

On filmmaking as a collaborative act



Actor and filmmaker Josephine Decker on the value of deep collaboration, learning from the people you work with, and gaining confidence in your own voice and vision.

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As told to Charlie Sextro, 2969 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Production](#).

At the Q&A following the world premiere of your new film, *Madeline's Madeline*, your cast and crew gushed about the unique collaborative experience they had working on your set, with a genuine enthusiasm I don't often see. How conscious are you of creating that work environment? Is it obvious to you when you're in the midst of production?

Oh my god, no. I always worry it's the opposite, that people aren't sure if they had a good experience on the movie. It's really nice to hear you say that it felt really positive, because it was hard. Everything was hard, but hard in a really important and growth-oriented way. And it's been complicated for me, as the director of this movie, to talk about it or even share praise about it, because I feel like this movie was made on the backs of so many people. It is so deeply collaborative. It's so deeply born out of many people giving so much of themselves, that I've sometimes had a hard time enjoying the fact that the movie's doing well because you are given so much credit as the director. Too much, I think.

I hope people feel appreciated, and it's also hard to know how to appreciate them. When I list the names of the people who, for instance, I spent two years developing the project with, I feel so indebted to them. They gave so generously to the movie, and they gave so generously to me, as a human, in terms of helping me grow my process. I just hope it didn't drain them, and that they feel seen in that. It was deeply born out of all these minds.

I was writing and kind of improvising with all of these people for one weekend a month for about six months. Then we did an intensive for four days with Quinn Bauriedel, Sophie Traub, Eva Steinmetz, Kaneza Schaal, Liz Rao, Helena Howard, Sean Carvajal, Felipe Bonilla, Ashley Connor, Dana Eskelson, Lolo Haha, Charlotte Hornsby, Sharon Mashihi, Jonathan Roldan, Krista Parris, Alexandra Tatarsky, Jorge Torres-Torres, and Nikki Zalcita. I think it's important for the names to show up because we learned so much in those rooms. It was built on this rehearsal process that was deeply collaborative, everyone brought this process into the movie shoot itself.

The weird thing about a movie shoot is that it's not always meant to be collaborative. In fact, it's supposed to be the opposite. That was hard for both me and the group, because we were all still coming from a space where we had time to talk when issues came up. For example, the way that the group talks about appropriation at the end of the movie, it was such a delicate thing. Like, "How are we going to say this in the right way?" We had so many conversations. We were starting to shoot that in the morning and it evolved into one person saying, "I don't feel comfortable saying this line. I don't know that that's the best way to approach this." And I was like, "Cool, but this person who was involved in our rehearsal process said that exact line to me, and I thought it was really helpful to hear." She was like, "Yeah. That person is not me."

So then we spent about an hour of shoot time talking. We broke for lunch and spent all of lunch talking about it. We finally ended up shooting that scene one way. And then we missed a shot, so we had to go back to it a couple days later, and we ended up shooting it a different way with different dialogue.

In a way, those were my favorite moments—the moments when, as a group, we all took collective responsibility for the thing that we were making. That's the thing that I think is different, maybe, than other movies, because the people who are responsible are usually the director and the producers. From the beginning, I think everybody in this film felt a sense of responsibility, and I think the pride came from, "We did make it together." I think that people also saw that I worked really hard, that I tried really hard to honor that. To listen. Even though I don't think it was always successful. I mean, I made a movie about a terrible, exploitative director, so sometimes I feel that way.

Before you directed your first feature film, where would you say you gained your biggest insight into the director's role on set?

I worked in documentary for my first seven years after college. It's funny because in documentary filmmaking, there's emphasis on becoming invisible, which I found really hard for me. One of the things I discovered from documentary was the sense that you're supposed to, when you're interviewing a subject, just pretend the camera is not there. You're just sitting down having a conversation with them. That ultimately helped me when [Joe Swanberg](#) started asking me to be in his films. I was like, "Oh. I've been practicing not caring that the camera is there for ages." It was interesting working as an actor on Joe's films, which was something I did right before I shot *Butter On The Latch*. Just seeing that you could make a film out of improvisation, you didn't need a script, and you didn't need millions of dollars.

This is gonna sound crazy, but it doesn't matter that much what you capture. I mean, it does obviously, I care deeply when I'm on set, but I'm such an editor. Over time documentaries taught me you that can make something out of so many different pieces, which I think is why I don't get obsessed about getting a line of dialogue perfect. It's more like we need this thing to be alive and listening. Imperfect works too, and sometimes that feels really right. Working in documentaries, I think, gave me a lot of freedom going into narrative films. I wasn't scared. I wasn't worried about it. It felt really liberating, like, "I'll just catch a bunch of stuff and then we'll make it into a movie." I think my friends who went to film school had to unpack a lot of trauma.

One thing that I loved when I worked with [Stephen Cone](#) on his movie *Black Box*, was that he is all about a very open conversation with actors. He was really clear about what was working and what was not working. He's like, "Okay, you have this backpack that you're putting down in this shot. You are doing way too much with the backpack, just drop it." It's so helpful to have little notes like that. It felt like it gave me so much freedom to talk to actors and to really be their collaborators and be really involved with them. I still think I'm clumsy. Talking to actors can be really clumsy.

Is there a specific way that you would describe your directing style when you're on set?

The first thing that came to mind was something that someone said to me when they saw me directing *Thou Wast Mild And Lovely*, and that's 'soft power'—I really appreciated that. I felt very seen when they said that because at that point I felt like I had no power. Molly Parker said something too, which was like, "It's funny, because you seem so, so, so collaborative—and you are—but I also think you really know what you want, and you don't stop until you get that." That is something I've always felt. I don't stop until I get the thing I want. As a more mature person, I think I'm getting better at asking for that earlier in the process. Sometimes I do love getting everyone's input. And sometimes I'll feel guilty if I don't take it, so I'll be like, "Okay, let's try that thing", knowing I don't really want to do it. I can end up exhausting people because I'll end up being like, "No, actually I want to try it this way."

It's just about getting better at trusting my own ideas earlier, and pushing for getting feedback and not always feeling like I have to follow it. I'm feeling increasingly liberated to say what I think, and also to say, "I don't know."

When I was on *Thou Wast Mild And Lovely*, it was so hard, and Joe Swanberg was like, "You are making it a little bit harder for yourself because the thing is, none of us care as much as you. None of us know what is in your mind. None of us are actually going to be that happy with this experience as a whole unless you are happy with it, so you need to get what you want and not feel ashamed of asking for it." This was just so much permission. A lot of my life has been about finding my voice, but also my literal physical voice, and not being ready to speak up. Now I'm finding healthier and healthier ways to do that earlier. Be more assertive earlier. Follow my instincts earlier.

It's gonna be really different this summer working with pretty impressive actors. I think normally my default would be to inherently trust them more, because they're more experienced. It's crazy, actors work on a million movies, but I've had this one movie in my head, swimming in it for a year, deeply rewriting it and writing it again. It's always important to remember that you are the storyteller. You know the story better than anyone else, and it's actually okay to remind people this is what we're going for, and not to be intimidated.

What do you see as your key responsibilities on set?

Well, I feel very much responsible for the performances. I feel very responsible for the performance of the camera, which is as important as the actor's performance. I usually think of my camera as a good actor in the movie. One of the few projects I made without my regular cinematographer, Ashley Conner, I remember the cinematographer talking to the steadicam operator like, "Hit this point, and then hit this point, and hit this point. When the light goes, hit this point." I was like, "It's gonna look like shit. That's not how you operate a camera."

I went to that steadicam operator and said, "I want you to do one take that is just you following your instincts. Don't think about the lighting. Don't think about hitting any marks." It was so alive, so much more exciting. He's performing. He's dancing. I take it on as my responsibility that people are trusting their own instincts as opposed to imposed ideas. I think sometimes it's about reminding people to stay connected to their visceral experience, because just hitting marks is not the soulful, present solution. That's a lot of my job-trying to keep the spirit, the soul, and that energy.

What atmosphere do you want to feel on set?

Very open. "Spiritual" sounds like a corny word, but that's definitely something I've been thinking about a lot, especially as I look towards making my next feature. A spiritual space which is about you not just connecting to your idea or your mind, but also you're connected to your body, your breath, the magic that's emerging with everyone else, so you're not just working alone. Ideally that's the atmosphere-very connected, very soulful.

What personalities do you find difficult to work with on set?

I had a great conversation with somebody recently. She was saying that with complicated relationships in your life, you can either walk towards them and grow, or you can hide from them. I was like, "Fuck yeah, so true." I love working with really strong women who are kinda bossy. I trust them, and then sometimes I'll forget that I'm the boss. I think when there's a personality who really isn't naturally a great listener, but who is really gonna say what they think with confidence, that can be hard because when I don't feel heard I don't necessary know how to defend myself.

Sometimes it takes me awhile to figure out how to communicate with that kind of person in a way that gets us somewhere beneficial. It's about being explicit, like, "I don't think what you're saying supports the narrative because *this*." If I can frame it in terms of the story, it can be really helpful. Sometimes you come up against a person who is like, "No," and they don't want to talk about it. I find those people really hard to work with because I don't get a chance to grow if I don't know what's wrong. Usually it's something completely random that you have no idea about, like a costume thing, or lighting, who knows.

It's okay for something to be wrong, and to not know what's wrong, and still try to point to it. That has felt increasingly good and a space I'm more willing to go to-not pretending that everything is fine when it's not fine. It's also knowing when to do that, because sometimes you just don't have enough time to have a deeper conversation, so it's knowing when you can open up that space. Those are the hardest things to figure out. I'm pretty good at pulling people out who have softer energies. I work great around chaotic energy. I like people who are a little bit chaotic.

Do you follow any mental or physical health regime, either leading up to or during production?

That I take very seriously. I do a lot of meditating. I try to really up my spiritual game. I practice Zen Buddhist meditation in New York at the Fire Lotus Temple. We did five minutes of meditation at the beginning of every day on *Madeline's Madeline*. It was more like a five minute silence, it wasn't even meditation. We had the whole crew and cast, whoever was there, stand in a circle to start every day with silence. It was so good.

I think it really made a big difference to the crew because on a film set, everybody launches into their jobs. If you're a person who is showing up that day for the first time, you don't actually even know what everyone does. I think spending that time together, you literally start to see, "Ohh... that's the boom operator, that's the 2nd AC, and there's the DIT guy." And people whose work is maybe more invisible feel seen. It was also about holding a space that was like, "You're really important. Everyone in the circle is really, really important. If one person doesn't do their job, you all feel it." And it's so true, that's how a film works.

Usually I'd try to go to the [School of Making Thinking](#), a residency I'm pretty involved with, either during the same summer of the shoot or the summer before. It's usually deeply informative. Being in nature is so helpful too. I just came back from vacation in Washington state for a week, hiking and hanging out with the trees and just being way more connected to inner peace. That was so good for me. I still feel so relaxed because of that. Your priorities shift. I just try to get away when I can, because if you go into something really stressed out, it rubs off on the production. You just want to bring your mountaintop to the movie, ideally.

Going forward, where do you see room for growth for yourself as a director?

In my career up to this point, I've mostly worked with a crew that is my age or younger. Mostly they've been significantly younger than me. I learned so much working with David Baker, the editor, who is older. He just knew so much about cinema. I feel like working with him in the editing suite is like getting a master's degree. I wish I could have that in every department, just to learn from someone who has been a production designer for thirty years and knows how to artfully add to the story in ways that are totally surprising. That's the thing about shooting low-budget stuff, you're always relying on people in their early twenties who need credits and don't need a lot of money. But increasingly, it's nice to work with people who have really expressed visions and experience. I think I would grow a lot from being around that more.

And then with my own growth, I taught advanced acting at CalArts this semester and loved it. It gave me a lot more confidence working with actors and getting excited about my way of working, but it also showed me all these holes in the way that I talked to actors and how I direct. I feel like that's a lifelong thing. Acting is so spiritual, and to be a partner with someone and to try to push them into a place... I just don't think that's a thing where I could ever be like, "I'm great at this." You slowly find more ways to communicate, and hopefully that's helpful.

Josephine Decker recommends:

[Zen Mountain Monastery](#) in upstate New York: clear your mind.

Heavyweight podcast, especially [this episode](#)

[We Have Always Lived in the Castle](#), novel by Shirley Jackson

[National Resources Defense Council](#), if you're looking to save the literal world

[Eagle Rock Pilates](#), best pilates studio I've been to in my seven years of religiously pilates-ing (it's in Eagle Rock, Los Angeles)

Name

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Vocation

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