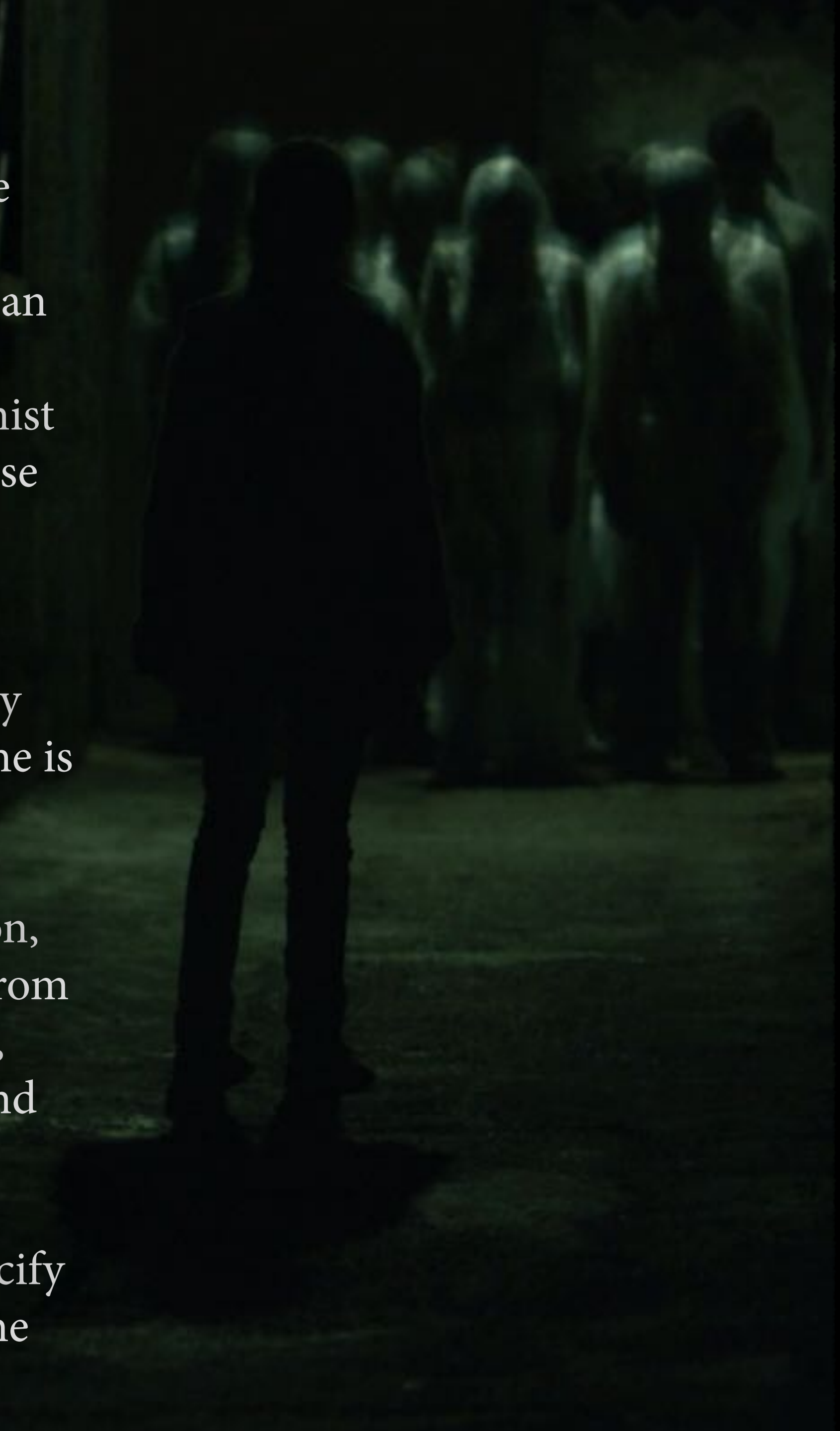
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DIRECTOR'S VISION

Stifle begins as a grounded character drama, unravels into a psychological thriller, before finally exploding into a full-blown horror film. It uses its unique setting— the world of performance and comedy— to destabilize audience expectations, explore key themes in an acutely dramatic way, and offer wholly original opportunities for unnerving visual storytelling. It revolves around the experience of a challenging but sympathetic protagonist (Zadie), and offers a highly subjective take on her descent into self-erasure. It is an intense and succinct journey, told with flair in an emotionally forceful manner.

We externalize the threat to her in the form of a resentful friend and roommate (Janelle) who wields clandestine powers of the occult, but for most of the film leave her culpability ambiguous. Similar to *Rosemary's Baby*, Zadie and the audience are never quite sure if she is imagining things, or if there really are sinister forces at work, until it is too late.

Zadie's arc is one of the loss. Janelle's curse targets Zadie's sense of confidence, conviction, and passion. Zadie's goal through the film is to try and preserve these unique qualities from being destroyed, and ultimately to maintain her sense of identity. Although she survives, like many heroines in the horror genre, Zadie is profoundly altered by the experience, and will never be the same. At the end of the film, the intensity of her spirit has been diminished, and she has learned to be more cautious about who she makes herself vulnerable to. Janelle's goal in the film is to humble Zadie, but her ultimate need is to pacify the discontent she has with her own lackadaisical nature. They are both left scarred by the experience, and the audience is left with a lingering sense of dread.



DIRECTOR'S VISION

Stifle is part of a tradition of what some critics as refer to as "elevated genre cinema" that includes films like *Black Swan*, *The Babadook*, and *Hereditary*. In the vein of these films, *Stifle* motivates all the genre elements through the lens of personal trauma, and adds a socio-political backdrop that adds a sense of contemporary vitality. What makes my approach to this genre unique is a dedication to texturing Zadie's experience with a broader spectrum of emotion. My sense of earnest as a filmmaker creates what I think of as "heartrending horror". *Stifle* is terrifying, but it is also infused with humour, rage, sadness, and despair.

To that end, *Stifle* will pursue a gritty realism in terms of what is placed in front of the camera (the dramatization, lighting, and production design chiefly), and then contextualize it with more genre-tinged techniques (camera work, imagery, music). I see it aesthetically and stylistically very much in the vein of a film like *Suspiria* (2018).





CAMERA LANGUAGE

At the beginning of the film, the camera work will emphasize the energy and dynamism of Zadi's character by keeping things handheld or on steadicam, on something akin to a 35mm lens to immerse the audience in the action. We will utilize a brusque and spontaneous operating style to build a sense of volatility and tension, to keep the audience on their toes. I am inspired particularly by how Alex Ross Perry and Darren Aronofsky captured their protagonist in films like *Her Smell*, *Black Swan*, and *mother!*.

A woman with blonde hair is shown in a dimly lit room, looking off-camera with a serious expression. The lighting is low, creating a moody atmosphere. The background is dark and out of focus, with some architectural elements visible.

CAMERA LANGUAGE

As Zadie's sense of self begins to deteriorate, the camera style will grow lazier and less adept to following the scene to illustrate her inhibition. Rather than chasing the action, the camera will drift a bit more—the movement taking on a sluggish quality. We will also start to use longer lenses as the film goes along to, to convey a more observational experience of the action as Zadie starts to disassociate.



CAMERA LANGUAGE





LIGHTING

Although the lighting design shouldn't overtly signal the horrifying trajectory of the film from the outset, it should suggest that there are things lurking in the shadows. I imagine strategic pockets of harsh top light, and murky shadows in the background that you can peer into— but not see detail.



LIGHTING

I am particularly inspired by Sayombhu Mukdeeprom's work on *Suspiria* (2018), and the way he created something that feels quite grounded, but nightmarish at the same time. He's always inviting the audience to look into the background, but withholding what's there in order to give the film a chilling, disorienting, and threatening quality.




LIGHTING




ZADIE'S NIGHTMARES

Our visual treatment of Zadie's nightmare will have a more controlled and menacing quality. The compositions will be more striking and exact, and the camera movement limited. The lighting will be a bit more contrasty, and the colours more saturated.



ZADIE'S
NIGHTMARES

A man in a dark vest and light shirt is performing on a stage in a dimly lit club. He is holding a microphone and looking towards the right. The stage is lit with warm yellow spotlights. In the background, there are several tables with red lamps and a large green spotlight beam shining across the room.

PRODUCTION DESIGN

Everything will be grounded in a gritty realism— shooting mostly on location and utilizing as much previously used material as possible. I see jagged shapes in the set decoration, props, and locations whenever possible in order to emphasize a sense of danger to these joyful spaces. For instance, we will select stages and performance spaces with hard lines and a square proscenium, rather than an a circular thrust. *Stifle* is also a big city movie, and will emphasize the close-quarters, grime, and well-worn qualities of these urban environments.



SPECIAL AND VISUAL EFFECTS

We will deploy a light touch and a practical approach to the effects whenever possible. For the doppelganger sequences, I will utilize camera trickery, selective lighting, and photo doubles rather than CGI. For the design of the demons in the face of Zadie's collaborators and in the audience, I envision a subtle alteration that one could also consider subliminal— something as simple as a performance affectation, selective makeup effects, and colour adjustments to the eyes. You'd feel like you were seeing something wrong with their faces, but you wouldn't necessarily know how to describe it.



SPECIAL AND
VISUAL EFFECTS





THE COMEDY AND PERFORMANCE WORLD



WORLD BUILDING

One of the things that makes *Stifle* unique is that it takes place in the comedy world, and uses the particular challenges associated with performance to dramatically explore the perils of inhibition and crippling self-consciousness. There's a tension to setting a story of psychological trauma in environments usually characterized by laughter and joy, which I will explore by offering an authentic representation of the Toronto comedy scene, then subverting it with images of terror and delirium.



A dimly lit comedy bar entrance. The sign above the door reads "COMEDY BAR" in large, bold, yellow letters. Below the sign is a menu board with two rows of text. The first row lists "8PM BEERPROV THE DRAFT" and "1 PM TWO STRIKES". The second row lists "8PM WE HAPPY FEW" and "930PM LAUGH SABBATH". A man and a woman are standing in the doorway, looking into the bar. The interior is dark, with some lights visible inside. A "PASS" sign is visible on the left side of the door.

COMEDY BAR

8PM BEERPROV THE DRAFT 1 PM TWO STRIKES
8PM WE HAPPY FEW 930PM LAUGH SABBATH

WORLD BUILDING

The Toronto comedy scene is a tight-knit and diverse community of folks hustling between different creative forms and gigs to survive. They have to navigate social and professional spaces with confidence and charisma. It's a demanding, thrilling, whirlwind lifestyle that we're going to step inside of, through a process of consultation and collaboration.

During scenes of improvisation, stand-up comedy, commercial acting, pitching, and improv training, we'll get a sense for the emotional rigors and different skills required to succeed. And, as Zadie's emotional condition deteriorates, we'll see how that work preys upon sensitive people and demands a network of support.



GENRE AND THE FILM'S OCCULT ELEMENTS



DRAMA/THRILLER/HORROR

Although *Stifle* begins feeling grounded and dramatic, and it has elements of a psychological thriller, the film ultimately claims the horror mantle because, as in the tradition of the genre's greats, the malevolent forces that torment Zadie are an external manifestation of her unique fears, particularly those she harbours as a performer. It's not *just* in her mind.

Janelle's curse is only as powerful as it is because Zadie, despite her outward confidence, is like many artists haunted by the spectre of self-doubt. Everything that happens to her— paralyzing inhibition, vicious denigration, disassociation, depersonalization, paranoia, mutism, muzzling— is the wicked design of her own imagination.





HEARTRENDING HORROR

Crucially, although the curse is what unleashes these fears and allows them to transform Zadie's life into a living nightmare, the emotional catalyst for this spiral is the vicious personal castigation Zadie receives from Janelle. The "curse words" that Janelle uses wound Zadie not just because they are loaded with black magic, but because they attack a fundamental insecurity Zadie has that only Janelle would know about. In this way, *Stifle* will remain a grounded character drama at heart, always motivating horror techniques and supernatural elements through the psychological and emotional life of the characters.

A dark, circular ritual space with lit candles and a chalk drawing on a wooden floor. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the numerous lit candles scattered around the perimeter of the circle. The floor is made of dark wood planks, and a chalk drawing, possibly a pentagram or a similar occult symbol, is visible in the center. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

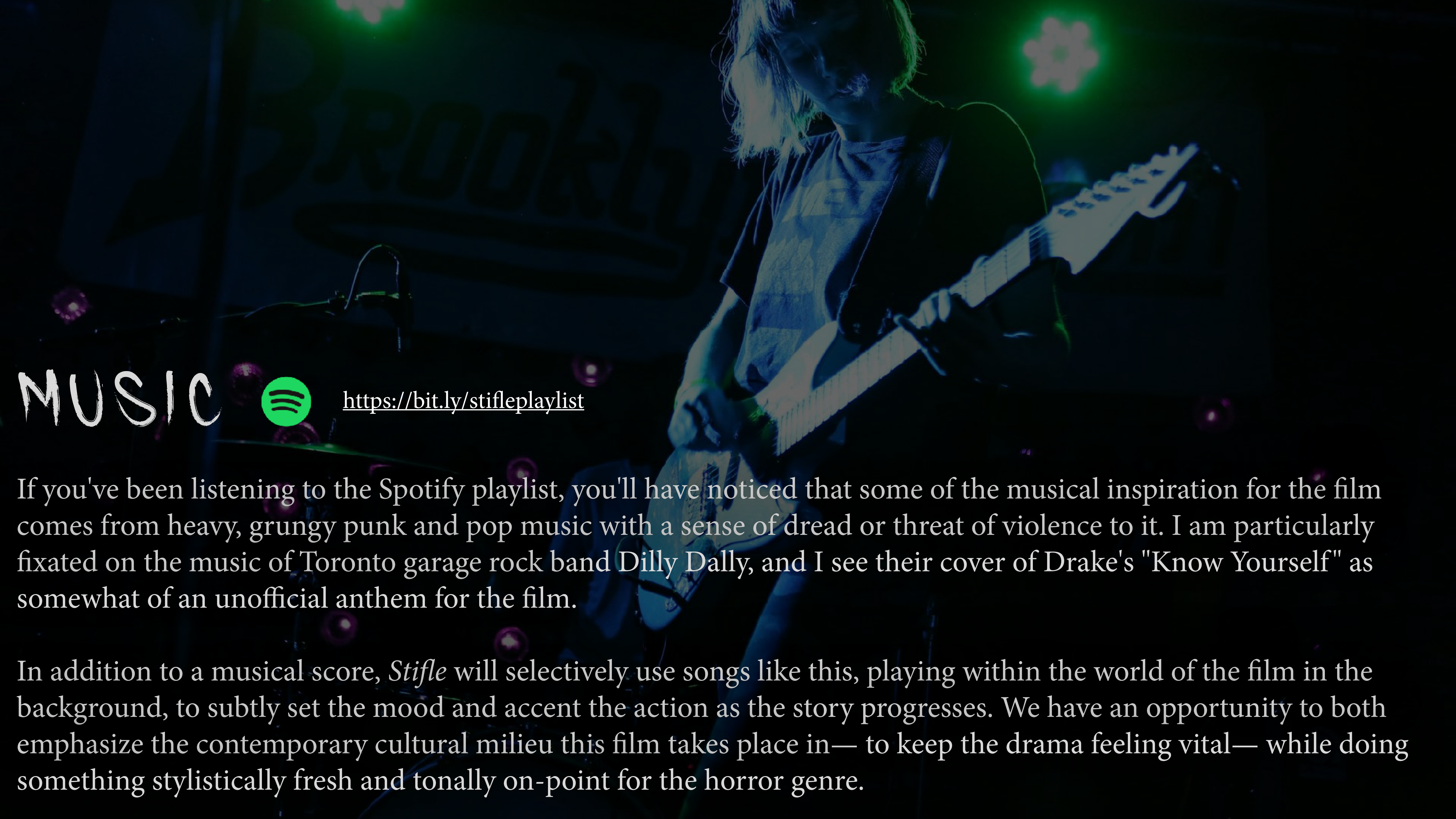
THE OCCULT

To this end, the occult elements will be a subtle, background part of the plot, similar to films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Hereditary*. We'll establish a sense for the darkness to come through tone and style, but limit the audience's narrative perspective to what Zadie sees and hears. And, just like *Rosemary*, the magic that entraps Zadie mostly happens on her periphery. We'll foreground the trauma of what's unfolding, and only offer little glimpses of *how* it's happening, while keeping the occult elements aesthetically subtle and vaguely familiar.

A woman with long dark hair is shown in a dark, cluttered room, looking upwards with a fearful expression. The lighting is dim, with some light sources visible in the background, creating a suspenseful atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the lower portion of the image.

REFRESHING THE HORROR GENRE

Stifle is characterized by wholly original set pieces (the impov scene with the apparition, the commercial shoot with the doppelganger, and the boardroom confrontation with the demons) that are fresh and inventive, but still fulfill audience expectations of the horror genre to unsettle, terrorize, and viscerally thrill. Although I'm mostly committed to avoiding the tropes and crafting disturbing imagery and sequences based on fears of self-doubt, I can promise a few jump scares.




MUSIC



<https://bit.ly/stifleplaylist>

If you've been listening to the Spotify playlist, you'll have noticed that some of the musical inspiration for the film comes from heavy, grungy punk and pop music with a sense of dread or threat of violence to it. I am particularly fixated on the music of Toronto garage rock band Dilly Dally, and I see their cover of Drake's "Know Yourself" as somewhat of an unofficial anthem for the film.

In addition to a musical score, *Stifle* will selectively use songs like this, playing within the world of the film in the background, to subtly set the mood and accent the action as the story progresses. We have an opportunity to both emphasize the contemporary cultural milieu this film takes place in— to keep the drama feeling vital— while doing something stylistically fresh and tonally on-point for the horror genre.



MUSIC

I see these songs in addition to a musical score, to be completed by veteran composer Spencer Creaghan which will emotionally have a lot of "attack" to it. The film itself, like *Zadie*, will have a lot of unpredictable energy, and I see the score as contributing to that by having some unexpected surprises, similar to Jason Hill's work on *Mindhunter*. Aesthetically, I will room for Spencer to play, but it would be interesting for the music to incorporate some of the forceful, distorted feminine qualities of Dilly Dally and Grimes, or Keegan DeWitt's work on *Queen of Earth*.



COROLLARY FILMS



BLACK SWAN

USA, 2010, Darren Aronofsky

Like *Black Swan*, *Stifle* focuses on a performer's crisis of identity and psychological unravelling. It also follows a similar genre trajectory, beginning in the world of a grounded character drama, descending into a psychological thriller, before exploding into full-blown horror. And, *Stifle* will utilize similar techniques to create fear. Both films are interested in crises of identity and a transformation of the self that is ultimately destructive.

Black Swan takes place in the world of high-art and bourgeoisie culture, whereas *Stifle*'s world is working-class, vulgar, and filled with humour. I would also say that the character arcs are almost reversed—*Black Swan* tracks a character's purposeful transformation to a place of elevation, even though it destroys her. *Stifle* tracks a successful character's degeneration to a place where her career is in danger.



CAM

USA, 2018, Daniel Goldhaber

Cam is about a vulnerable performer in the same sociopolitical world *Zadie* is, who suffers a loss of identity, manifest through a series of experiences of depersonalization. *Stifle* also makes use of some of the doppelgänger imagery *Cam* does.

The films are not thematically or stylistically very similar, but there are a lot of similarities in terms of their tone, budget level, production values, and potential market. *Cam* was made for about \$1 million US, premiered at Fantasia, where it was purchased on the spot by Netflix.



THE BABADOOK

Australia/Canada, 2014, Jennifer Kent

Both films personify a woman's mental health struggle through a nightmarish psychological journey onset by a curse, but in different story worlds with a completely different set of characters. *Stifle* aspires to the same emotionally-grounded horror techniques and iconography.

One of the big differences *Stifle* and *The Babadook* is where the characters begin. In that film, because the character starts in a place where she is already struggling with depression and grief, there is a sense of inevitability to her decline. Whereas *Zadie* starts *Stifle* in a position of strength and poise. Her deterioration is unexpected and consistently shocking.



QUEEN OF EARTH

USA, 2015, Alex Ross Perry

Principally an arthouse drama with elements of a psychological thriller, *Queen of Earth* has the same starting point as *Stifle*, and progresses similarly, but doesn't go as far into the horror realm. *QOE* is a story about the devolution of a friendship, and the psychological impact on one of them—very similar to the story of *Stifle*.

While *QOE* makes the claustrophobia of the cottage part of the character's deterioration, in *Stifle* we will provide a much greater range of opportunities to express Zadie's torment. *QOE* is a more deliberately opaque narrative, which leaves a lot of questions unanswered. As is my hallmark as a filmmaker, *Stifle* will be considerably more earnest and have a clearer narrative through line.



HEREDITARY

USA, 2018, Ari Aster

Like *The Babadook*, *Hereditary* makes a concerted effort to ground the horror elements in the drama of the character's experiences, in the way *Stifle* would. *Hereditary* also brushes against the world of witchcraft and the occult in the same way *Stifle* would— subtly appropriating the aesthetic, making it part of the plot in the background, but never quite naming it.

There is a relentless bleakness to *Hereditary* that *Stifle* would not have. There is an ongoing tension in *Stifle* between the world Zadie occupies and the horror she's experiencing. There is a lot of dynamism to the energy and tone of our film that isn't in *Hereditary*.

THE FILMMAKER

In the last decade, Brendan Prost has been quietly emerging as one of the most prolific young filmmakers in Canada, with an impassioned and eclectic body of work that includes four features and a dozen shorts. His character-driven work is characterized by powerful performances, a uniquely earnest spirit, and a thematic interest in alienation, longing, and vulnerability.

Brendan's films have screened at major international and Oscar-qualifying film festivals like the Edinburgh International Film Festival, Nashville Film Festival, Rhode Island International Film Festival, Vancouver International Film Festival, Manchester Film Festival, Inside Out - Toronto LGBT Film Festival, and Telefilm Canada's Not Short on Talent Program at Cannes. Notable broadcast and online premieres include Hulu, CBC, Omeleto, Directors Notes, and The Queer Network where his short *Loretta's Flowers* has more than three million views.

Brendan graduated with distinction from Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts, is an alumni of the Directors' Lab at the Canadian Film Centre, and recently completed his Master of Fine Arts in Film and Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia.



SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

- **SCRIPT** - *Stifle* screenplay, draft dated March 2022.
 - **RIP-O-MATIC** - A video moodboard or sizzle reel demonstrating the look and mood of the film.
 - **MUSICAL MOODBOARD** - A collection of music (songs and score from other films) that inspired the film.
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LINKS TO PREVIOUS FILMS

<i>Heavy Petting</i>	2021, short film	Drama/Horror	https://vimeo.com/bprost/heavypetting	password: petting
<i>Main Squeeze</i>	2019, short film	Dramatic Comedy	https://vimeo.com/bprost/mainsqueeze	password: xmas
<i>Loretta's Flowers</i>	2018, short film	Drama	https://vimeo.com/bprost/lorettasflowers	
<i>jordaan mason - No Wires</i>	2018, music video	Music Video	https://vimeo.com/bprost/nowires	
<i>Sleepaway</i>	2016, short film	Drama	https://vimeo.com/bprost/sleepaway	
<i>In the Shadow of the Mountain</i>	2016, short film	Drama/Horror	https://vimeo.com/bprost/mountain	
<i>Sensitive Parts</i>	2017, feature film	Dramatic Comedy	https://vimeo.com/bprost/sensitiveparts	

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, is shown in a dark room. She is looking towards the camera with a distressed expression, her hands pressed against a glass surface. The room is dimly lit, with string lights visible in the background.

STIFLE

a blistering, heartrending psychological horror film by

BRENDAN PROST

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