On knowing when you're ready

Filmmaker Derek Nguyen discusses why he went to Vietnam to make his first feature film, the ways in which young filmmakers can often get in their own way, and why you have to be willing to create your own unique creative path.

April 15, 2021 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2475 words.

Tags: Film, Beginnings, Process, Production, First attempts, Success.

Your first film, *The Housemaid*, was shot in Vietnam, which I understand was complicated in many ways. Was shooting the film there also the thing that enabled you to get it made?

Absolutely. To this day, films about Asian Americans don't get financed, not very many anyway. After writing so many scripts and feeling like no one was interested in my story, I finally decided that actually going back to Vietnam might be the answer to getting something made. At the time, my grandmother had just passed away. I was in mourning. I started thinking about her life. I started thinking more about telling her story. I couldn't have told her story anywhere other than Vietnam. At the time, I had met Timothy Linh Bui, who is a pretty accomplished producer who'd worked in both Vietnam and the United States. We were talking about the initial ideas for *The Housemaid*. Finally, somebody was like, "Oh, it's an Asian lead. Oh my god! That's good." At that point I fully devoted myself to this story and writing this script.

In many ways, this is now how many Asian American filmmakers are able to make their films. They go back to their mother country and make their films and then later come back to the United States to make American films. Ang Lee is a prime example of that, as are all of the Korean filmmakers that are now making Hollywood films. It was something I observed and was like, "You know, maybe I should think about shooting something in Vietnam. Then maybe I might also be able to make American films."

Was the fact that the film would be shot in Vietnam and aimed toward a Vietnamese audience part of the equation in getting the film funded?

Yeah, it was a part of the equation. That was one of the main reasons why I got it financed. I was able to make the film because it dealt with Vietnamese issues, had a predominantly Vietnamese cast, and I was working with Vietnamese Americans who had done really well back in Vietnam. I couldn't have made it without them. I didn't have the contacts in Vietnam, since I pretty much had only worked in America. They were the ones who really made this happen in Vietnam.

Interestingly, a lot of the financing came from Korea. CJ Entertainment are like the Sony of Korea. They have a special relationship with Vietnamese studios. They were doing a lot of production in Vietnam. They came on as one of the financiers, and were pretty much the primary financier. They are the ones who are now doing the American remake of *The Housemaid*, too.

So, you go and shoot in Vietnam and you have access to amazing, but complicated locations. In addition to that, you had to deal with the censorship laws in Vietnam. They have to approve your script and be present at the shoot, right? That's a whole other kind of hoop you have to jump through.

The thing is, I was willing to do pretty much anything. I knew going in that I would have to work with the Vietnamese Cinema Board in order to make my film. At the beginning, I was a little resentful of it, being an American believing in freedom of speech and artistic freedom; but I soon realized that these were the things I'd have to deal with, that these were the conditions. Also, I talked to many other filmmakers that work in the American studio system, where the studio notes are pretty similar to what we were getting. American filmmakers also have to deal with the MPAA and ratings boards, so it's not *entirely* different. I had to look at the process in a different way. I was trying to play ball, but at the same time make sure that the central message and what I wanted to say was still there.

I rewrote the script three times after notes from the Cinema Board. Finally, they gave us the permit. I was very happy. I remember the day they gave us the permit. I think we waited four months for it after turning in the last draft. We did a lot of pre-production because we had all of this time to kill while we waited. We weren't sure when we were going to be able to get the permit. We were preparing and making sure that once we finally got the thumbs up from the Cinema Board we were basically prepared

for everything. The day that it came through, we were all jumping up and down. It was as if we had won the lottery.

Young people who are maybe aspiring filmmakers often have this auteur vision of, "I'm going to make *my* movie. I'm going to do exactly whatever I want." For almost all filmmakers, there are mitigating factors in terms of what you're eventually able to do.

Budgetary restrictions, that's one of the biggest ones. Everybody has these grandiose visions as a young filmmaker, thinking that you'll be able to make anything that you want but usually your first feature film is going to have a budget that is *very* limited. You have to work with that. I think the test of a good director is being able to work with what you have and being creative on set and truly creative within the parameters in which you are making your films.

The Housemaid is essentially a genre film, though I don't think of it as a horror movie in the strictest sense. That being said, good horror movies can be done at a relatively small budget. Our budget was tiny. Even though it might look slick, it wasn't made for a lot of money. We struggled with the schedule. We made it in 24 days, but we worked 20-hour days, six days a week. We just had to get it done. I think that there's a lot of misconception about the film, because it does look kind of sleek and polished. But you have to realize that it was *so much* work to make it look like something on par with a higher budget film, with an American horror film. We had that challenge. I didn't want it to look like an extremely micro budget horror film. Even something like CGI, which we used for a few of the visual effects, was less expensive because we were in Vietnam. All of that stuff was created by just a few guys working in an office building in Saigon. It wasn't a huge team or anything.

Do you find that being involved in the industry with your day job gave you a more practical, realistic insight into what it also means to try to get a movie made?

It was integral for me. I work at Game Changer Films. We're a film fund that finances narrative feature films directed by women. Not only was I completely devoted and believed in the cause of gender equity and dealing with Hollywood and the international film community's bias towards women filmmakers, I felt like I learned so much about the film industry by working there. I was one of the people who helped build the company from the beginning. It was really telling for me to learn how films are made and why films are made and why some things are financed and why other things aren't. That was important for me to learn in order to make my own film.

I love genre films, but I thought that coming out with a genre project—as a person who pretty much was an art film enthusiast in college—felt strange. Initially I didn't think of doing a genre project, even though I love genre projects and genre films. I felt some kind of artistic pressure to make art films. I also felt like I wanted to, in some ways, honor the festivals and institutions that were helping me with my career, since some of my projects have gone through Tribeca and Sundance and all of those type of things. Initially, I felt this weird responsibility to make art films. Eventually I realized that genre films *are* art films. I wanted to make artful genre films, which is what I'm really into right now. I'm interested in films like *The Witch* and *It Comes at Night*, those are extremely exciting for me. Those are the types of films that go back to things like *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Shining*—movies that are artful and suspenseful and freaky and scary, all of the things that make me excited.

So much of the dialogue around filmmaking is negative. It's impossible. It's expensive. You've got to find the money. What do you think are the ways in which young filmmakers can get in their own way? What are some of the pitfalls to avoid if you are someone who's trying to make your first feature?

Stop asking for permission you don't need anymore. I feel like anybody can pick up a camera now and just make their films. That was different from when I was growing up, where making a film was really expensive. You had to shoot on film, and even If you shot on video, that was still very expensive. One of the ways that I think people can get in their own way is by having expectations that are simply unreasonable. They want to make the next *Star Wars* but they haven't actually directed a film yet. Right now, one of the things I do is consult for the Tribeca Film Institute. I work in the education department, so I work with young people, primarily high school kids, to make their first films. They mostly make shorts and stuff like that. They make amazing short films. They're just stunningly well done with really great voices and really imaginative, but they're shooting very simply. It illustrates how much you don't actually need to make something interesting or powerful.

So yes, the money is hard to find, especially in features. I think that that's something that hinders young filmmakers nowadays. There's this sense of entitlement that they should be given all this money right out of the gate. That's just not going to happen, unless you raise your own money and you come from means. You have to be creative. You kind of have to be a ninja. You have to do it your own way. It's hard to do it the traditional way because there is no traditional way to do it anymore. You just have to be prepared to do whatever it takes, go to whatever lengths you need to go to, in order to make your film happen.

Students often want you to tell them what steps they need to take—A to B to C to D—in order to have the kind of career they want. It's often frustrating for them to be told, "Those steps no longer really exist," but it can also kind of liberating. The industry has changed so much. You create your own steps.

I agree. I actually get that question a lot, through Game Changer and stuff. There are many emerging filmmakers who come to me and say, "How does this get done?" I usually have to say, "There's no clear road. You have to make your own road. You have to make it

yourself.” If you see the castle in the far horizon, there are many ways to get there, but there isn’t really a paved way to go through. You have to pass through the river and through the woods in order to get to it. You just have to be tenacious. I also like to remind people that I myself am a pretty late bloomer. I’m 45 and I’m making my first feature now. It was years and years of trying in order for me to make my first feature.

For some reason there is still this idea in our culture that if you don’t somehow explode out of the gate in your 20s and make a big splash, then it’s all a wash and it will never happen for you.

I definitely felt that. I remember when I was 18 and I had written down goals for myself. They were ridiculous. I was like, “I’m going to have a Broadway show by the time I’m 30. I’m going to make my first film by 28.” Then, when you hit those milestones and you are kind of like, “Oh, I didn’t do that yet,” you can beat yourself up about it. Also, the majority of the people who I know now who are making their first features are not in their 20s. I think in some ways that is a good thing because only recently did I have the maturity needed to make a film. Back in my 20s I’m not sure what exactly I had to say. I wasn’t ready. If I’d made a movie back then, chances are it would have been terrible. [*laughs*]

Derek Nguyen’s Gothy Recommendations:

Rebecca - a novel by Dame Daphne de Maurier
Manderley, the dark and mysterious estate. Mrs. Danvers, the cold and overbearing housekeeper. And of course, Rebecca de Winter, the deceased and beautiful psychopath whose presence is always felt in the house. What’s not to love?

The Head on the Door - an album by The Cure
It’s a near perfect album that’s a great mixture of gloom and pop. Besides the hits “Close to Me” and “In Between Days,” I have a special affinity for “Six Different Ways,” “Push,” and “The Blood.” Always a good soundtrack for a rainy Sunday.

Let the Right One In - a film directed by Tomas Alfredson
The composition of the shots in this film are incredible. A young bullied 12-year-old falls in love with a vampire girl in modern-day Sweden. It has an incredible balance of being a tender love story and a disturbing horror film.

St. Vitus Cathedral in the Prague Castle
The vastness and sheer beauty of this cathedral is mind-blowing. Built in 930, this Bohemian church gave me chills when I went inside on a trip to the Czech Republic. The cathedral’s nave and the Eastern facade are quintessential examples of Gothic architecture.

Penny Dreadful - TV show created by John Logan
What? A TV show with Dorian Gray, Van Helsing, Victor Frankenstein, Count Dracula, and Dr. Jekyll in Victorian England? Totally into it. And it wasn’t a jumbled mess that many thought it might turn into. And did I mention Eva Green? All hail Eva Green… whom I suspect might be a real-life witch.

Name
Derek Nguyen

Vocation
Filmmaker