

On not giving up



Filmmaker Christina Choe discusses the long process of making her first feature and the irrational perseverance required to make movies.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2630 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Independence](#), [Adversity](#), [Anxiety](#).

Your first feature film, *Nancy*, just premiered at Sundance. Did the experience of traveling to festivals with your previous short films inform how you went into making and promoting a narrative feature?

Yeah. The short films were also great practice for how to work with actors. For most of those shorts there was at least one actor that was a nonprofessional, so I was really involved with working with them on their roles and really "directing" them. I feel like this is such a different piece and a different experience in a million different ways. I got to work with a dream cast, which made me realize, "Wow, *this* is why you have such high caliber of actors." It makes my job so much easier. I'm used to working with actors a lot and with this movie it was much more of a process of basically just getting out of the way and letting them do what they do best. I was also kind of intimidated in the beginning. You prepare and prepare and then after all these delays suddenly Steve Buscemi is in my living room and I'm supposed to be telling him what to do? It's insane.

You mentioned in one of your Q&As at the festival that there was a point a couple of years ago that *Nancy* almost got made and then the funding fell through and you had to wait a long time for another chance. How long did it take you to get your movie made?

A *long* time. I think the process of raising financing was maybe two to three years. The script started to take shape about five years ago. It's actually kind of a normal amount of time for an indie first feature to develop, but when you're in it, it feels so long. It's pretty excruciating. Nobody understands unless they've been through it. It's almost like you're waiting for your whole life to begin. There are so many times where you feel like you're not in control of what's happening... because you're not. It's a very painful kind of waiting, like torture, basically.

During that period of years, how do you sustain yourself? Not just financially, but emotionally as well?

It's hard. Like I said, you feel like you're born to do this one thing and it's like, "When am I going to do it? When is it ever gonna happen?" It's not like other art forms, where there's more freedom to do it on your own. It's like, if you play music, you just play music. If you paint, you just paint. If you want to write a poem, you just write a poem. With filmmaking it's different. You need time and people and lots of money.

Because you need so much money to basically follow your dreams and express yourself, there's a different element to it. I have a background as an editor and that kept me afloat during those times. I had to learn—or at least *try* to learn—how to be more zen. I'm not really a Buddhist and I don't know how zen most people that know me would say I actually am, but I definitely had to try and not stress about it. Even now I have to really remind myself that things will work out in the end as they're meant to be.

It's hard. It's like you're always on an emotional rollercoaster and that's not really a healthy way to live your life. I haven't figured it out completely yet but I think having a personal life and a good support system balances it out. At the same time, if I hadn't had that sort of fever-pitched dream and insane, irrational persistence, I don't know if it would have gotten done. If I had been more chill and just been "let's just see what happens, it will all work out" about things I don't think my movie would have ever happened.

Even if you are a technically brilliant filmmaker, if you don't have the personality and people skills to advocate for yourself and push for things, you might never make a movie.

Yes. Especially if you're a woman, a woman of color, or if you're gay, or a person that's on the margins of the mainstream Hollywood system. Then it's even harder. You have to fight more. The fighting for money and behind the scenes stuff is really about 80% of being a filmmaker, then 20%—the good part—is actually just making the thing. You channel through so many thoughts and emotions, even in the course of a single day. It's exhausting. I still find myself thinking about how hard it was just to make this movie. I wonder sometimes: Can I do it again? If it's going to be that hard next time, I just don't know. This is kind of dark, but you know what I mean.

Aside from all the technical stuff, there are so many people skills involved in being a good director—knowing how to talk to people, put people at ease, etc.

I'm glad that I did have some experience directing actors, one class in particular at Columbia, that taught me just how to talk to them. Talking through objectives and needs in a very technical way but also in ways that made sense. I got to use those tools in directing non-actors, when it almost felt like sometimes I was their acting coach, going in-depth with them while making my short films. I think that was the best training.

I kind of prepared in the same way for *Nancy*. For all of the actors' roles, I knew what all their objectives were. I did all the things I would have done for a non-professional actor. I was just like, "I've got to be super prepared. It's fucking Steve Buscemi!" All of them—Andrea Riseborough, John Leguizamo, J. Smith-Cameron, Ann Dowd—were like fucking actor's actors, so I was just *really* prepared. It's funny, because one time we were just chilling out and having drinks and I showed Steve my notes. He was like, "Wow, that's so great." He was really impressed. Then when I started directing it was like... well, it's not that I didn't have to do anything, it was just way easier than I anticipated. They knew what they were doing. There's a couple scenes where I'm improvising with John Leguizamo and Ann Dowd. I always have the belief of if you're over-prepared it's better. It's like improv or jazz. As long as you know your notes, you can go off and riff, but you have to actually know what you're doing first. Then later you can come back to the central theme, or whatever it is you're trying to get to in that scene.

I feel like because I had done all that other training and excessive preparation, in a way, I could be more relaxed. I think actors at that level just want to feel comfortable. They want to feel like you're on the same page in terms of what you want, and then they can just go play. That was sort of my philosophy on set. I wanted people to feel really comfortable, free to experiment if they wanted to, or do what they feel is right.

Another filmmaker once told me that the most shocking thing about making his first feature film was the sheer volume of questions that he had to answer on a daily basis. Even when you think you've made every possible decision, it turns out there are a million more.

Oh my god. I used to joke with my producer about this. People from the props department would be like like, "Do you like *this* Tupperware or *that* Tupperware for this scene? Do you like these socks?" I'm just like, "Oh my god. I cannot deal with all these questions!" My producer was like, "Well, that's directing. What did you think it was?" I was like, "I don't know, but it's just a bit much. I didn't think I'd be picking out socks and tupperware all day."

Every movie director is different and has their own approach. Some people are like, "I'm the benevolent dictator." For other people, it's like, "No, I'm just a dictator." There are people who want to know everybody's first name on the crew and feel like they're liked, and other people who might say, "I don't care if I'm liked, I'm the boss."

I have no desire to be the either the dictator or even the benevolent dictator. Maybe it is because I've worked with so many nonprofessional actors in the past. I'm always trying to make actors comfortable because I feel like what they do is so vulnerable and magical. To think about what they are *really* doing, it's like they are baring their soul in front of you while all these other people are standing around watching. I respect that. When they're really doing it, it's like magic, it's like voodoo. It's something you don't fuck with.

I feel like you have to create an environment where they feel like they can be vulnerable and they feel safe. I think when actors start to give you problems, it's because they don't feel safe, they don't feel respected, they don't feel like you're in control. So yeah, you do have to be in control, in terms of leading the production, but I just don't believe in people being afraid of you. How are they going to be vulnerable? You're fucking asking them to elicit intense emotions on the spot. I can't do that to people.

I heard you speak about having an almost entirely female crew working on *Nancy*, which is both awesome and also not an easy thing to assemble. How was the process of putting that together?

I was just talking to someone else who wanted to do this same thing on their film. I'm like, "It takes more effort but you just have to be willing to make more phone calls, you have to send more emails." Who do you know that's good at this? Do you know any women that are good sound mixers? Even if the list is shorter, you to do your due diligence and seek them out. Sometimes you have to be willing to give someone their big break. It's like, "Oh, well, they've mostly been a second AC," but you take the risk of them being the first AC. It's also hard because if you're doing a lower budget film and you have a lot of people that are really green, it affects the process. It can slow things down.

On a small movie with a limited budget, everything really needs to move quickly. You don't have a lot of time.

You just can't afford to lose time. It's really a tricky balance of how much you can afford to risk, in a way. Everyone can't be green or else you're not going to finish on time. It also shouldn't be your burden as a new filmmaker to do that. It worked out for us on *Nancy*, but there are those kind of things that people don't want to talk about. Those are the things that you're weighing in your mind. I'm giving them their first break, which is awesome, and more people need to do that. Shouldn't there be more people that are in a position of power that can also do that? You're really stretching everything thin when you're making your first film and you can't afford to screw it up, but you also want to do the right thing and feel good about it. It was a constant negotiation.

***Nancy* is a kind of wonderfully ambiguous movie with a fairly inscrutable lead character—you don't always understand her motivations, which is what makes it fascinating. When you were trying to get the movie made, was that something you had to fight for? I kept imagining studio notes saying things like, "She needs to be more relatable," etc.**

Yeah, I think there was probably some of that and people that might have wanted the whole thing to be more neatly resolved. A lot of people liked the script, they were just like, "Well, it's execution dependent."

Execution dependent?

As in, "this could be good, but it depends on how it's executed." For a lot of people it all depended on who played *Nancy*, how it would be directed, what the tone would be. Things that I can't really give you evidence for before having made the film. I can't give you evidence of my execution. Part of that was also that I had a lot of female characters and a female lead, that I was a female director. They questioned me because I was a first time filmmaker. There were all these question marks—it *could* work, but it's execution dependent. When you hear that term it usually means, "maybe, but no" or "Yeah, it could be good but we don't know so we're not going to take the risk." It's almost always about "We can't take the risk."

I noticed at so many of the Q&As at Sundance one of the most common—and nearly impossible to answer questions—was typically "How did you get your movie made?" For people who want to do this, who maybe didn't go to film school, or don't have the same kinds of organic connections with peers who came up in the system at the same time they did, what can you even tell them?

Just looking at how I did it... I just don't think it's the same for everyone. I never thought it would happen this way. I didn't really have any models to follow. The only real consistent thing is perseverance. I somehow just didn't give up when it felt like so many things were against me. To me, it's about being the last one standing. It eventually worked out because ultimately I was the last woman standing. I feel like I stuck it out, I stuck out the marathon. I finished. Otherwise, I really have no good answer for this.

I've been answering a lot of questions about being a female director, about being an Asian female director, etc., and I do feel like things are improving. I think we're in an era where people are going to hire more women. Even though it's not like the tide has completely changed—there's still so much work to be done—I think there are certain people that are advocating for certain other people that they can help. You know? And so much of it is that—supporting talented people that you know, being supported by other talented people. I think the more people feel empowered to do that, the better things will be. As for filmmaking, there is no right way to go about it. Right now it feels like for directors, TV is the way to make money and filmmaking is this space where you can do your art. How do you pay your bills and then do your passion project? That's probably always going to be the hardest question to answer, but I'm convinced it can be done. You just can't give up.

Christina Choe recommends:

Wanda (1970) Written and directed by Barbara Loden

Taxi Driver (1976) Directed by Martin Scorsese and written by Paul Schrader

Close-Up (1990) Iranian docu-fiction written, directed and edited by Abbas Kiarostami

A Woman Under the Influence (1974) Starring Gena Rowlands. Written and directed by John Cassavetes

Name

Christina Choe

Vocation

Filmmaker



