On not giving up

Filmmaker Sean Baker on what it takes to maintain a career in independent film, why you should never stop studying, and the importance of keeping things in perspective.

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As told to Charlie Sextro, 2505 words.

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You've been making films for almost two decades. Any advice related to maintaining a career in independent film for so long?

Well, I don't know if it's even considered maintaining. It was this desire to eventually get recognized. I just equate it to some kind of blind faith where I knew that at some point I would either amass enough of a collection of work where somebody would eventually recognize it, or I would have one that eventually hits. I was lucky enough to have this television show for a little bit, *Greg the Bunny*, that allowed me to still stay within the industry to a certain degree, and be creative. That's a big deal, because many of my fellow NYU-ers had to take 9-to-5s just to pay rent that eventually became careers outside of film.

I always felt it was important to stay within the industry, even if it's on the far fringe. I'm talking about editing wedding videos and corporate videos, and actually at one point I was even hustling so much I was doing a duplication service because I just happened to have 10 VCRs. This was back in the late '90s in New York where I would put up flyers, especially during IFP week, all around that block that say, "VHS dupes, DVD dupes." I would be at home pressing play, record, play, record. I was actually a mini dupe house. It was like a desperate way to latch onto anything that was still within the industry.

Even though there were times where I was like, "This is the prostitution of the film industry," I look back on those days very fondly because not only did they always keep me practicing and always keep me up to date on new technology, they also provided a lot of real material. I was always able to use whatever job I had to learn more about other people, and that helps me so much with writing now. I got to attend a Russian wedding in Brighton Beach, an African wedding in Jamaica Heights. I got to absorb all of this stuff, and it really has made its way into my screenplays, so you never know how these things will reward you.

No matter what you're doing to pay the bills, just keep in mind that it can be beneficial. If you're a writer, you can learn something from any job, whether it's learning more about the world and writing for people, meeting people, or understanding people. There's also the technical side of things. I always advise people to try to stay within the industry as much as you can, even if it's on the far fringe, just to keep practicing and to keep motivated. I don't like giving advice that much because I still feel so lost in this industry.

Was *Greg the Bunny* the moment you decided to go all in on your career?

No, I was in my 20s. I actually had shot my first film. I had issues in my 20s, you know, addiction issues, on top of being in my 20s when you're not really focused and you can slack and you can be quite irresponsible. I finished my first film, but I didn't edit it yet. I was having a lot of issues editing. Now, looking back, it wasn't just the partying and the irresponsibility, it's that I can't edit a film right away. After making six

films, I've now learned that I need a break between shooting and editing. After making a film, I need distance. Mark and Jay Duplass gave me that distance—they gave me over seven months before I started editing *Tangerine*. I waited five months before editing *The Florida Project*, so this is now something I'm realizing. It's just part of my process. But back then I was also just everywhere and not focused.

That's when *Greg the Bunny* sort of just dropped in our laps. It was one of those things where we didn't think it would happen, but we put our show up on public access in New York City and suddenly, this is pre-YouTube, the agents started calling and we got a show up on IFC. The reason I brought all that stuff up earlier is because I fucked up. There was one incarnation of *Greg the Bunny* that I wasn't involved in, because I had to get help. I had to get sober. I never got rich off of *Greg the Bunny*. Yeah, it's nice to get paid for that year, but it's not like these things ever got any syndications. There was never really any big bucks from it. It was just enough to keep me from having to do a 9-to-5, to keep me going, and pay for the movies.

That's a big deal, because I actually paid for *Prince of Broadway*, not only the making of *Prince of Broadway*, but the distribution. I did a hybrid service deal, and I had to pay a lot of money. I'm not going to tell you exactly how much, but I could've put a kid through college. I spent almost everything I had saved up from *Greg the Bunny* and just threw it into the distribution of *Prince of Broadway*. It kinda bombed, but it got my name out there, which—looking back—was extremely valuable.

Looking back through your filmography, your work is filled with characters hustling through life in pursuit of economic or social stability. How much do their stories mirror the 20 years you've dedicated to making low-budget movies?

There's definitely that mirror. I mean, when we were making *Prince of Broadway*, of course we weren't hustling as hard; just the fact that we were white and born in the United States and male, we had a privilege that you can't even compare with. It's almost disrespectful to even compare ourselves to the hustling of an undocumented African immigrant. But there was always joking on set where we saw ourselves as hustlers and we were hustlers getting by making this movie. In independent film, in general, it seems like you are in an economic class that's… somewhat subpar.

Do you see a lot of similarities between making your first film and your work today?

Looking back at it, oh my god. I was a very… it's a young movie. It's literally a person making a film right out of college with no life experience. It was just basically guys in the suburbs hanging out at a late-night party. That's what I knew, so that was it. That 10 years through my 20s into my 30s, I think that I grew so much in terms of not only how I saw the world and what I've experienced, but also filmmaking.

I've studied a lot. I've never stopped studying, so I feel that my craft has definitely improved. I feel that I have a different approach to filmmaking, and I think I'm a very different person. I've acknowledged the fact that I still have those post-production issues where I wanna edit my film but I need time. Besides that, I think my whole approach to filmmaking is different now.

Were you the same passionate cinephile then as you are today?

Yes, I was, but I was younger. I was living in New York, which definitely allowed me to absorb more than most. But still this was pre-internet, so Kim's Video and all the retrospective houses were my only accessibility to anything that wasn't contemporary. Now you have everything. I think I was still finding myself. When I made *Four Letter Words*, I didn't deep dive yet beyond the big titles. Of course, I saw maybe three or four of John Cassavetes' films, but I hadn't seen the entire Cassavetes library, I hadn't seen the entire Ken Loach library, et cetera, et cetera.

Since you have this extensive knowledge of the career trajectories of all these great filmmakers, does that set expectations in your head about your own career?

Most definitely. For me there is a definite path I want to take. There are models that I look towards as ideal careers. There's a limited amount of time and I'm getting older. My focus is very much the traditional route that I don't think many young filmmakers are actually interested in anymore, but I am. My goal has been to get to Cannes my entire life. It's all about that festival circuit and playing the eight festivals, and being recognized in world cinema.

That's why I really am not honestly that interested in television right now. Listen, they're linked, but I do see it as a slightly different art form. I have been focused and trained to tell a story in a feature-film-length running time. That's how I like to absorb my stories, and those are the types of stories I wanna tell. They're not stories that need you to be with these characters for three years. They're characters that are in your life for 110 minutes. Some people might call me old-fashioned or perhaps old school or not forward thinking, but I don't see that. I mean, as long as your films are forward thinking, as long as your content is forward thinking.

Now, who knows with expectations. There have definitely been bucket-list check marks made. I've been able to say I went to Sundance, and hopefully I go there again. Especially in the last three or four years, a lot of these achievements checked off, which is a wonderful thing. But there's still a far way to go and so I'm still on that route. That's why I do a lot of traveling. I want to be known in Armenia, so I'm going to take a week in Armenia and do press and meet people who are interested in meeting me, and establish a name there. Sometimes people think I'm an idiot for doing this, taking all this time, but I think it's actually part of my work. I'm enjoying it, but it's work. I'm doing my own PR.

What are the career trajectories of the filmmakers who you look up to the most?

I'm not comparing myself to any of these, but I'm saying these are careers that I look at like, "I hope my career is following this, but in my own way." I always use Paul Thomas Anderson as sort of a model career in terms of him being able to do what he wants. These are personal films, yet they're big and high profile, yet they're indie. But his first hit was in his mid-20s. I started late—actually, I'm 47. My films don't come close to hitting the same sort of impact that *Boogie Nights* had. But if I've had any sort of hits with the last two films, that happened in my mid-40s, so it's a very different time in my life that this is happening. Also, the opportunities he's had over the last 20 years are very different from the opportunities that I've had or I will have.

Well, Tarantino, he seems like he's followed a real path. I also look up to the driven passion of people like Lars von Trier and Ulrich Seidl, who have this vision that they haven't wavered from.

Then there's Cassavetes, in the way that he made films about the human condition. He never wavered from that. He never really seemed to sell out. He did one or two studio films, but still—the way he works with a team, the way he works with people of the same sensibility. What I loved about Cassavetes was that from what I could tell, his films were also about discovery and self education, and learning more about the world through the making of films. That's what I've been trying to do, so I feel akin in that way.

Has a filmmaker you respect ever said something to you that changed your perspective on your career?

At dinner in Istanbul, Peter Weir said something like, "You know that feeling that you get between films in which you think, 'Oh, I have no idea if I'm ever gonna be able to make a film again?'" There's a desperate moment between movies where it's almost despair. Am I gonna get another movie off the ground? Is this gonna happen? If I can finance it creatively, will I even get inspired enough to make another film? Peter goes, "That doesn't go away." And he was 80 at the time, and he said, "No, between every film there's that despair." I loved to hear that, and I hated to hear that at the same time. I hated to hear that somebody who's had his amount of success and recognition still has to deal with that mental torture. So it made me feel good to know that I'm not alone, and that this is something that all filmmakers go through. But at the same time, it made me feel that I'm going to have to face this for the rest of my life, so I better just accept it.

From that point on, I have to say that I've tried to change my attitude about it. I've tried to say, instead of getting stressed out, instead of getting all depressed about not knowing exactly what's going to happen next, I

try to twist it. I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but it’s going to be a cool journey, and that discovery is going to be really rewarding.

For example, near the end of shooting *The Florida Project*, I didn’t know exactly how I was going to end it. Then Chris Bergoch says, “Let’s do an orchestrated score of celebration,” and I was like, “Holy fuck! We just figured that out now at the end of this whole journey?” That’s so rewarding, and it feels so good. You get these moments where the inspiration comes, and it just puts you at ease and makes it all worth it.

What was it like for you to have *The Florida Project* premiere at Directors’ Fortnight in Cannes in a section alongside filmmakers like Claire Denis?

Yeah, that was really surreal. And Abel Ferrara as well as Bruno Dumont, whose film *P’tit Quinquin* had a big impact on *The Florida Project*. You can see the behavior of the kids and everything, but I used that as a reference. It really felt like we accomplished something great. It was like, “Yeah, okay, I’m here.” Suddenly you’re on equal terms with some of your heroes. It really felt surreal and it also felt like the journey has been worth it.

Essential Sean Baker:

Four Letter Words (2000)

Take Out (2004)

Greg the Bunny (2002–2006)

Prince of Broadway (2008)

Starlet (2012)

Tangerine (2015)

The Florida Project (2017)

Name
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Vocation
Filmmaker