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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2032 words.

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On being honest about what you are doing and why you are doing it

Filmmaker Matthew Puccini discusses following up on unexpected success, mining your personal experiences in service of your work, and what it means to be a queer artist.

How did the reaction to your previous short film, 2017's *The Mess He Made*, influence what you decided to do next? Did you take away certain things from that experience that carried into your new work?

The reception and reaction to *The Mess He Made* was so beyond our wildest imaginations. We made that film for pretty much no money and in a total vacuum, so to have it get into South by Southwest and then have this journey through the festival circuit and have it resonate with as many people as it did was such a lovely validation. Especially at a time where I was really starting to doubt whether or not I had what it took to be a filmmaker. I had been working as an assistant to several high profile folks in a very *Devil Wears Prada*-type situation for the first couple of years out of school. I was starting to feel really lost and discouraged, so making that film was a way to try to change the trajectory of where I was headed, and make something that was, for the first time, tapping into my own personal experiences as a gay man.

To have people react to it in that way was so crucial in allowing me to feel like this was an avenue to continue pursuing. I knew that as I was getting ready to try and make a follow-up short film that I still wanted it to have queer themes, while also trying to push myself to do something that was outside my comfort zone in the same way that *The Mess He Made* had been.

It took a while to land on a story. And of course it ended up being—as the best things usually are—something mined from personal experience. I had recently stumbled into a relationship that had some similarities to the one in the film, and that provided a lot of inspiration to make *Lavender*. At that point *The Mess He Made* actually started to become a bit of a chip on my shoulder because I really did start to feel this pressure to deliver a follow-up film that fulfilled the promise of what people expected of me from the previous work.

So it became a bit of a mental game of trying to protect myself from that pressure, but, inevitably as you're trying to make work and find money, you are asking people to invest in the hopes and in the promise of this new piece of work being as successful as the last thing you did. As I was writing, even as I was getting ready to make the film, I definitely started to feel this really intense pressure to deliver something that checked off all these boxes of what people expected of me. I began to resent that.

At Sundance last year, Andrew Ahn and Christina Choe did a panel at the Kickstarter house where they talked about the opportunities that became available to them after making their first feature films as Asian American filmmakers. I was really struck by how they felt torn between obviously being excited to be telling Asian American stories, but also feeling a bit resentful that they were solely expected to be delivering those kinds of stories. And there is this sort of duality for me in a similar way. I feel caught between being thrilled and excited to be telling queer stories, and in another sense, wanting to just be able to make whatever the fuck I want to make. And so as I move forward, I'm sort of still caught up between those two paths.

This is a thing with so many queer artists I know. A writer was talking to me about this recently, how he didn't think of himself as a "gay novelist" but he was told he'd be more successful if he was willing to classify himself that way, regardless of his subject matter. The weight of representation can also be a

very weird thing to grapple with.

Absolutely. It is always a question of: What does it mean to be a queer artist? What does it even mean for something to be queer? By being a queer person, at least in my own mind, my work is automatically queer in the sense that everything is automatically being viewed and created through a queer lens. So the work doesn't necessarily have to always explicitly have a gay character, although that's always lovely if it does. Also, it's great that our entertainment industry has been shifting towards things that are more inclusive, but there are still so many gaps in what people are seeing that it remains incumbent upon queer artists to try and brighten sensibilities and share our real-life experiences with a wider audience. It is a tricky path to navigate.

The thing that's great about *Lavender* is that it speaks to an experience that's very relatable for a lot of gay men. Discussing polyamory, or simply the idea that people can create their own model of what a relationship should look like, is still pretty radical. Your film is not judging non-traditional relationships. The complications involved stem from the people's personalities, not the idea of their relationship being unconventional.

That was important to me. I wanted to put this unconventional queer relationship on screen that was complicated, but ultimately it's an affirmation that it is possible for this kind of relationship to work. I think for a large chunk of the film, you're seeing these three people who are genuinely in love with each other and have a very symbiotic relationship that is lovely and genuinely beautiful and intimate. Even though it ends with it all unraveling a bit, even in that stage everything is done with a certain amount of respect and grace. It was important to me that the younger character, who is involved with this older, more affluent couple, knows that he has agency within that situation too.

For a lot of artists, regardless of what field you work in, there is this terrible idea—whether real or imagined—that every new project has to be at least as successful as the one before it, if not a little bit more successful, or else it's a failure. If it's not somehow a stepping stone to something bigger, then it's not good.

Yes. And I hope that it's a false perception that I have. I do think that something that I have somehow unfortunately grown to believe is that every project *has* to be another rung up on the ladder towards "success"—whatever that means. It can be so damaging to the creative process and detrimental when you are really trying to trust your instincts and make something that is coming from a personal place, when you're also trying to calculate what is going to get you into a certain festival and allow you to make the next, bigger project.

I'm lucky that I had this personal experience that lifted me out of that space. The first things I was writing after *The Mess He Made* were very contrived attempts to replicate what worked about that film. Then this thing happened in my real life and it became obvious that was my subject matter. *Lavender* has maybe an overlapping sensibility to my earlier work, but it's actually super different tonally. I think if I had tried to make *The Mess He Made* again, it wouldn't have had this film's success. It took exploring a new situation, something meaningful to my actual life, and trying to create a new tone to push me into a more successful and more interesting space as a filmmaker.

Short films are, of course, a fine art form unto themselves. Still, it's funny how sometimes people will talk about them as if they're simply a stepping stone to making your first feature. Your shorts say so much in such a compact format. *Lavender* says everything it needs to say about the subject at hand. It doesn't need 90 minutes in order to do it.

I think it's only recently that the perception has started to shift around short films, where they've begun to be seen as standalone pieces of work rather than simply as stepping stones to making a bigger project. Obviously there are these Cinderella stories that we all fixated on, movies like *Whiplash* that have successfully made that transition from short to feature. But as far as I know, most of those films were conceived as features *before* the short was made. If you make a successful short film and it accidentally stumbles into having this incredible life and *then* you go back to it because of that success to try and adapt it into a feature, it normally feels relatively forced.

With *Lavender* I could see that world expanding and that relationship existing in a longer format. But also I'm really excited about the chance to use the momentum to take that next step towards finding new things that I'm excited to explore. I'm lucky to be in a place now where a feature might be on the horizon, and if it happened to have elements of *Lavender*, I'd be fine with that. You really have to be honest with yourself about what you are doing and why. Why are you adapting your short into something bigger? It should be because there's actually more there for you to say, rather than because X, Y, and Z executives are telling you that there is maybe a finance option. It's just so easy to get caught up in the path that people are prescribing for you rather than doing something that feels true to who you are. I have to remember that tapping into those honest feelings and experiences are the reason why the short did well in the first place.

All art forms present their own difficulties and complications, but filmmaking is especially complicated. In addition to figuring out what kinds of stories you want to tell, you have to navigate applying for fellowships and grants and funding, and trying to get into the right labs. It's impossible to truly do it yourself. All of that outside stuff becomes a job unto itself.

There's so much around being an artist today that has nothing to do with your actual art. You have to be decent at self-promotion. You have to be able to navigate the entire commercial industry aspect of what

you're doing, and always be charming and articulate. You have to be able to sum up your soul into something that is palatable and quickly digestible for people who have very short attention spans and are ingesting a lot of content. So it's really hard to maintain this voice that everyone is supposedly excited about, while also figuring out how to get it out there in a way that people are listening to it. You can lose yourself so easily.

And then of course, one thing that's really unique to filmmaking is just how expensive it is and how necessarily collaborative it is. If you're a singer, you can sing. You need a microphone and a stage. You can practice singing every day. But if you're a filmmaker you can't really do that. As a director, it's crazy to me that I probably have spent a total of six days in the past year actually on set directing something—and that is what I call myself, a director. You look at your life and think about how far you need to go in order to get time sitting in that director's chair. In the meantime, you have to do so much work to create opportunities for yourself to learn and grow.

Matthew Puccini recommends:

RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars Season 2

Happy as Lazzaro by Alice Rohrwacher

Dancer from the Dance by Andrew Holleran

Little Men by Ira Sachs

5 Terre Backpackers

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Matthew Puccini

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