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ClimbAR - An Arkansas Rock Climbing Documentary

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ClimbAR – An Arkansas Rock Climbing Documentary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

Danny Henkel
University of Arkansas
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Abstract

The goal of this thesis project, 'ClimbAR' - a rock climbing documentary - is to tell the story of a fringe sport/outdoor activity in the state of Arkansas. The history of the sport has been passed down primarily by word of mouth and contained within a small, tight knit group of Arkansas rock climbers since its humble beginnings in the 1980s. Though many of the original climbers in the state have since moved on, a new generation of adventurers have taken the reins. This film focuses on the newest generation of Arkansas rock climbers.

Like many climbers in the state, this story uses Cole Fennel's guidebooks, "Rock Climbing Arkansas" Vol. I & II, to more accurately portray the wide variety of rock climbing locations in the Ozarks.

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Pre-Production & Research

The research for this story began in January 2015 when pursuing a story for Brett Schulte's magazine writing course. The story was centered around two acquaintances of mine who formed an outdoor guide company called Guide Arkansas, LLC. To tell that story, I went on a climbing trip with the company's' founders, George Bieker and Nik Lamb.

My original intent was to cover all of the numerous outdoor activities available in the Ozarks under a broad "adventure tourism" perspective. The following is an excerpt from my proposed research from the Research methods class:

"The adventure tourism industry – which includes adventure education, recreation and tourism itself (Mullins, 2014) – is a rapidly growing area of tourist activity that has received limited attention from researchers (Bently, 2008). In 2013, 49.2% of Americans, or about 143 million people, participated in some type of outdoor recreation, with participation rates in recreational activities involving risk or danger increasing up to 25% since 2009 (Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2014; Ewert, 2013).

At the core of adventure tourism is adventure activity and outdoor recreation. Schott (2007) found that despite an increasing number of attempts by researchers to define adventure activities, a universal consensus is lacking within the academic community. Generally, adventure recreation involves activities that contain inherent elements of physical, emotional, or psychological risk and potential danger that typically involve a close interaction with the natural environment (Ewert, 2013). Most adventure activity participants are risk takers (Allman et al., 2009) or 'edge workers,' who attempt to surpass what has been done in the past, while continually challenge their comfort zone as they approach the boundary between the ordered and disordered sense of self and environment (Laurendeau, 2006; Allman et al., 2009). According to Swarbrooke et. al., (in Schott, 2007), the individual participant's state of mind centrally creates 'adventure' by (p. 258):

(1) be of a heightened nature – a stimulating context will induce a range of emotions (of which excitement will be key), and separate it from everyday life;

(2) entail intellectual, physical or emotional risks and challenges – these will be absorbing; and

(3) be intrinsically rewarding, providing opportunities for enjoyment, learning and self-development

As I dove into the relevant research material, I learned that the outdoor adventure industry is a multi-million business sector. In Arkansas alone, over 6 million dollars was generated in 2015. Aside from generating a huge revenue stream, the heuristic application of studying the specific activities within the adventure tourism industry seemed promising. My research shifted towards the participants of extreme adventure activities, roughly centering around the question “why?”

Per my research:

Prior research has been guided by a wide array of topics, which range from: Finding the underlying motivational structure for participants who engage in adventure recreation (Ewert, 2013), understanding the value of extreme-risk activities, such as BASE jumping (Allman, 2009), the role of skill as an important avenue for research related to participants’ environmental learning and engagement (Mullins, 2014), and examining the link between suppliers and consumers of tourism products from a distribution channel perspective (Schott, 2007).

There is a lack of research into the structure of integrated, multi-level adventure industry that traditional methods cannot examine. Hogue-Mackenzie & Kerr (2012) note that the greatest limitation of existing adventure tourism research is that many adventure tourism offerings have skill prerequisites. A film medium will allow for real-time observation of both the participant and manager throughout the entirety of an adventure trip.

This study was prompted by three research questions which aim to examine not only the participant factors of adventure tourism, but the manager factors and business structure of the industry:

RQ 1: “What motivational factor(s) influence an individual to participate in outdoor recreation/adventure tourism in Arkansas?”

RQ 2: “How do adventure tourism managers (i.e. outfitters, educators, state-level development/sustainability workers, adventure guides) work within the industry to provide goods and services such as technical skill education courses, outdoor recreation safety and risk management techniques, and adventure guides?”

RQ 3: “What industry practices promote a rewarding experience for the adventure tourist, regardless of activity type?”

Which leads to the overall goal of the study: What interaction exists between adventure tourism managers (outdoor recreation outfitters, developers, guides and educators) and the participants of adventure recreation that has led to the growth of the industry?

My focus narrowed to one adventure tourism activity, rock climbing, rather than all the Natural State's outdoor recreational activities. My thinking at that time was that I would rather tell one in-depth story about one of the state's natural attractions than attempt to show everything the state has to offer. The scope of my original thesis idea was far too broad, and after filming and photographing a single climbing trip with George & Nik at Sam's throne (one of the most difficult - and rewarding - filmmaking days), I was immediately infatuated by the sport of rock climbing. The idea of filmmaking in the wilderness became a very attractive prospect, and the footage I shot that day turned out to be excellent. (Note: The footage from that cold winter's day in February of 2015 is in the film, following the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell sequence.)

In the following months, George and Nik became technical advisers of sorts; they taught me climbing basics like rope skills, knot education, and encouraged physical fitness. Both George and Nik have worked for Alaska Mountain Guides and the on-campus outdoor center (UREC), so their technical skillset is broad and practiced. I had found a topic I was passionate about, but knew that it would be both physically and mentally demanding. Through several Ozark climbing trips with George and Nik, I learned the skills necessary to realistically make this film.

In a surprising turn of events, George accepted a GA position in the summer of 2015 and enrolled in the graduate program in the fall of that year. Over the next year, George would become my primary contact in the climbing community. He is well connected, sponsored by Fayettechill, and has understood his role in the story I aimed to tell from the very beginning. The film probably would not have been possible without his assistance. He introduced me to Andy Chasteen, Patrick Weldon, and (his lifelong friend) Alex Burleson, all of whom are featured in the film.

By the start of the fall 2015 semester, I knew that the climbers in this state had a story to tell. When I officially chose this topic, I made my intentions very clear: To provide an in-depth look into the past, present and future of rock climbing in Arkansas and shed some light on the vibrant, tight-knit community of climbers in the state.

Production

The main reason I chose rock climbing as my thesis topic is because I knew the production stages would be extremely difficult to pull off. I was well aware that rock climbing is a difficult, physically demanding, and occasionally dangerous sport. Rock climbing with camera gear is even more challenging. And, since most of Arkansas rock climbing is in the middle of nowhere, I became very skilled at transporting, maintaining, and using a wide array of camera equipment to places video cameras rarely go. I am happy to answer all questions regarding my camera and audio equipment list and the aspects of my videography at the defense, there is literally too much for me to write about. In simple terms: I spent 18 months filming in unpredictable weather conditions, with multiple cameras, often from a rappel position high above the ground and – much to my relief - I didn't break a single piece of equipment.

I chose to tell this story from an immersion perspective. Immersion filmmaking (or reporting, for that matter) is an inherently time-demanding process and requires a “fly on the wall” mentality of observing and reporting. Over the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016, I spend at least two weekends a month (often Friday morning to Sunday afternoon) out filming and climbing in the woods of the Ozarks. My mindset for these filming weekends was centered around the concept known as ‘the art of hanging out.’ I was introduced to this concept in another Bret Schulte class - literature of journalism - after reading works by Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Michael Paterniti. Documentary filmmaking and literary journalism share

many aspects with one another. Specifically, both require an intimate understanding of the subject matter and the characters around the subject to accurately tell the story from an outsider's' perspective. Once you truly understand the subject and the surrounding environment- in my case, rock climbing - and understand the nuances, vernacular, and unspoken norms of the subject, you are able to become a non-intrusive member of that subject matter, even when you have a camera with you. In this manner, I was able to act as a 'fly on the wall.' This allowed me to (hopefully) capture the moments unique to rock climbing.

My interview questions were uniform, but I maintained a flexible, conversational framework while conducting the interviews. I filmed (well, scheduled, planned, wrote, coordinated, set up the lights, external audio and two cameras to be more exact) 8 individual interviews, all of which lasted for more than an hour each.

Production of this film has left me with almost 3TB of raw data: Thousands of photos, hundreds of hours of audio and video, and one gigantic project file.

Script

Writing the script for this film was, in many ways, more difficult than the field production. The bulk of the information with which I had to work with came from the interviews and footage from the field. The written history of Arkansas rock climbing only goes back to the 1980's. All of this history is written in Cole Fennel's guidebooks. I asked permission from Cole to use visual aspects of his book and the historical information provided within. He agreed to let me do so, I have written confirmation.

My film focuses primarily on the present condition and future predictions of climbing in the state. I decided to use a small amount of narration to tell the story after reviewing every

piece of footage and concluding that the best way to succinctly and clearly convey the historical parts of the film was through short narration.

Post - Production

From the start of production, I was meticulous when handling my video files. I shot primarily on a Sony A7 (a mirrorless, full-frame camera) which records video in a .MTS file. To ensure uncompressed quality, each video file was imported into Adobe Media Encoder and re-encoded to ProRes 422 (a .MOV Quicktime file with no compression). This is a time-consuming, yet necessary, part of my production workflow to ensure lossless encoding during the export process. The editing process was extremely time consuming due to the large amount of raw footage. Organization and categorization of the raw footage would prove to be crucial, especially towards the final stages of the edit. Troubleshooting the various export issues in the past two weeks have claimed over 72 hours of my life. Because of these late-stage export issues, the graphical elements of my film had to be drastically simplified. These graphical elements do not detract from the story itself.

Conclusion

From a visual standpoint, I am pleased with my final thesis film. However, there are certain aspects of the film which could have been approached differently. For example, my focus on an immersion style of filmmaking resulted in countless hours of unused footage. There was also room for more impactful historical interviews. Specifically, I missed an opportunity to conduct a historical interview with Cole Fennel (author of the Arkansas rock climbing guidebooks) about his critical role in Arkansas rock climbing due to scheduling issues. As a whole, this project has been an incredible amount of work: I have pushed myself, both physically and mentally, to make a film which provides a unique perspective into the sport of rock climbing

in the state of Arkansas. The weakest aspects of my film are the graphical elements and the transitions from video to graphic or still elements. These graphics and transitions, though simple to conceptualize, are extremely time-consuming. Rendering these elements alone would take hours upon hours, the final graphics build will take weeks to complete.

The production of this film would not have been possible without the cooperation of the various subjects and characters in the film. I relied heavily on the climbing expertise of George Beiker and Nik Lamb who taught me the various skills necessary to film rock climbing and stay safe while doing so.

The climbing community in Arkansas, though small, is a very vibrant, tight-knit group. All of the climbers featured in this film were receptive to the project as a whole and willing to assist my efforts in any way possible. Outdoor adventure and extreme sports are blossoming in the Natural State. From its inception, this film aimed to capture and chronicle the stories of the rock climbers, or “conquerors of the useless,” in a state where the sport is very young. The takeaway message from the film is that there is a need for development in Arkansas, and requires a “push from the community” as climber Alex Burlison eloquently stated. The future of climbing in the Natural State is bright and promising, and my hope is that ClimBAR captured a small sliver of what it has to offer.

Script – “ClimbAR”

Italics: Video Descriptions & Nats

Regular: Dialogue

Bold: Narration

CAPS: GRAPHICS

Open: “Welcome to Arkansas”

Fade from black to reveal interview of George, medium shot

(George) You get a lot more than people understand from going out into the mountains and going to do things that are ‘somewhat dangerous’ to people...and putting yourself out there and seeing what you can do. And those experiences teach you a lot. People do them...and they hate ‘em when they are doing them...and they get done with them, think about them later and their like (pause, piano music begins) that’s amazing. Maybe a few weeks later, a few months later, they say to themselves...I’m gonna go do that again

Up nats full of a car on a dirt road, exterior shot of car on dirt road

The climbing duo prepares to climb a route at Invasion, CU of gear and rope

(on camera) Alex: Ok, ready?

George: Ready.

Slow-mo shot of dynamic move

(Alex VO) Everybody has their thing.. Ya know, for some people its painting, some people its writing, for some people its painting...Whatever it is for that certain person. Climbing is my outlet...Its the thing that makes me happy

Hard cut intro into shot of chalk dust, begin clean cuts of climbing footage

(VO Patrick) I see Arkansas rock climbing right now..I wouldn't say its infancy but almost

(VO Alex) Climbing hasn't blown up here yet...climbing is still tiny, tiny when compared to the rest of the states because

(Thomas VO) It's all in the middle of nowhere in the backwoods

(Patrick VO) Some of those spots you feel like the only person whose stood there in like 100 years....The first time someone hammered a piton in might have been 20 years ago, ya know?

(Alex VO) So much untouched rock...so much potential around the corner of every dirt road...you could be like 'Oh My God' there's a boulder field right here how did we miss this??

(George VO) People don't even know why you go to Arkansas, even now, anywhere else in the states...but climbers do...

(Patrick VO) We're like an island in the middle of nothing.

Shot of HCR climbing w/ Title gfx

CLIMB/AR GRAPHIC FULLSCREEN

I: Hidden Gem

Fade up music (A Storm at Eilean Mor)

Drone shots of HCR

The most well-known rock climbing area in Arkansas is a 2.2-mile cliff band called

Horseshoe Canyon Ranch.

Transition to sport climb parallax

The Ranch is home to over 400 sport routes,

Boulder parallax

And Hundreds of boulder problems

Which are all neatly compiled in local climber Cole Fennel's guidebooks..

Transition to cover of Cole's guidebook

Development at the Ranch began in the late 90's

Parallax from cover of book to Horseshoes and Hand Grenades & titanic boulder

when climbers such as Clay Frisbee began establishing early classics like Horseshoes and Hand Grenades (5.11) and Portside (5.10d) on the Titanic Boulder.

Parallax from titanic boulder to pic of Chad Watkins

but the arrival of Chad Watkins in 2002 would transform it into a full-fledged climbing area, establishing more than 100 routes in that year alone.

Map of Early crag development

A high concentration of moderate sport climbs and relative ease of access have made the ranch an iconic mega-crag in the state. (possible George "that's what Andy capitalized on, what put Arkansas on the map was HHH) Its also an ideal location for Arkansas' premiere climbing competition; 24-Hours of Horseshoe hell.

Cut to black screen, slow drone shot pans up as the aspect ratio shrinks to "cinematic." Music starts to build.

FS FLY-THRU GRAPHIC "24 HHH"

Up-beat music builds

Graphic transition to haircut shot, quick montage before VO comes in

Climbing event montage begins

(Thomas) I mean they call it horseshoe hell for a reason

(George) It's like burning man meets a climbing competition

(Thomas VO) You and a partner try and put up as many routes as possible in 24 hours

(Alec) Your feet are in pain, your hands are in pain, your fingers...you're lucky if you have any skin left

Hard cut to night shot

(Alec) When night hits that's when you're like "oh man, what am I doing right now? I should be going to bed" 3 am, that's definitely the hardest part

Up nats full of crickets chirping as headlamp-clad climbers head up the wall

(INTERVIEW w/ ANDY): Me and a couple buddies were out here climbing back in the spring of 2006 and we got this wild idea. 'Hey, let's see how many routes we can put up in twenty four hours.

(Andy on cam w/ crowd shot) "Ok guys, we're about to start the serious stuff

(Andy VO) When we started back in 2006 we had maybe 150 people here total. Now we see, you know 1000 people every year

Crowd shot "The biggest F&%ing climbing event in North America!!*

Drone shot of crowd

(Alec) For me, 30 mins before, I just start getting a little restless

(Thomas) Everyone is dressed up kinda ridiculous

(Alec) Meeting at the trading post, about 930...

Crowd shot w/ Andy "this is where I hand the mic over to people more interesting than me

(Thomas) They have this climbers creed where, you know, you promise not to drop or kill your partner during the event...After you scream in your partner's face, they shoot a shotgun and it starts

Drone shot of crowd scattering

(Andy OC)The coolest thing about the event is the community it fosters. Its not about how many routes youve done, its not about the pros that show up. Its like a big family reunion.

By his second book in 2014,over 400 routes had been established at the ranch

Transition to cover of guidebook, seamlessly to shots of climbers using the guidebook

After mapping, documenting and free soloing every route in the book, Cole's vision is clear -

CU of quote in guidebook about Cole's vision outside the ranch.

to show the world what lies beyond the Ranch

TRANSITION SHOT - *Parallax to map of Arkansas climbing locations, Hard cut to black from FS map*

II : Outside the Ranch

(George VO) About an hour and a half away from Fayetteville lies a central hub of Newton County, Ozark National forest rock climbing.

George and Nik at sams throne, abseiling down, walking thru woods, etc... (George)

Most agree that modern sport climbing started on the sandstone walls of Sam's throne.

Sams throne area

The 1980's were a pioneering age of climbing in the state; the first bolt driven into the walls in 1987 at Sam's Throne by Fayetteville climbers Billy Bisswanger and Keith Smith

FS Map

This region is home to several classic Arkansas sport climbing crags.

(Thomas) There's a lot just down the road. There's cave creek, Valley of the blind, candy mountain all within 3 miles of Sams throne

Classic routes from this region are quintessentially Arkansan; short, steep, overhanging roofs

Transition from parallax map of area to Brick Attack route description

(Thomas) Brick attack wouldn't be considered such a mega classic if it weren't so gorgeous

Shot of Thomas with the guidebook

(Thomas Vo) My strong suit in climbing is that I remember all the moves,

(Thomas) even on a 100 ft route, I can visualize the moves in my head so I don't show up to a spot and think "oh god, i forgot how to do this part"

Shots of Thomas climbing

(Thomas) You head up the wall and get to a no-hands rest so you can take a rest underneath the roof, like your head hits the roof

(Thomas) And then your looking up and out...it's like 5 ft behind you. You can see it, its got chalk on it

Thomas big move

(Thomas) So you hop out and catch it. You're on a 60-70 degree overhanging roof and you're hanging. Have to keep moving, its really hard to hang at that angle...your arms get so tired, so fast.

(Thomas) It all came together on my first try and I was really surprised there at the end. I was like oh...Great!

Thomas lowered down

(George VO) Arkansas sport climbing short and steep, so its really powerful. So there's times in sport climbing where you can just relax and if you don't relax, you're going to fumble something later. You can calm your breathing, relax and get everything back

And then you move thru the next sequence, execute as you do, and not think about it.

Shots of George on the roof of Brick attack

(George) If I'm sitting there scared to take a fall or I'm worried about something else outside of that, then I'm no longer focused in it

(George ON-CAM) I'm gonna try this a few more times, then Thomas is going to try some trad

Quick shots of George on the route, trying hard and making it happen

(George ON CAM) *I do want to see what it feels like....that last move is huge. Tried to use an intermediate, dont know how its gonna do when I'm pumped out of my mind. We'll see. But before that, Thomas is going to lead some hard trad*

Shots of Thomas prepping for trad

(Thomas VO) In trad climbing, its like, you're putting in your own protection. So your safety is on you at that point

Shots of Thomas trad climbing

(Thomas VO) Whenever people talk about it, it's always like "oh man, trad climbing. So scary." It's just because you're fully trusting yourself at that point.

Trad climb shot transition to Time lapse of Sams throne

Development of the Sams' Throne region began to slow in the early 2000's as climbers shifted their focus to the Ranch and other crags around the state.

Transition with timelapse sequence into OCG

III: Bouldering/Gym climbing

Alex flips on lights and goes into gym

(Alex) My favorite thing in the world is seeing someone climb a route that I put up. Them coming down and seeing this pure look of joy on their face of like "that was so cool" that's like

the greatest feeling I've ever had. Seven years ago I was looking up to Ike Huges & Charlie Lou and Todd and Cole and being like wow, I want to do what those guys are doing. And, ya know, never thought I'd be working here, never thought I'd be the main route setter here. Its like a dream, its crazy

Fade up, slow pan shot of Glass bowl, start boulder montage

(George) The best thing about bouldering is that you can just...execute. It's like the power lifting of climbing

(Alex) It's just pure movement

(George) You have to make sure that every part of your body and your mind are in the right position at the same time.

(Alex) As hard as it is and as hard as you are trying its like the most calming sport or hobby that I've ever done

(Alex OC) Those first couple years you're trying as hard as you possibly can and you're not doing anything...ya know?! It feels like you're swimming upstream against a current and you're not going anywhere. And then, idk when the switch happens, but it feels like your just being swept along by it. Its like that easy. You're really not trying, but you are. It's a strange paradox.

Transition to Alec, at off the rails near Cowell, AR. "V2, v3, v3, v3 it just goes on and on. Never stops"

(Alec) Off the rails Just this perfect line of holds that goes out of this little cave on this enormous boulder detached from the cliff. To me, the line was just really inspiring.

Shots of Off the rails

I knew it was going to be a challenge, but I really wanted that to be my goal for the season. I told myself that was my goal for the season. So that was my goal...and I said to myself I'm gonna do it. And if I can't do it, I'd just keep coming back until I got it

Alec sending Off the Rails

(Alec) When it all finally came together, I mean that was just a huge reward. Cause I set a goal for myself, dedicated myself to working it. It finally came after 5 days of strong effort. That was pretty awesome, I'll have to say

Shots of Alec saying 'thank you guys' and community stuff

(Alec VO) Had this mentality, the whole season, to climb this one route...but all I did was climb a rock. Could be perceived as stupid. Or a waste of time...

(Alec OC) But for anyone that rock climbs, they have that understanding of what it means. It's more than just climbing a rock

(Alex) So climbing is so much more than the physical aspect of climbing. Its just...without it I feel like I'm withdrawing from a hard drug or something. Like I get really stir crazy, my mood swings, um. And when I am climbing, I'm so happy

IV: Community

(Thomas) It's not just like a hobby, anymore.. I don't know when it stopped, but its become everything I do

Shots from UREC climbing comp, thomas and alec instructing

Transition to George VO & OC

(George) I've been working here since 2010...but I've never competed.

(George) That's the great thing about northwest Arkansas in general. We get lots of people from all over the country who come here and say 'hey, I can go outside and have fun...every weekend.

Lets go do that

(Alex) When we started climbing, we were using Cole's first guidebook, so we were kinda riding this wave of like here's everything to climb

(Alec) There's always new stuff going up in Arkansas, they're finding new areas and putting in the grunt work to develop them

(Alex) You can go out and repeat stuff, go out and do the Idaho circuit at Horseshoe, they'd rather do that than spend all day romping thru the woods, thru poison ivy and brushing off rock and maybe climbing for like...twenty minutes ya know?

And I understand that...I totally get it. But somebody's gotta do the dirty work. And right now that's Patrick

Transition with slo mo bouldering shot

V: Development (Backwoods Bullshit) & Problem Solving

(Patrick VO) My whole life I've tried to change. I can't work factory jobs or anything like that. I have to see new things and do new things. Climbing was just like this limitless discovery process.

(Patrick) The forest in Arkansas will eat your development. It eats the roads... it eats the old houses that get abandoned and it will cover your boulder problems back up.

Shots of Joe cleaning boulder

(Patrick VO) Currently, we've been working on Bigfoot hollow, we're working on our second season of development out there.

(Patrick VO) These are the first things we looked at in the area, but the last things we got on

(Patrick OC) It's supposed to work! YEAAAA, ARRRGG, HIYAAAA....oh nothing works

(Patrick) SO much land, so many boulder clusters and like, then we get stuck on stuff like this...who knows. I mean we spent like three hours cleaning this shit & its still not really clean. I don't know, there's definitely potential for hundreds but we haven't gotten there yet.

B-roll of Bigfoot

(Patrick OC) I think we have all the criteria to be like Chattanooga or Boulder

(Alex)But I think its gonna take a push from the community to go and develop...like do what patrick and Joe Koepeck are doing right now. Like spending their time brushing off holds at bigfoot. Because, what they are doing is so admirable.

(George) There's just different motives for everyone. What do you wanna do...do you wanna just go repeat things, you wanna go hang out with your friends, do you wanna climb super hard boulders with your own, knit crew, do you wanna develop boulders, you can do whatever you want with climbing, which is great. I want to do something completely different than all the other people do but we're still recognized as climbers.

Long jib shot begins w/ Joe clapping hands together

Music Fades up (Dexter Britan)

Credits

Directed, Produced, Written and Edited by Danny Henkel

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