

On why it's important to keep making things



Writer and director Nastasya Popov discusses endurance in the creative process, handling rejection, and the importance of revision

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 1844 words.

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Tell me a little bit about your journey to film making. Did you always want to make movies? When did you know this was the path for you?

I grew up in LA, so naturally, I was surrounded by peers whose parents worked in the industry. I had a theatrical streak as a kid, but around middle school, I realized there's this whole other subset of roles behind the camera. That was around the time when Netflix was sending movies in the mail, so I set out to give myself a cinematic education, and just started watching all these classic movies like [The 400 Blows](#) (1959), [A Clockwork Orange](#) (1971), and [Nashville](#) (1975).

I don't remember a conscious moment where I was like, "I want to be a director." It just morphed into me making weird music videos in high school, then getting into Northwestern, which turned out to have this incredible documentary and journalism program, plus creative writing and screenwriting. I ended up really honing those skills. The big thing was realizing that [filmmaking] is not really a medium that you can study. You just have to start making things.

It sounds like a lot of your personal interests convened in this art form and have led to so many things..How do you begin a creative project? What is your creative process?

It's always evolving. But with screenwriting, my process has become all about revision. Revision is everything to me. I think the hardest part is getting that first draft down. Anne Lamott has a chapter about "Shitty First Drafts" in *Bird by Bird*, and I'm a big shitty first draft person. I like to get it out of my head and on paper. Put everything that inspires you into that first draft and think about it later, or else you're going to be stuck rewriting the first page for months. I always start there.

Another thing I learned through the making of *[Idiotka]* was that before starting with the shitty first draft of a script, ideally you have a great outline. I ended up going through many more drafts than I would have had I first mapped out the movie, but of course, that's easier said than done with personal work. Screenwriting is so much about structure. So now, I'm really big on spending a few months outlining, making sure I know how it ends, being able to express the themes that I'm trying to explore, yet still knowing that the first draft is going to be horrible.

Something I started, three to five years ago, and I've been doing religiously every morning since, are morning pages. I recommend them to every artist. It's [Julia Cameron's](#) concept from *The Artist's Way*, where you write three, freehand stream-of-consciousness pages when you wake up—they're meant to be thrown away, never revisited. Having that low stakes place to essentially drain your brain in the morning before you start out on a creative

endeavor is really helpful to level you out.

Totally agree. So much of art making is just endurance.

Exactly. Can you keep going? Even if you think you're writing shit? Can you get back to it every single day?

In a 2018 interview with The Creative Independent, acclaimed director Sean Baker talks about "blind faith." This belief that at some point he would amass enough work where somebody would eventually recognize it. Does this resonate with you? Why is it important to keep making things?

Oh, wow. Chills!

The way I process life is by finding beauty and humor in everyday things, and in the darkness of the world. So, I think [as an artist] you have to have a delusional belief that, if I'm honest with myself, someone else is gonna care about this. That it's going to resonate. This was something I learned when making short films. Focus on being specific in your work, and that specificity is what's going to be relatable.

Faith is a huge part of it. A lot of the process of making my first film was clamoring for people's attention and convincing them that it would be worth something. Hopefully I'm building that muscle that Sean Baker is talking about. Now that I've done it, I can do it again next time. Surrender to the chaos a bit. I think that's what he means, have faith that your art will find its audience as long as you're being honest in the telling.

The personal is the universal.

One hundred percent. I even wrote a joke about that in [*Idiotka*]. I wanted to poke fun at how sensitive we can be. I thought it'd be funny to watch an artist be told that the "personal is political" and kinda watch her brain explode.

I remember that line!

So, your debut feature film Idiotka is about a working class immigrant family from Russia who struggles to pay rent in West Hollywood, Los Angeles' "Brighton Beach." The oldest daughter of the family tries to pull them out of trouble by participating in a reality TV show fashion competition. What made you want to tell this particular story?

I'm second generation. My Russian Jewish grandma was such a huge part of my life. Toward the end of her life, I moved back into our intergenerational household with her, and my parents, and my sister, and my boyfriend, after living away from home for many years. I wanted to immortalize her iconic presence, but I was also really interested in capturing the difference in how "the past" was dealt with in my two cultures. There was a stoicism to my Russian elders—they proudly "suffered in silence." But in Hollywood, I was being encouraged to dump my trauma on anyone who would listen. Reality TV felt like a great vehicle for capturing this juxtaposition.

Idiotka is star-studded. Why was it important to you to cast actual Russian-speakers?

As a native speaker, I often hear that the language is messed up in films.

It is. The film highlights a very unique subculture that a lot of people don't have access to. There are lots of books and movies about the American immigrant experience, but there are few contemporary takes on the Eastern European/Soviet Diaspora immigrant experience, other than secondary characters or villains. Maybe it has something to do with how insular the community is, or its remnants of the Cold War and anti-Sovietism? Why is it important to tell these underrepresented stories?

I think it's my job to use humor and invite people to think a bit more deeply, to see nuance. I was writing this film when the war [in Ukraine] broke out, and it was important to me to explicitly call out Putin's tyranny in

the dialogue, but also to make sure the sentiment matched the film's tone. Many of the artists who inspire me, like [Mikhail Bulgakov](#), [Nadya Tolokonnikova](#) aka Nadya Riot, [Demna Gvasalia](#), do a tremendous job of making "political" work that is still approachable and has a sense of humor.

The coolest thing was sharing the film with other second-generation immigrants. The more specific I got, the more my work spoke to this shared worldview where we're all just trying to make our parents' sacrifices worth something.

I know you're also a documentarian ([Pickle Man](#) is a really moving example), how do you bridge the gap between true stories and fictional films? *Idiotka* is about a reality TV show afterall...

Documentary was a really amazing way to learn about editing. After shooting a ton of footage of a character who I found compelling, I then had to turn it into a cohesive movie. My fictional work always starts with a documentary lens. Our job is to listen to people and to notice things and then shape it into something interesting for an audience to enjoy.

I'm also fascinated by the fact that, these days, we're all always performing. Ten years ago, reality TV felt artificial and staged. And now everyone just speaks that language, because we've all learned to perform who we are online. I think it's a fascinating extension of the cinematic art form and I adore the medium.

I know the film industry has been through A LOT over the past few years. How do you deal with rejection, lack of funding, false starts? How do you manage to make ends meet in an industry seemingly under collapse, and what advice do you have for those aspiring writers and directors that want to get their skin in the game?

Rejection is a constant. That's my POV. Don't let it be a big thing, expect it, and understand that the right people will find you. Back to that blind faith...you have to have thick skin and brush it off. Easier said than done, but I really try to remind myself of that every day.

In terms of how to make ends meet, I'm a big side hustle person. I've had to work various other jobs. My goal is to work jobs that still leave me creative juice in the tank, or let me work on my writing in the morning and then something else later in the day. I moved home after living away from home for many years, because I was really convinced I needed to make this movie. So sacrifice was part of it.

To quote my own film, Margarita says, "Just keep your head down and do the work." She says it in this moment of naivete. But, I still think we have to believe that. You really have to be a self-starter if you want to be a filmmaker.

Also, I think it's so important to build that community that will push your ideas and projects into existence. Work with your friends and lean on your collaborators. It truly takes a village, so you better love the people you're creating with.

What's next?

I've been writing another comedy. A romantic comedy. I grew up loving films like *The Parent Trap*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The form is so fun to me. I'm developing a few other features and some TV. *Idiotka* will be in select theaters February 27th!

Nastasya Popov recommends:

The movie *Toni Erdmann* by Maren Ade if you want a father-daughter story that will make you cackle with laughter and cry in the same sitting.

[The Screenwriter's Workout](#). I found this workbook helpful and to the point.

Drowsy silk sleep mask. My producer Tess got this for me a few years ago and I'm a convert!

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain. A goodie by George Saunders! Felt relevant to any and all writers, including screenwriters.

Galina Jovovich (who happens to be Milla's mom.) She plays the grandmother in my film and she's just incredible. See it to find out.

Name

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Vocation

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