

On embracing the beginner stage



Director and writer Rachel Fleit discusses the joy of storytelling, being comfortable with more than one voice in the room, and being creatively insatiable

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As told to Sophy Drouin, 2380 words.

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You went from a successful career in fashion to a now successful career in film. How would you characterize those first few months and years between careers?

I loved my job in fashion. It was so fun. I got to work with incredibly talented people, like the best of the best, and I got to direct these campaign films. So I would write them and then I would direct them, and it was amazing BUT, I got to do my dream for like, six weeks out of the year. So when the business model sort of shifted you know, for all intents and purposes, I was laid off, it really felt like the universe was doing for me what I couldn't do for myself. [The fashion job] was too adjacent: I got to be creative, work in a creative field, but it wasn't my exact passion. So I really felt like I got a push from the big wild energy out there.

The business transitioned in 2015 and I got my first job making a feature documentary in 2019. Those four years were hard and super intense, and I had to really keep my eye on the prize because I went from having a salary and a steady paycheck, to having to find a way to make money. As an aside, I think it's important to mention that my biggest fear in becoming an artist was that I wasn't going to be able to support myself, and the great irony-one of the greatest ironies of my life-is that as a director, I've made more money than any of my other jobs. I have made more money being true to myself as an artist, it's just crazy.

You don't hear that often.

I definitely had my comeuppance. I directed branded content with tiny budgets, really just putting the pieces together. I finally got repped as a commercial director and that helped a little bit but it was still hard to mouth. I really believe work begets work and certain tiny adjustments are really meaningful. And that's the other thing, besides working on my films and sort of treading water, I made a decision at some point, I probably talked to an astrologer or medium or some friend who was older and wiser. And I started to not say I want to be a director or I want to be a filmmaker. I started to say I am a filmmaker, I'm a director and a writer. And it's like a tiny little tweak. I share that with everyone I know: stop saying "I want to be," and just start saying "I am." It's a bit of "fake it til you make it," and a bit of "act as if," but it really worked for me. Anyway, I am very proud to say that [ultimately], I became a full time feature film director by organizing people's closets. I was a closet organizer for a solid two and a half of those four years. I was renting my Brooklyn apartment all the time. I was couch surfing and closet organizing, and lot of people helped me out because I was like, I need to do this. I rolled up my sleeves and organized people's closets, and I met some really wacky New Yorkers but I'm an artist, so everything is copy. I had to focus my energy on my creative work and I needed a day job, so I created this day job because I was really good at it. And weirdly, closet organizing is a perfect sort of training as a director because you go into someone's house, and you have to make them feel comfortable in a really intimate space, and clothes and body, it's all wrapped up, so it felt like I was working even when I wasn't.

I really believe I was in the right place at the right time to get my first feature film job, and I'd been working the whole time towards it. I just kept at it. I started making a bit more money and then I was directing commercials or branded content and working on three short documentaries between 2015 and 2019. One of these, about gefilte fish, was kind of a big deal. And I was introduced to Selma Blair's manager and then to Selma, and then we made *Introducing Selma Blair*. The irony of that documentary is that she actually grew up with the family I made the gefilte fish film about. So it was crazy serendipity.

What's your North Star as you're trying out things? Are you goal specific, or not thinking too far into the future?

I think it's just about the work. It's doing work that is meaningful to me and it's also a fine balance, because I need a job that is going to pay for my life. I'm 43 and the bills are real, you know, just life gets expensive. So I have to take a job that's going to pay me a salary, while also being in line with my vision to be a feature film director of documentary and narrative films and television. So I'll take a more commercial project, and then it gives me the room to take on another project that might be less of a bigger budget and more of a passion. But they both have to feel like they make sense that I am directing them. There always has to be a balance.

I have a note in my phone—it's not a collage on a wall or something, although I do love a mood board—and I write down goals for myself. They're totally dorky filmmaker goals, they're like festivals I want my film to appear at, certain things I want to achieve, but mostly what I just want is the respect of my peers. And to tell really important stories and move the needle in the direction of good, if I can, in my lifetime. At the end of all of it is making people feel good and making people feel seen. And I'm just big into leaping, because everytime I do it, I'm like, wow, that worked. I think success to me is just getting to work in the field that I love, getting to be a filmmaker. And just working and continuing to show up.

Someone said that recently: ninety percent of a job is just showing up.

Do you have a success fantasy?

I have an Oscar fantasy—who doesn't? However, I'm a very grateful person, but I know that awards would never really fulfill me. That acknowledgment from the material world would be really fun for a moment, and I'm sure after I'd feel weird and empty and like, what's next? I'm kind of insatiable and I think it's okay. I try not to think about those things, but in this industry, you're constantly bombarded with that. It's like, wait, why wasn't I invited to that festival? why am I not nominated for that? why am I not going to that award show? We call it "compare and despair," and so I go back to the work. Work is my North Star. Go back to the work, be where my feet are: what am I doing today?

I got photographed by Annie Leibowitz in 2021 and it was so epic. After she photographed me, she said, "you have to live the life, or the work suffers." You have to have balance. If you're not traveling, or seeing, doing, being, swimming, walking—experiencing life, your work will suffer. Resting and seeing things [is necessary], and not just for the sake of the work, but just to see them.

How did you grow into the role of director? And did you enjoy being a beginner after having a career in a different industry?

I'm an expert at talking about being a beginner. First and foremost, I did not go to film school, so I often don't get the reference. People are like, what about that, like so and so film? And I'm like, I haven't seen it. I went to school for theater, so I do know a lot about telling stories, but I learned making movies on the job. So that means I've had to humble myself enormously and ask a lot of questions. I also started making movies as a producer, not as a director, because it took me until I was 27 to say *I'm an artist*. I've learned everything I know about shooting from my cinematographers. I always ask, "how do you do it?"

My favorite story is that the first day I was ever a director was for this fashion brand film. I was on set and I had written the script and I was directing it, and I'd been on set for, I don't know, ten years prior to that but always as a producer or a helping hand. And we got the first shot off and I'm standing behind the monitor and the

assistant director yells *action* and the actress walks up this hill, which was her direction. And everyone is just like, standing around. And the AD looks at me and is like, "Do you think we got it?" And I'm like, "Yeah!" And he's like, "Okay." And then I was like, "Oh, it's my job to say cut!" And I just think about that all the time because really I knew nothing, but I knew how to tell the story. It's not that I was bullshitting. It's just that I didn't have that much experience. And now I've been directing for almost 12 years, and when I talk with my team and the people who might finance the film, I know what I'm saying, and it's the coolest thing. [Overall], I let people do their thing, cause I actually don't believe I have the best idea in the room always, and I'm curious how others would approach it. I like surrounding myself with experts that I trust. Another thing is I know what I like and don't like. So I can say oh we try it like this, or oh, can we not? But sometimes I don't know where to put the camera, I don't, and I'm okay with being like, "I don't know where to put the camera, where should we put the camera?"

How did you find collaborators you could trust in the beginning who wouldn't take advantage of your inexperience?

I feel like I can sense who is strong, competent, secure and unafraid. I find insecure, fearful people are a red flag and I try to stay away from them. I think it's really about character and getting a good vibe from someone and testing the waters. You can see if this person is going to be a-I kind of hate the word-safe collaborator.

In the beginning, I just looked for nice people whose work was good. I've definitely worked with people who are not very nice. And it's just-you have to move on, lesson learned. But I think of them as insecure and fearful: why are they being so mean? That's another thing that I feel really strongly about. I am nice, I do not believe in being mean. If I'm mean, it's because I'm afraid. And usually I can catch myself and be like, you're afraid, that's why you're being mean, so be nice now. And I really do believe you can be a successful person and you don't need to raise your voice. And you can be super clear with people *and* be kind.

An acting teacher once told me that people only scream when they feel like they're not being heard.

Totally.

What has surprised you most about being a filmmaker?

I'm always surprised at how much people resonate with the film. I know that that may seem obvious, but I'm always like, "Oh, I moved you, that worked!" That's been a real surprise because you get so stuck in the weeds of telling the story and the best way to tell the story, so when you tell it and it works, you're like, "Oh my god it worked. That's good."

Is there something you wish you could tell yourself when you first started? Do you think it would change where you are now? Is there a project you would revisit and do differently?

I don't think it would change where I am now, but I think it would be to just take my time a little bit and be more mindful about how I'm going to approach something. I kind of get really, like, ok we gotta go, go, go, and make quick decisions. I am constantly obsessed with time because I started directing when I was 32. I felt like I was behind so I feel like I have to make up for lost time and do it all. But I could always take more time, and I tell myself to go slow.

Rachel Fleit recommends:

Contrast therapy. Very hot saunas and very cold plunges! I try to do this for one hour once a week or once a month. The key is to stay in the sauna for as long as I can and then do the same in the cold plunge. It feels super energizing and like a reset for my nervous system.

Perfect Days by Wim Wenders. I recently watched this film on a plane. The beauty of the mundane but also the passion the protagonist has for his job. I think about this film a lot right now.

Long walks. I try to walk for an hour outside everyday when I can-wherever I am. I will go for longer whenever I have the luxury of time.

The subway. I try to exclusively take the subway when I'm in NYC. There is something about that liminal space between two destinations that can inspire me and at times enrage me but I love it nonetheless.

Big Thief. Anything they've created but "Vampire Empire" and "Certainty" really hit me hard this past year and I listen to those two on repeat.

Name

Rachel Fleit

Vocation

director, writer

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