

Peter Vack on moving from one side of the camera to the other



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2241 words.

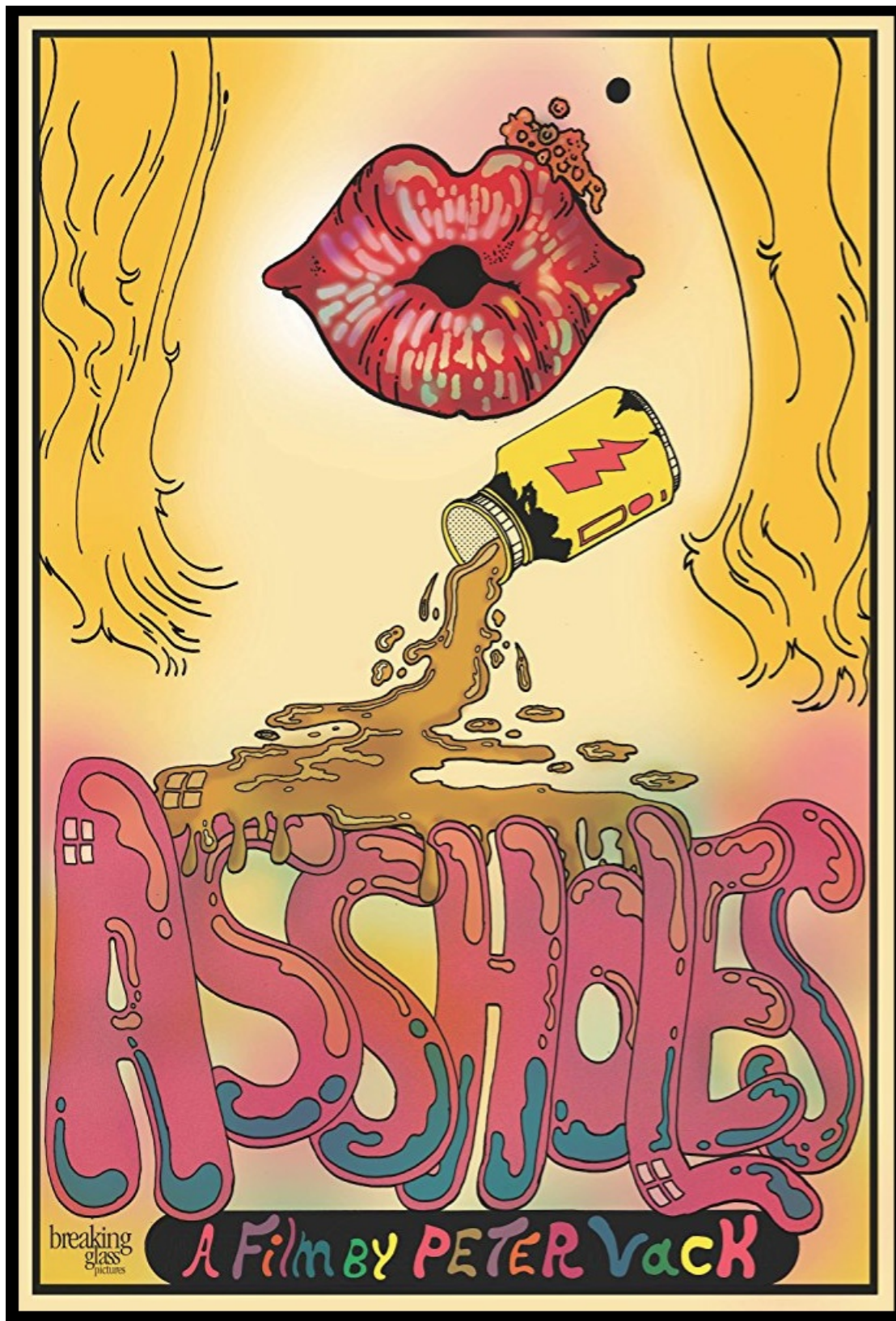
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Last year you wrote and directed your first feature film, Assholes. How was the experience of moving from one side of the camera to the other?

I come to filmmaking primarily from an acting background. That's not to say that I haven't been writing and creating plays with the dream of making them for many years, from way before I ever made *Assholes* or acted in any film. I guess I learned to be a director in two places. The first place was from my father. When he was 40 he took a decade off from his career in the restaurant business to make films, so observing him was really my first film school, because I was then able to closely watch each step of the process. People seem to have an idea of how a painter paints the painting or how a musician practices, but there's still something a bit mysterious about the filmmaking process. There's a question I think that all people have where it's like "How does that even happen? How does one do that?"

Seeing my father make a film answered that question in a huge way for me, and I'm not sure that I would have had the same urge to make a film had I not seen how the experience was for him. I've been an actor in something like 25 films now and lots of television shows and there's nothing more valuable than watching other people work. You always think to yourself, "Oh that's what I would do when I'm making my movie" or "I will never do it that way."

I feel like I had been amassing a database of directing and filmmaking "do's" and "don'ts" for years without even realizing it, always with this intention in the back of my mind that at some point I had to make my own movie. So when I did finally arrive at the task of being a filmmaker myself, I felt prepared. It was exhilarating finally being able to put some of my little private theories into practice.



What were the biggest surprises from the experience?

Well, you write your screenplay and that's one experience with the story, but there's another experience that has

to be honored as something fresh and unique, and that's the shooting of that screenplay.

I think where filmmakers go astray is when they're too attached to their ideas and the screenplay. Of course, certain core values in your script need to be upheld, but what's so fun for me is arriving at the shoot and abandoning the plan for a better one. That's not to say that you don't have a very rigorous plan in place—because you *must*—but you have to be open to ideas. There's a quote that I found after making *Assholes* that sort of corroborated the process that was something like, "You need to have a very strong vision in order to know when to abandon it for an even better one."

One of the things that I think is most surprising when shooting a movie is seeing what's working and what actually needs to be totally revised—and then having the courage to actually revise it. It does feel like courage is the right word because it generally feels slightly safer just to try to make the original idea work. It *always* feels like stepping out onto the edge of some precipice to go off script while the cameras are running and time is always of the essence. I think that a unique challenge to filmmaking is that there is always this extraordinary pressure to get things done in a certain time table, especially on a movie like this one—a minuscule independent film—where there is truly no wiggle room.

On a tiny film like ours there are no pickup days, there are no alternate shooting days, there is nothing. There is only the brief moment that you have scheduled. Low budget indie filmmaking feels like making a half court shot. Almost every time you nail a scene you feel like you just sunk an impossible basket, because it's scheduled *that* precisely. The whole process feels like being chased by a madman with a knife, but, if you make it to the finish line, the madman then turns into Santa Claus and you make out.

Directing a film and acting in it is a pretty unique challenge. But as the director, there are so many questions that need to be answered and endless choices that need to be made—by you specifically—that's a lot to manage.

So many choices. And there are always more to make. Also sometimes the simplest scene can give you the most trouble, while a scene that you thought was gonna be really complicated actually flows like butter. Would butter flow? Flows like water from a tap in the metropolitan area. Spreads like butter? Anyway, it's just always those unexpected problems that are the most challenging. I actually was very nervous about acting and directing, but found those scenes to be the most fun. At first I was like "Oh my God, how fucked! Am I gonna direct *and* act?" I did make a short film before *Assholes* but I didn't act in it. I realized on set that my role would be even bigger than I thought it was on the script, which is kind of funny. I went into it thinking "My role is not that big." And as soon as we started I was like "Oh shit, I actually have a *lot* of lines to learn."

What's so cool about being an actor and a director simultaneously is that you tend to communicate the tone of the scene in a very organic way, almost through osmosis, in a way that you can't when you're just on the outside. There is a scene in *Assholes* where all the characters find themselves at a family dinner. It's one of the most absurd high energy scenes in the movie, and I almost felt like it was easy to direct because I could just go to that place as an actor, and everyone had to join me.

I found those moments to be exhilarating. A joke I would make sometimes making our movie was that the best acting preparation was just to be the director. One of the things that fucks you most as an actor is overthinking and over analyzing what you're doing, but there's no time to overthink when you're also the director. So I'd be tending to all the myriad concerns of the director and then just have to jump right in as an actor. It was liberating because I hadn't been thinking about the scene in my proverbial trailer or actual trailer the way you would when you're just the actor. The old adage about acting is that it's all about hurrying up to wait, which is 100% true. Well, there's no hurry up and wait when you're also the director. As an actor, I found that to be extremely liberating and creatively lubricating.

You've been acting for a long time now. Do you find that the hustle of acting—of trying to get work, auditioning, etc—has gotten easier the longer you've done it? So many describe the experience of being a young actor as a process of perpetually trying to sell yourself, to convince someone that you are the right person for the job.

In a way, that is almost counterintuitive how I feel about it. It's like part of my job convincing people that I'm

an actor is about never actually doing that. Maybe I'm wrong about this and maybe someone will read this and debunk this theory of mine—and I'd actually be happy to have it debunked—but sometimes I feel like in order to be a good actor, you almost have to live as if you were *not* an actor.

You simply have to live, just as a person, and hope that what you're putting out, like vibrationally into the world, will resonate with people. You hope that people are like "Oh shit, *that* is the person I want in my film and it just so happens they can act and are an actor, so I might as well use them." Those are the kind of actors that I'm most interested in, so that's the kind of actor I would hope to be. The kind of actor that I don't like is someone for whom acting so firmly central to their identity that they actually forget to cultivate who they are as a person. They're so willing to be anyone for anybody that they are somehow a half-baked human as a result. That's the kind of actor that, unfortunately, you do meet a lot. You almost want to tell them to quit acting and then maybe they'll be a great actor.

I know that the process of making your film was a long one. Not only did you write and direct the film, but you Kickstarted the project and raised the funds yourself. Having gone through the process and now with maybe a little bit of hindsight, how do you feel about it? Did it light a fire in you to do it again? Or was it a feeling of, "I don't know if I can ever do this again"?

I actually honor both of those feelings. Making a film does take so much out of you. It deserves to be said that I funded this movie myself. I was lucky enough to make a lot of money on a television show, *Mozart in the Jungle*, and there's no way anybody would have funded this film except for me. We raised finishing funds on Kickstarter, which we were very lucky to do, but part of what excites me about making movies will probably always be the great challenge of it. Things that are exciting are often also challenging and, for better or worse, I'm drawn to movies that are theoretically impossible to fund.

Those are my favorite kind of movies in the world—the ones that almost seem like they should have never been made. Feature filmmaking requires such a large upfront investment, so of course that inhibits what can ultimately get made. I was in an extremely privileged position in making this film. The movie becomes almost a critique of that privilege.

So, to answer your question, I was exhausted by the experience and I also can't wait to do it again. It's such a rush when you are making a film. I love the relationships that develop around the making of the film, the community that develops, and the intensity that you live with day to day while you are doing it. It is such a unique high, not only based on excitement and fear, but also because of the intimacy and camaraderie. It's an experience like no other.

So even if it takes a lot out of you, it's worth it. In a way it's like falling in love. We all know that falling in love is the best thing and also the very worst thing. I mean it is truly the greatest gift life has to offer, and it is truly the destroyer of worlds. To me filmmaking is the exact same experience. I feel like my relationship to filmmaking and acting is a love story, but a tumultuous one. I love acting, but I'm certainly not famous. I'm not working all the time. I wish I was, but not for fame's sake. Although, famous actors do work a lot more than the ones that aren't famous. (laughs)

It's the same thing with filmmaking. It's such a struggle to get anything done, but I always say that films are like a gift that continually keeps on giving. This will sound so corny coming out of my mouth, but I don't mind a little corn. I found the making of my film to be really emotionally nourishing. The stories and the memories you have last for a good lifetime, plus I still get to reminisce with these people that I made the movie with and laugh and hug each other, and chuckle, and just feel so connected to them.

I feel like I could cry, actually, right now, thinking about it. I really do feel like a layer of emotion come up in me, thinking about how special it is to make a movie of this size and with this ethos. Yeah, so of course I'll do it again. I hope to do it again and again and again until they put me in jail.

Peter Vack Recommends:

I'm just going to tell you about things that are around my room that I happen to love. The first thing would be The Pocket Pema Chodron. It's a little collection of her pithy statements. It's very important to me. What else... mid-century design and mid-century furniture. And coffee. I love really, really good coffee. I'd recommend is this book called Not One Day by a French writer named Anne Garréta. What else? Oh, condoms. I'd recommend condoms because you gotta have safe sex. At the end of the day *Assholes* is also just a plea to the youths of America to use condoms. It's a cautionary tale.

Name

Peter Vack

Vocation

Actor, Writer, Director



Photo by Hao Zeng