Gillian Robespierre on getting a movie made

The writer and director of *Obvious Child* and *Landline* talks about crisis and sadness in comedy, the importance of collaboration, and why finishing a second movie isn’t any easier than finishing the first.

February 2, 2017 - Writer/Director Gillian Robespierre is a Brooklyn-based filmmaker, born and raised in New York City. She graduated from the School of Visual Arts, Film & Video Program. Her first feature, *Obvious Child* premiered at Sundance in 2014. The film got a nod for the year's "Best Discovery" on iTunes and she won Best Directorial Debut from the National Board of Review. Her second feature *Landline* premiered at Sundance in 2017 and was sold to Amazon. She did not vote for Trump.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2485 words.

Tags: Film, Collaboration, Anxiety, Beginnings.

When I reached out to you, I said I wanted to talk about crisis and sadness in your comedy. At first you wanted to go in a different direction, but you changed your mind.

At first I was afraid of your question, because I thought it was too early to analyze the new movie, *Landline*, and compare it to *Obvious Child*. I’m also so early in my career. I was nervous to explore it, but then sitting with my writing partner, Elizabeth Holm, and my editor, Casey Brooks, talking about comedy, talking about digging out what really matters in this scene, it dawned on me how important crisis and sadness is in my type of comedy, and how it’s important in storytelling. It’s not really funny if there’s nothing deeper backing it up.

But I don’t know if I think of it as crisis and sadness in comedy, necessarily. I think of it as life. Which can be fun and tragic, and I think it’s impossible to stay away from either of them. The type of human I am, I like to seek out laughter while I’m in the tragedy. I try to balance that on film, but often I think you don’t see the humor in a tragic situation or crisis until after it happens. There’s a balance and struggle with life being fun and tragic. I think that jokes can often be a deflection for many people. I know, for me, it’s a deflection, but there’s also something wonderful and vulnerable about laughing with somebody. It brings people together. There’s nothing more intimate and vulnerable than sharing a gut laugh with someone where your face contorts and sometimes snot pours out of your nose. It’s human and beautiful and ugly at the same time.

When I sit down to write with Liz we don’t start with like, “Okay, how is this going to be the funniest movie ever or the funniest scene?” We usually start with emotional moments and the drama of life—then we go for the actual joke.

We’re sitting in an edit now on *Landline*. So many times, I just want to go for the humor, but I’m being told many times by her and our editors, “Don’t do that.” It’s a real learning curve for me, but it totally makes sense that the funniest part of a scene or life moment isn’t necessarily a chuckle. In order to find the humor, you have to dig out the drama. I think that’s something I’m learning to do every day in my life and work, and not always going for the joke that’s going to kill.

While making people laugh is the best feeling ever, I’m looking for the deeper meaning to a joke or life. Don’t

get me wrong: I love absurdity and I have a real soft spot for slapstick. *Airplane* might be one of my favorite movies of all time. Physical comedy, when done well, and within the range of some normalcy, is quite beautiful and a skill that not many people have.

I'm not a huge fan of The Three Stooges, but I love the idea of somebody tripping and falling on their first date, and bringing humor and humility into comedy. Rather than going for, like, tripping into a paint bucket—bringing absurdity into the everyday. Human comedy rather than sketch comedy. That describes what I try to reach for in my own work.

Comedy doesn't necessarily have to be happy. It can be a relief.

It's often that. It's often something that breaks tension. I remember my grandfather died and we were at his funeral; they were playing "Taps", but they were playing it on a boombox. It was not live. It was very sad. He was my only grandfather I really knew. They all died when I was younger or before I was alive. He was my main grandpa, and I loved him, but the second they fucking put that tape in and pressed play… I burst into tears, but laughing at the same time, and so did my mom. My whole family did. It broke this tension, and then we all went to a diner in New Jersey, and had tuna melts and talked about my grandpa, but it allowed us to get there. That's maybe being part of a Jewish family, or maybe it's exactly what we were just talking about where comedy doesn't have to necessarily mean happy.

As you said, you're early in your career, but can you imagine writing something that's purely drama, or are you still drawn very much to the comedic as well?

I'm still very drawn to the comedic. It's hard to kill some of my darlings, some of my jokes in this new movie, but I know that I have to in order to serve a greater part of this story. But I think it's interesting. This one is not like *Obvious Child* at all, and maybe it does lie more in the dramatic world. Maybe people will be bummed. I don't know.

There's no stand-up comedian in Jenny Slate this time. She wasn't playing herself in *Obvious Child*, but it was definitely a version of herself, a comedian and somebody who was struggling in the comedy world in New York… but we weren't really focusing on that part of the life. We were just trying to depict one woman's story of how she was navigating a crisis in her life. Part of that was her voice and energy on stage and her sharing her experience. But we were certainly not advocating that everyone needs to get up on stage and talk about something that's deeply personal. It was just what this character needed to do to overcome her own fears and stigma that was attached to that experience. I think ultimately we were saying that it's good to talk about it with somebody. Obviously a roomful of strangers isn't the go-to for everyone.

When you started work on *Landline*, did you immediately think, "All right. I want to work with Jenny Slate again"?

I really like working with Jenny. We did the short version of *Obvious Child* together. We did a pilot together. It wasn't picked up, but we still did it together. When writing *Landline*, the family was always written for Jenny to play the older sister. I think even while filming it, we were always talking during a scene, right before and right after, like, "Make sure that I'm not playing Donna Stern (Jenny's *Obvious Child* character)." We were always trying to find a new way for Jenny to be really funny and also really touching and dramatic and vulnerable at the same time, and also be a character. We're always after scenes making sure she's always like, "Am I too Donna Stern there? Was I too myself there?" Peeling that layer back.

I love working with her. I love writing for her. I love her dramatic chops that she has, and beyond that, she's also got this humor, this topical humor, that's not easy to do. We definitely gave her more in this movie than in *Obvious Child*, so that was fun. She got some bruises. Banged her knee running around New York City, and in the woods. It's exciting to try new things with the same actor. Also, the same crew—working with the same director of photography, and editor, and composer—but also opening up and letting in room for new collaborators, and working with a brilliant new production designer, and costume designer. It's been really fun to work with the people that you have a great shorthand with while still being open to brand new collaborators. This movie, in the new movie, it's more of an ensemble. Last time, Jenny, I believe, is in every single frame, except when we were doing key

roles of trees. We were like, “Well, she could be a tree, right?”

Hiding up in a tree.

Jump in the tree! This time around it was ensemble. I got to work with Edie Falco and John Turturro and Jay Duplass, and a wonderful new actress name Abby Quinn, who plays Jenny’s younger sister. That was a really fun experience to do that alongside Jenny and Liz, and open up our family and our world. It can be claustrophobic to only work with the people you’re very comfortable with. It’s lovely to have that familial thing and not have to go through those like, “Okay, let’s get to know each other” parts of a relationship, which I find to be hard. I actually like feeling like an old married couple, immediately. I don’t really like that romantic part. I don’t think that’s romantic, I just love farting in front of somebody and being like, “That’s it. We’re happy.” If it shakes you up a little bit and makes you work a lot harder, and I think it’s important. Especially when you’re in film, and it’s such a collaborative experience.

Jenny cursing on *Saturday Night Live* almost feels like a joke you wrote for her. Honestly, in my opinion, it’s sort of the perfect *Saturday Night Live* career. You get on the show, you have a skit, you curse, you leave the show, and then do other stuff. It feels like a scene from one of your movies.

I know! I wish. I wish. Except I would have added toilet paper getting to her foot, too. Then we would have cut it because everyone would have thought it was too over the top. Yes. It’s one of those things where it can seem tragic at the time, and then you’re able to create a story from that moment, and build the rest of your life on it. Those are the kind of stories I like to tell. That one catalyst in life that feels like the end of it, and then you realize it’s just a start. I’m glad she cursed. It all worked out for everyone. It made everyone stronger in the end—and she got to do *Obvious Child*.

Has working on your second feature been easier? Or is it been like starting all over again?

I’m pretty done with learning. [*laughs*] No, it’s totally new and different, and it’s a different kind of skill set in between *Obvious Child* and this movie. I got married and had a kid, and so beyond the personal, the actual technical and creative is always a learning experience for me. I don’t think anybody would still be doing it if each project was identical to the last. It could get tedious and unfulfilling. I definitely don’t think I have all the answers. I have more confidence for sure, and feel more free to experiment, but I’m still learning.

I think it’s a combination of confidence and voice, but also just becoming more of a mature filmmaker. The first go round you’re so green that you do things maybe a little chaotically because you don’t know the repercussions, and now you do, so you have to remember those repercussions, but also try to forget them or else you make a movie of just one person talking in a room and never try to explore how hard is the outside world. Yeah, I’m constantly learning from each project and each experience. Every person I work with, I actually feel like I’m learning something from them. It’s not me just taking from them. I use the “C” word a lot, but it is a very collaborative experience. Part of that is part of why I got into this business in the first place, to be around really, really smart and talented people.

Because there are suddenly expectations, is there a different kind of pressure when making a second film?

A small amount of people, mostly in Brooklyn, hold that movie very near and dear to them, and I don’t want to let them down. It’s not an obligation, but there’s a desire to get them excited about a new story that’s not *Obvious Child*, but obviously has a lot of similarity in tone. It’s made by the same team. How do you live up to expectations people might have of you? At some point I know that I have to just relinquish that idea, and dive full on into the new movie, and not think about the others. I think that you have to live life.

Once you get a film funded is it easier to get the second film funded? Or is it a continuous struggle?

I think that it’s helpful to have a first one that is liked by people and critics. It definitely helps you get in that door. It helps to get that meeting. Those meetings aren’t easy to get when you’re nobody. Luckily after Sundance in 2014, the door finally opened. Liz and I went out to LA, and took those meetings. I think it’s still

hard though, no matter what. More money means a little bit more—a lot more—input, and having to balance the producers' desires to make their money back, and create art, and a story that is good and entertaining… but also just good. It's hard. A lot of people telling you what to do. I only think it's easier if you really don't have any money, and you're making something small and under the radar.

But making movies is costly, no matter what scale you're on. Obviously equipment is so much cheaper now, and making a good image and having great sound is definitely more affordable and attainable, but it's still a lot of money. It's incredibly difficult to wrangle all that together for a low, low price. There's a freedom when you don't have to please anyone but yourself and your collaborators.

That said, I'm really excited that we found a company that was excited about *Obvious Child* and excited about this new story. It'll be interesting to see what it's going to be like after I turn in my director's cut this Friday, and continue working with them through the release and all that. I don't really know what it's going to be like. But I'm trying to stay optimistic and not suicidal.

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NOTE: Following our conversation, Gillian did, in fact, complete the film. *Landline* was picked up by Amazon Studios after premiering at Sundance.

Gillian Robespierre recommends:

Marc Maron WTF (start with Molly Shannon's interview)
The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis
the movie *Fat Girl*
playing Tetris on Gameboy while sitting on the toilet (something I haven't done in 10 years and miss)
Marcel The Shell with Shoes On (gotta support my pals, Jenny Slate and Dean Fleischer-Camp who wrote this beautiful children's book that I now read to my little girl.)

Name
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Vocation
Filmmaker

Fact

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