On making art powered by youth



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As told to Charlie Sextro, 2340 words.

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Considering the films you've made so far, is it fair to say that you have an obsession with youth culture?

Yes, for sure. I think for me it started as a kid watching movies and being really fascinated by young actors. That people my own age could be in films was this bizarre concept to me. I remember particularly being struck with Gaby Hoffman and being like, "Wow, she's kind of like me. She's from New York, and she has this incredible screen presence." There was just something so moving about watching performances by people my own age.

So the obsession started when you were their same age? It wasn't when you were even younger, looking up to teenagers on screen?

Similar age, and being really struck by films about characters my own age. Particularly darker films, and films that showed me something about myself that maybe I wasn't able to realize. And I grew up in New York in the '90s, so films like *Kids* really shook the city, if that makes sense.

What would you say are the most impactful representations of teenage life to you growing up?

Definitely *My So Called Life*, I was obsessed with that show. I would sit on the phone with a best friend and we would just sit quietly and watch it, and then talk during the commercial breaks. Definitely *Kids*. Those two early Hal Hartley films, *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*. Adrienne Shelly's characters in the films we're very inspirational to me. A lot of John Hughes films, *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*, I was all very obsessed with.

As you've gotten older, how have you maintained this fascination with youth?

As a kid I actually really wanted to be an actor, so I was just always very captivated watching kids act from movies like *Paper Moon* to *Au Revoir Les Enfants*. The idea of these young performers was intriguing to me. Then I went to graduate school, started making films, and I started working with kids. I did it not really realizing or being conscious of it but because I thought it would be more fun than trying to write a student film and cast some random actor in LA. It seemed easier and more accessible to write for kids… But it was essentially an extension of the same fascination, I just hadn't realized it.

I was loosely writing from memories and from my own youth. That's where I started as a writer because I went to graduate school never having written a film before or written anything. I just started extracting from memory, and not really writing about my life as a graduate student. It seemed sort of banal and mundane, so one of the first things I wrote was a film that was inspired by a memory I had traveling through Lake Tahoe with a cousin. She was a year older. I was like 13 and she was like 14, but we were years apart in terms of where we were in our sexuality and our sexual development.

Working with kids alleviated some pressure so I could think about the camera, and what it meant to be directing versus having this conversation about acting, because kids just understand the context of the scene. They understand that acting is doing. It freed me from having a more conventional conversation that I would have had to have with an adult actor.

Now, a few films later, do you still find that to be true?

Not with *Beach Rats* because that film was much darker and much more intense, but I still don't have very weighted psychological discussions about character once we're on set. When we do a read-through of the script, we talk about all that stuff, and then we let it go. But yeah, I think there's something liberating about working with young people who understand how to just bring themselves to the scene versus thinking about this character as being something separate from themselves.

How much do you rely on the perspective of your younger actors in shaping their character?

I think it depends on who it is and what world they're from. When I made *It Felt Like Love*, Gina Peirsanti at the time was 14, and Giovanna Salimeni, who plays her best friend Kiara, was 15. Giovanna was really from the world so I looked to her a lot to refine the dialogue, how she would say things, what she was interested in, or try to draw and excavate from her life to make the world feel more credible. She was from a certain neighborhood. We used her dance group, so I was really kind of pulling from her world to make the film, actually. Gina was from a slightly different world. She was from Jersey City. I didn't pull that much from her interests. But Giovanna I definitely did. I think it's nice, if they're from the world, to bring pieces of them into the narrative.

Where else do you go to research youthful perspectives?

Yeah, I would call myself a big… when I'm writing a script, I'm a big Facebook troll. I'm shooting a film that I think begins in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, and it's not a place that I'm from, but I really want the story to start in a coal-mining region of Pennsylvania. I'm on Facebook looking at different high schools, looking at what the kids are wearing, what they're posting about, how they're posting on Facebook, what they're writing, what activities or events they're involved or engaged in, and letting that infuse the process.

I think teaching gives me some perspective, particularly teaching undergrads. My students come in at 17 or 18, which is pretty much high school. The first year that they show up in college is like the fifth year of high school, in a way. And actually, it's interesting to hear from them, especially art students, what their obsessions and interests are, what movies appeal to them. A lot of them still respond to Larry Clark, *Kids*, and all those films. Those films never really died.

The first day of class this semester I went around the room and said, "What's everybody watching? What are your favorite movies of the year?" And almost every other student said, "*Ladybird*, *Call Me By Your Name*, *Ladybird*, *Call Me By Your Name*, *Ladybird*, *Call Me By Your Name*." They're films about youth. They're films that explore what it means to come of age. And they're characters that are discovering something about themselves at this moment. These are also very charismatic performances by two young actors. Again, it's that connection of seeing a young person in a film and seeing yourself in that young person, I think.

Your films have focused on uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous, world of young life and sexual experience. How'd that become your focus?

I'm interested in young characters confronting things that are stigmatized in some way in the world, and that's the similarity between both films. While they were many similarities between them, I think fundamentally it's about somebody confronting something in themselves or something in the world that is perceived as bad or wrong.

I think, oftentimes, youth in coming-of-age films are presented in a very generalized sense. There's a real darkness and a loneliness to being young and alone with your experiences when you're afraid to talk about them. When we're young we withhold a lot from each other and our parents and that creates this fundamental tension in our lives. I don't know anybody who had a totally open friendship with their parents growing up. You're always holding your cards and hiding something about yourself. I'm interested in that tension and the loneliness of it.

With *It Felt Like Love*, specifically, I wanted to make a movie that explored adolescent obsession. And this idea that girls pick guys that maybe don't even see that they exist, and decide that there's something worth pursuing even if there's nothing, and make quests out of men, in a way. It's something you don't always see, these awkward pursuits that end badly

or nowhere. If there was something I was trying to subvert, usually in that narrative the girl is sexualized. And for me I wanted to make a narrative where the pursuit was so unsexy that it was sort of painful and horrifying to watch. And the closer that she gets to almost getting what she wants the more uncomfortable the audience is, because we know that she's not ready. And we know that he doesn't care.

It was just a dynamic that I hadn't seen before that I wanted to play with, that not all films about young women are sexy, that they can be kind of horrifying. I don't want to talk bad about other movies, but usually the girl is so pretty and unaware of her prettiness, and unaware of her hypersexuality. I wanted to take all that *Lolita*-ness away, and have the audience be uncomfortable with the pressure that a young woman feels to have a certain kind of experience before she's ready.

I'm interested in a kind of unsexy sex. And sexual tension that you would find more in a horror movie than you would in a teen comedy.

Do you have an interest in continuing down the road exploring youth culture?

I'm gonna do one more film, I think, in that space, and then I will move on. That's sort of the goal.

Like a trilogy?

I don't think it's gonna really be a trilogy, because the next film isn't set in Brooklyn. It's more set in Manhattan and Pennsylvania, but it does continue along the same themes, and it is about the character confronting something in herself that's stigmatized in the world… But it's a little bit more of an odyssey, I would say, and it's a little bit of a nicer film, maybe, than ones I've made in the past. I think I needed to make something a little more optimistic for myself. As the country gets darker I find myself wanting to make something a little bit more optimistic.

How important is it for you that audience members the same age as your characters actually see your movies?

It's important. I think with *It Felt Like Love*, maybe, it resonated more with young women who were in early college than in high school. They had just enough distance to be able to look back and say, "Oh I understand that character. I see myself in that character." Whereas a younger high school audience, maybe, watched the film and said, "That doesn't look exactly like my world." They got tripped out on it not being identical or a perfect mirror.

Beach Rats hit a much wider audience. I still haven't processed who watched it. I think it's just on Hulu at the moment, so it's not widely available online yet. I'm trying to step back and think less about who's watching it and why.

How conscious of the audience do you have to be when you're creating a film?

Well, I'm aware that there's a certain male demographic that would see *It Felt Like Love* and think it was trivial. When I was trying to get an agent out of Sundance that first time, a lot of male agents of a certain demographic we're basically like, "I couldn't relate. I've never been a 14 year old girl."

I think that there is a sense that men look at films about women and see them as trivial and unrelatable. Whereas, I think unfortunately, *Beach Rats* resonated much more widely because it was about white male protagonists, so I have some trepidation in going back, because the film I'm working on is about two 15 year old girls, and I do have some nervousness that it will alienate a certain male demographic who thinks that female stories are trivial and unrelatable.

I think about audience in that sense but I also think that the film that I'm making is important to me, and that's what drives me to make it. And if it's important to me then hopefully it will resonate with other people.

I wonder how becoming a mother has influenced your perspective on youth culture and creating art from youthful perspective.

It may sound like it doesn't make any sense, but I don't totally feel like a mother. I have a three and a half year old son, and since the moment that he could crawl he's been crawling away from me, and never looking back. He has never been clingy. I feel like this person in his life that just wants to make sure that he makes good choices, and responsible choices, and I don't feel this maternal presence necessarily.

I feel like my job is to make sure that he's fed, he's happy, and that he's in a safe place. I don't know what it feels like or means, necessarily, to be a mother. He's very much his own individual. I want him to feel like he can live his own life without me being overbearing or judgmental. Whatever I can do to help him I will do. And it's not about my expectations of him. I don't know if I identify so much with mother culture. I don't read mother blogs, and I don't have that many other friends that are mothers. There was a lot of nervousness that it would somehow stop me from wanting to make work, or derail my career. I don't know, I don't feel that way. I just hope I'm doing stuff that he's ultimately proud of one day.

Essential Eliza Hittman:

Beach Rats

It Felt Like Love

Forever's Gonna Start Tonight (short film)

High Maintenance (2 episodes, 2018)

Name
Eliza Hittman

Vocation
Filmmaker

