Stephen Cone on working outsic the system



April 5, 2017 - Filmmaker Stephen Cone was raised in South Carolina and is now based in Chicago. He has written, produced, and directed seven independent feature films. His films *The Wise Kids* and *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* deal with evangelical Christian families struggling to negotiate issues of faith, desire, and sexuality.

As told to Joshua Sanchez , 1894 words.

Tags: Film, Anxiety, Process, Independence.

Making a Movie

For me it usually starts with a *feeling* of wanting to do something, rather than the specific story idea for a film. I'm not someone who's ever in danger of running out of ideas. In fact, I have too many. I'm making movies for under $200,000 and over the last five or six years I will generally know by the fall of the year if I can raise the money for a $100-150,000 movie. Usually, I have been thinking about two or three possibilities throughout the year and then in the fall I see what's stuck. Then I write very quickly, probably *too* quickly, a first draft to run by a few people and see if it passes muster as something that people I trust feel is worth tackling.

Sometimes it's very clear what I should make and sometimes nothing is lighting a fire and the smart decision might be to not make anything, but often times I'll keep thinking and try to come up with some sort of nugget that will light a fire. That happened with [2015's] *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*. I thought that film would be the last micro-budget I made, and then I tried to make a bigger budget film last year. I thought maybe I was rushing it so I said, "Well, a sane person would just chill out and enjoy the rest of his summer," but instead I quickly wrote a new project and shot it six weeks later.

Playing the Long Game

I've been making movies in my own little world for 12 years without any real organizational support and without going through any developmental labs. I've paid for that in this incredibly long game that I find myself playing and by not building momentum within those systems that could potentially make bigger things happen for me more quickly. I have production managers and line producers, but for better and for worse, I have always been the most connected, powerful person on the project, which at this point is not always good because I do want to make something bigger.

The short term benefit of micro-budget filmmaking is that you have movies that actually get made. The long term downside is that it gets harder to get a bigger project off the ground. I do have people interested in my larger projects and I'm excited about that, but I also want to be able to keep making movies like [2011's] *The Wise Kids* and [2013's] *Black Box* without fear of derailing myself.

The Discovery Fetish

I have the weirdest history at film festivals. The fall/winter festivals tend to always reject me. Then these

spring, regional festivals swoop in and have given me whatever legitimacy I have as a filmmaker. *The Wise Kids* premiered at Outfest. I'm pretty sure we were the only world premiere there. *Black Box* premiered at the Sidewalk Film Festival. We were the only world premiere. *Henry Gamble* premiered at the Maryland Film Festival, we were the only world premiere. I haven't been let into this other club yet.

A lot of the festivals have gate keepers who have good taste and are simply selecting films that are just good, but there is also the problem of not having established connections and momentum within these New York cultural establishments by working with the kinds of producers that have relationships with those programmers.

I could talk all day about this first time filmmaker discovery fetish that is so prevalent in the independent film world. I think it's disastrous and damaging to film culture to consistently be prioritizing and celebrating discoveries. We don't give our filmmakers a chance to grow and develop. Another result of this fetishing of newness is that you're screwing over the people you are celebrating by rushing them too quickly into the limelight. You're also screwing over the people who've made 10 movies and are just starting to get really good.

It may sound romantic or self-indulgent, but there are times when I feel like one of the the silent filmmakers. I'm by no means comparing myself to John Ford, but you know, those early filmmakers, people like John Ford, got like 15 to 20 shorts and silent films out of their system before they started making their well-known features. Coppola has all those movies before *The Godfather*. We just don't give people chances anymore. There are people—and I would put myself in this category—who don't necessarily feel like natural filmmakers right out of the gate and you feel like with each film they make they are tackling something new and learning something new.

A Love for Actors

My love for actors comes from having a background in acting, but in terms of method, I trust actors to do their thing. I don't give them a ton of direction. I don't speak in terminology. I talk to them like people. There is maybe a down-to-earth trusting practicality with my engagement that comes from acting.

I've learned to be open regarding how an actor can change a script. The prime example I always give is Allison Torem in *The Wise Kids*, who plays the super-Christian friend Laura. She was written as kind of a flakier person—maybe almost even more like a cheerleader type or just a ditzier character. But then Allison, who's a Chicago born and raised Jew—super savvy, smart and tough—came in and I was skeptical. I had to be talked into seeing her a couple more times. Finally I saw her in a play and was like, "Okay, I see it now" and that was when I learned that the casting of a film can actually itself be a kind of rewrite. As a person, I like to stay in control, but as a filmmaker, I've become more interested in chance and putting things together and seeing what happens.

Defining Success and Failure

I can very honestly say that I am tired of this decade of self-produced, micro-budget indies… My ego and my professional self defines success as a wider recognition of the work. I don't mean that in a compromised way, I just mean I want these movies to do better and play more places. I make no bones about defining success largely in those terms, but any time I've set out to try to start a script that might sell to a big company, I don't even get 10 pages in because I'm incapable of writing something by formula. I also define success as continuing to be able to do the kind of work that I've been doing. These two definitions of success seem to contradict each other, but I guess it makes sense. I want to be able to continue to tell the kinds of stories that I've been telling for 10 or 11 years and without much interference or stress and *still* reach a wider audience. That's really the greater dream, and I would just hope that both of those paths will maybe eventually bleed into one.

Being in Love with Film

One of my great weaknesses has been not nurturing other aspects of my life. And so what do I do when I'm not making a movie? I am watching them. I am reading about them. I'm teaching them. I'm currently trying to find a better balance. I don't want to sound like I'm ashamed of it, but I am just a little ashamed that at 36 years of

age how little I've read or traveled over the last few years because of how maybe too overly obsessed I've become with continuing to make work. That being said, I'm not making work out of a obsessive, doubtful nervous energy. I'm making it, I hope, like a painter in a studio. I think I've learned that I'm on a very specific track and I just need to keep doing my thing and what happens will happen.

I used to have an insatiable appetite for books. Now I spend at least 10 minutes a day lamenting my decreasing attention span. And I don't know what to do about it. I feel like I'm just so obsessive and my mind is constantly going. I envy the days when I went to bed at night and read 50 pages of a book, but I was 19 then. I mean, a 36 year-old should not have a shorter attention span than his 19 year-old self. But that's indeed what's happening in this century. I almost want to cry thinking about just being 17 in 1997 and having nothing really to do in my room except pick up a book. I'm so grateful that I was born when I was. That I was able to have one foot in that century when we didn't have all this other stuff in front of us.

Keep it Simple

My first short film was an update of the story of Abraham and Isaac—the story of a pastor sacrificing his son on the alter. From the beginning, I've been obsessed in many ways with the sexuality of religious people and Christians because I grew up in an environment that was positive and friendly and mostly very happy, but in which sex was not encouraged or labeled positively. To this day, any time I'm gathered with evangelical Christians of any sort, I'm thinking, "Wow, all of these people have physical desires" and it's just an interesting little conundrum for me. It's always there.

My first feature, *The Christians*, was about two Christian couples. One liberal Christian couple and one sort of more naïve conservative Christian couple, holed up in an apartment during the maybe apocalypse, or maybe when the rapture is about to happen. The first part is a very bad M. Night Shyamalan rip off, and then the second half I just dropped the plot completely and the two couples start to find each other physically and just take solace in each other, which has continued to be a theme throughout the last 10 years.

It took five years to find the tone and style of *The Wise Kids*. I was scared of naturalism. I was snobby about it. *The Wise Kids* is me basically saying, "Show up and just try to make something that's close to you and just don't worry about being a great filmmaker". It was a really messy, bumpy five years of stumbling through all of these projects. But also, I'm only realizing now that early on I was just trying to imitate my favorites. I never really gave myself an opportunity to just try to be myself. I'm doing that now.

Recommended by Stephen Cone:

-The essays of Marilynne Robinson, which have done more to shape my life and thinking over the past several years than any other body of work. She is also an astounding novelist (*Housekeeping, the Gilead Trilogy*)

-The underrated films of Frank V. Ross and Jennifer Reeder, two Chicago-area film humanists

-The music of Frances Cone, a great Brooklyn-based band that just happens to be fronted by my sister

-The masses and motets of Renaissance composer Orlande de Lassus

-The masterfully layered, densely novelistic, exhilaratingly bisexual films of French filmmaker André Téchiné

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Vocation
Filmmaker

Fact

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Joe Mazza