

David Lowery on finding inspiration where you grew up

September 27, 2017 - David Lowery is an American filmmaker based in Dallas, Texas. He has directed several feature films, including *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, *A Ghost Story*, *Pete's Dragon*, and the forthcoming *The Old Man and the Gun*.

As told to Charlie Sextro, 2987 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#).

We both grew up in the Dallas area. I left when I was 18 and rarely return. I'm interested to hear what keeps you there.

It's changed over the years. I always thought that I would be someone who would leave at the age of 18. All through high school I was waiting to leave. I was very excited to get out of town. I completely envisioned myself living in New York City, and if not New York City then in Los Angeles. What happened was that I graduated, and I tried college at University of Dallas, and it didn't quite work. I didn't understand how to be an upwardly mobile adult. That was my problem. I think if I had understood how to do that, I might have gotten out of Dallas, or at least gotten out of it earlier, but I just didn't understand how one made a living, or how one managed to pay rent, or anything like that. None of those things clicked for me. I was working from the time I was 16 until 24 as a projectionist at a multiplex, which was a dream job for me. When I got a raise to \$6.25, I thought that was a lot of money.

So I was making minimum wage, and making little movies, and trying to get better at my craft, and envisioning a future for myself that wasn't particularly grandiose, but was certainly creatively satisfying. I never really identified with Dallas, nor did I expect to stay here, but it was just a place that I lived that was comfortable that allowed me to make the things I wanted to make. If I had moved to New York, I knew I would be trying to make rent. I had this idea that I should never go to LA until someone was flying me there, which was kind of the case, so I just stayed put.

And then I went to New York for a while to work on a movie, and realized that it wasn't as exciting as it used to be for me. It didn't mean as much, and I didn't know if I had the aptitude necessary to make it in that city. Then I went to LA for a while, and I liked it there. I thought that was great, but by that point I was making a living cutting commercials and corporate videos and all of the work I had was back in Dallas, so I kept leaving LA to go to Dallas to edit things to pay my bills. It just made more sense to go back.

You mentioned never identifying with Dallas. Do you think that's based in not being born there?

Yeah. When I first moved to Texas from Wisconsin, I remember expecting it to be a John Ford movie. I thought it would be cowboys and all the clichés. I get there, and it just feels like a normal city, so that was an interesting re-orientation of my perceptions, which I think a lot of people have when they first visit Texas and realize that it's not all just a desert with cacti. That's actually Arizona, and not Texas at all.

I liked it. I always liked it. Criterion put out *Rushmore* on DVD, and on the commentary track, you can hear Owen Wilson talking about a scene where Max Fischer takes a chainsaw and cuts a tree down that almost kills Bill Murray. Owen Wilson says that that scene reminds him of a particular type of day that you find only in Dallas around Thanksgiving. I knew exactly what he meant, and I love those days. Those are the days that make me love Texas. The trees have no leaves on them. The sky is gray. The weather is generally pretty cold and foggy, and it's just got this very strange sensibility that is very bittersweet and melancholy and grandiose in a way that Texas can be grandiose, but not in the way the people normally expect it to be. That very specific *je ne sais quoi* is what keeps me in love with Texas as a whole, and particularly with Dallas, because it is a very specific thing to North Texas. Those were things that kind of sank their hooks into me, and which I gradually realized I loved, because I couldn't find them anywhere else.

Once I realized that I didn't want to live in New York or LA, and that I felt at home here, and there were so many things I liked here, it made sense to lean into those particular affectations of the city, embrace them, and realize that those are the things that make me feel at home here, and that's okay.

Do you have some favorite representations of the city?

I do, and it's not even set in Dallas... It's *RoboCop*, which takes place in Detroit, but whenever I think of what I love about Dallas a lot of the times it's that movie. The way the highways work, the overpasses and the architecture of Dallas, it's very well represented in *RoboCop*.

Another one is, oddly enough, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. Rest in peace Tobe Hooper. That movie feels very Dallas-y. I think parts of it were shot in north Texas near Waxahachie. I watched that movie recently. I was like, "This is one of the best representations of what it looks like in north Texas." Sort of when the city's giving way to the rural areas. So that was another one that I really like.

I guess the other big one would be *Bottle Rocket*. I think that movie opened when I was 13, and that was a real lightning bolt moment where I realized that you could make movies here. I knew that *Oliver Stone* had shot things here. I knew that *RoboCop* had been made here, but this was an instance of a bunch of guys making an independent film, and actually having it get released. It was a financial disaster, but that didn't register to me at that point. At that point all that mattered to me was that a bunch of guys from Dallas had made a really cool indie film. When you watch *Bottle Rocket*, it doesn't look like it was shot anywhere here nor do you really recognize anything from Dallas in it unless you live here, in which case you recognize everything.

And that speaks to that lack of identity, but to me it is a quintessential Dallas movie for that reason. Also because it was the first time I saw filmmakers in whom I saw myself, and that was important to me.

I totally get that. It's obvious that Wes Anderson has had a massive creative influence on our generation, but he meant so much more to me being from Dallas. It blew my mind to see him, Owen Wilson, and Luke Wilson get so popular. I remember watching Wes accept the Best New Filmmaker award for *Bottle Rocket* at the MTV Movie Awards. It felt like two worlds colliding.

Totally. I kind of modeled myself after those guys. There was a great article about them and I remember reading that and glomming on to every little detail. The article mentioned that Owen Wilson was working as a projectionist at the AMC Glen Lakes. I decided if that was good enough for him, that's what I'm going to do. As soon as I turned 16, I got a job at an AMC theater, and within six months was a projectionist, and that was the only day job I ever had. I stuck to that job far longer than Owen Wilson probably did.

Then I read about how they wrote the script for *Bottle Rocket* at the [Cosmic Café](#) over in Oak Lawn, and I remember thinking, "Great. That's where I'll go to write my scripts." I realized it wasn't really the most conducive place to write screenplays, but nonetheless, that became a regular haunt for me, because I felt I could tap into some of the inspiration that they had by visiting there. Everything they did in terms of making the short film, sending that to Sundance, getting into Sundance, I was like, "Great. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make a short film version of my script." Of course, it didn't work out the same way. They made the game plan for me, and I followed it to the best that I could—up to the point where Wes Anderson decides he's going to leave Dallas and never come back again.

For a while I wanted to do the same thing, until I didn't. Now I think about that a lot, about how when I was growing up here, anyone who came from here left. Wes Anderson being the prime example, but everyone who came from here left. I started to think about how cool it would be if someone stuck around, and now I'm finding myself in this position where maybe I'm that guy. Maybe I'm the guy that sticks around.

What percentage of movies have you made specifically in Dallas? and also Texas?

Not as much as I would like. I always want to make movies while living at my own house, and that has not yet happened. [A Ghost Story](#) was 100% shot in Dallas, although I wasn't living in Texas. I was living in LA, so I had to fly in to do that. Then [Ain't Them Bodies Saints](#) we shot in Louisiana, and then did a week of shooting in Dallas and in Austin. Then *The Old Man and the Gun*, the one I just finished, we shot mostly in Cincinnati. That's a true story that does take place in Dallas, but we had to shoot it in Cincinnati, so we're actually now gearing up to go do some pick-ups here, so that it looks like it takes place in the place where it's supposed to take place.

What does it feel like when you get to actually shoot something in Dallas? Where do you see the benefits?

It's a general sense of comfort. Even in the case of *A Ghost Story* where I wasn't able to go home and sleep in my own bed because my bed was in Los Angeles, I still had this sense that I knew what was around every corner. Like, on that movie, because it was so small, I remember going to pick up breakfast for the crew one morning, and knowing where to go at 5 am. There's those things that you know when you know a city like the back of your hand that makes it easier. That's the type of comfort that can make a production a lot easier, even if it's not having any practical results. That means a lot to me.

There's also no denying nostalgia is a valuable thing to me. It can also be a very damaging thing, but I like it. I like being able to drive down the highways that I learned to drive on when I was 16. I like being able to see the changes happening in a city that I've been living in for the past two decades. I really enjoy it. It's just nice to see that transpiring in front of me.

Aside from the comfort and the nostalgia, I like the idea of finding an industry in a place where the industry doesn't necessarily have a presence. I like making movies in places that aren't widely seen. That's one of the bummers about having everything shoot in Atlanta right now, is that everything looks like Atlanta, and I like making movies in other places. So it's nice to live in a place where every street corner has not already been photographed in 30 blockbusters.

What about shooting in other areas meant to represent Dallas? How much thought do you have to put into recreating North Texas?

It changes from one movie to the next. Like with *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, because it was such a rural movie, it wasn't really set in Dallas it was in this little town Meridian, so we were just looking for neighborhoods that have that particular Texas feel, which wasn't that hard to find in Louisiana. There were things like the street signs and fire hydrants are painted different colors there, so that always threw me. In that movie we didn't really have the budget to change all of them, but nonetheless, you could still find those little pockets of neighborhoods.

Then everything else was interiors, and we came back to Texas to shoot any exterior that really mattered. The really interesting thing about that was like the topography changes so much once you cross the Louisiana border. It just goes from being these rolling Texas hills and turns into a swamp very, very quickly, so for those exteriors we needed it to look like it wasn't shot in Louisiana.

With the *The Old Man and the Gun*, most of that movie is meant to take place in 1980s Dallas. We looked at pictures and tried to find things that would match architecturally. We put a lot of thought into that movie, because it's a true story that did take place in the DFW area for the most part. We brought in vintage cop cars that had all the Dallas insignias on them. We had lots of Dallas-y things. We looked at the opening credits of the *Dallas* TV show for inspiration. When we were shooting exteriors, we would look for places where we could digitally add in the familiar skyline and things like that.

So how much concern do you have for representing your city well?

I don't really feel like I need to represent it well, I just kind of want to represent it. It's a city that to me doesn't have that much of an identity. Now, it does have an identity in a certain light. There's the Dallas social scene that I am completely not a part of. I'm sure people perceive Dallas as, like with the sort of Texas version of Miami. Then there's the image that *Dallas*, the TV show, gave, which I think still persists. Then that cross pollinates with all the big business and the corporate world and the oil money and the politics, which are all terrible. Although, it's hard to turn a blind eye to the amount of good work that that money has given to the city in terms of its culture and the art and everything like that, so it's a double-edged sword.

The city doesn't have an identity in the way that Austin does, nor does it have an identity in the way that New York or LA does. Because I'm working in the film industry and the arts, it doesn't have the same sort of identity in that realm that a city like say Minneapolis does, where it has this huge, tremendous theater scene. There's a huge theater scene here, but it's not nationally renowned in the same way that Minneapolis is. It doesn't have the film community that Austin or Louisiana or Atlanta does. For me it's a city that doesn't have that much of an identity, but that's one of the things I actually like about it, oddly enough. I've grown to really like that, so I don't really want to change that, nor do I feel like the need to represent that on film.

Does the area have a certain sound to you? Have you had the chance to represent that in your work?

There's a lot of traffic. There's a whole lot of moving vehicles to get in there. The usual things are the cicadas, which you can find in other places. That's the type of thing that we spent a lot of time in both *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* and *A Ghost Story* using creatively to help push the atmosphere along. The birds, particularly like the morning birds, those are things that you hear and think "Oh, that's a neighborhood that I know." I would say that's probably about it. It's particularly the insects and the wildlife that give it its sound, and the traffic. It kind of feeds into that permeable identity that the city has that I, once again, to reiterate, appreciate quite a bit.

David Lowery recommends:

Repertoire screenings at the [Texas Theatre](#) in Oak Cliff. Their new movies are great, too (and usually of the off-the-beaten-path variety), but there's almost always something old and wonderful and unexpected showing, often on 35mm. Also, it's near [Spiral Diner](#) so you can go eat vegan nachos before or after your movie (or both).

Cats.

Projectors at home. When we got rid of our TV a few years back and replaced it with a projector and 100-inch screen, movies at home instantly got better. It's just as affordable as a large HD television and a lot more magical. Not an excuse not to go to the movies, though!

Vegan Reuben at Locali. This is a little convenience store in Los Feliz that serves the best vegan reuben ever made. I've missed it heartily since moving back to Texas.

Running in the winter in Texas. I love running, but all year I'm just killing time until the temperature starts to drop and the skies turn gray. December in Texas is probably like October on the East Coast. Cold and autumnal, but usually without any snow or ice. An early morning run around White Rock Lake in Dallas or Town Lake in Austin feels like something out of a misty old fairy tale.

Name

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Vocation

Filmmaker

Fact

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