On the responsibility involved with making films

Filmmaker and actor Justin Chon on how his various creative pursuits as a writer, actor, and director have informed each other, the value of working quickly and thinking on your feet, and considering all the unexpected responsibilities that come with making movies.

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As told to Elise McCave, 3125 words.

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When did you first decide you wanted to direct?

I think I've always been directing, in one form or another. Maybe not traditionally, but I've always made shorts. I've always had a video camera in my hand since junior high. Back when I had a mini-DV cam. I begged and begged and got one. I was always really interested in filming, so I would always film stuff and put stuff together, and then from mini-DV to the Canon XL1, XL2, to the Panasonic HVX200. And the 5D to Red, to that whole evolution of prosumer camera equipment I've had a hand on since the beginning.

I never thought I'd do it professionally, in a traditional sense. It's always been fun to make stuff, I always like just bringing an idea to life. I think what really sent me on the path of doing it more as a profession is that the type of story that I had an appetite for didn't exist. And also the types of parts that I wanted to play weren't offered to me as an actor. That's how I got into it: lack of opportunity.

It sounds like all of these things were happening concurrently: the writing, the directing, the acting.

Acting was always the forefront, and directing was just a hobby. And then when I would show up on set, as an actor, I would get free homeschool because I would find out what all the equipment does and how to use it, and camera technique and lighting and cinematography. I would learn that for free on set as an actor. That's kind of how I started.

So when that transition from hobby to something more professional came about, did you find that there were obstacles to getting those bigger projects off the ground?

The biggest barrier to entry is money, because longer-form work just requires more money. You can get people to show up for two days on the weekend to shoot a short. But getting people to show up for a month? You know, 20 days or something, five day weeks for four weeks? You have to pay them. If you have day jobs and all that stuff, it's hard to get people to just drop everything they're doing and basically get paid nothing. It just doesn't make sense for their livelihood. So, [the] biggest barrier to entry was money.

But then again, how much money do you need? If you want to make something, then write something that makes sense to make for cheap and be realistic. But also push yourself a little bit so it kind of goes beyond just making a

film in a cabin, you know? Another barrier to entry is that kind of knowledge, which I was fortunate enough to get on set as an actor. The money part? I think that's hard for everybody.

Do you think that people have shifted you in their minds from Justin Chon, the actor, and regard you primarily as a director now?

Well, you know what's funny is people in my community, the Asian American film community, see me as both. People in the industry at large, they like to categorize you. They like to say you're either this or that. I think, for simplicity's sake, it's hard for them to understand that you can do multiple things. But I don't see why it's so hard to understand that. I mean, I'm around it all. If they're introduced to you as an actor, they don't know your directing work, then they have to see the work first. And then if they see your movie as a director and they haven't seen your acting they're very skeptical of what you're capable of. That has been challenging—educating people on the fact that I'm just a creator. I'm not even just an actor and director, you know? I also write. I've written all my films.

How do you find your disciplines as director, writer, actor, inform one another?

I think they're inextricably related. You just really can't separate them. They are different disciplines, but I think that they all need to work synergistically in order for a movie to work well.

So, if you're a director--depending on what genre you do--but let's say you make films about people. You need some basic knowledge of psychology and how people interact, and to be able to critically think about human relations. But that's also part of what acting is…

You need to have that skillset to direct, I think. I have the ability to be able to talk to an actor because I *am* an actor. I feel like that's one of my strong suits, knowing how to communicate what it is that I'm trying to attain artistically to an actor. And then, conversely, as an actor trying to tell the director in a way that makes sense for him in a more macro scale of film making, you know? If I can explain a sort of a choice I would make as an actor by how it relates to the whole, how it can benefit the edit, or maybe save his ass in post, there's other options. That's also the job as an actor to be able to communicate that to a director.

And then when you do it all, you have just more sympathy for every department, you know?

So, I'm a horrible builder but I just wanted to see what it's like, how difficult it is to build stuff, like carpentry, and I bought all my own power tools. And I built a table, right? And now I know how extremely hard it is to do that. So, when I ask for something from the set designers, I understand what I'm asking for—something that's not unrealistic, and it's something we can do within our timeframe. And also that I have a basic knowledge of stuff so I could say, you know, "I want it to look like this," and, "This can work if we do this."

I think that has allowed me to get more out of my shoots, and get more out of my productions because I know what is actually possible and what is not. I can plan accordingly. I think when you don't have any knowledge of the other departments and what they do, you're picturing something in your mind, and 9 times out of 10 you're picturing something outside of your budget range.

Do you find it challenging figuring out how to prioritize what project you work on next? Or assessing the value of working on something that's your own, versus participating in someone else's project? How do you do that work?

That's the bane of every artist, the balance between money and commerce in art. I don't come from a super wealthy family so that balance is very difficult. But at the end of the day, I lead with passion and heart rather than money because I know plenty of really depressed, unfulfilled rich people. And I'd rather sleep at night being stoked on what I just did, even though we're skating by, than having that mountain of cash and having shown no purpose.

I do have a bigger purpose for why I make films and I let that guide me. First and foremost it's bringing empathy

towards my community, and you can see that in my work. And then secondly, I like making films that show how we can coexist in the world. That's also present in all the films that I make, whether it's interracial or intergenerational. And then, the third is showing how we're also a lot more similar than different. Those are things that drive my art and my decision making.

At this point in your career are you in a position where making your own work is beginning to be as commercially viable as participating in someone else's project? Or are you in that place where the choice between working on your own stuff or working with someone else's stuff is also the same as the choice between making art and making money?

I'm very much still at the beginning of finding a way to make my own work commercially viable and the main source of my income. But, I'm a very simple guy. I don't have a lot of flashy stuff, I don't drive a crazy car, I don't have a crazy mortgage. I live pretty humbly and frugally. I don't buy clothes. And so that is why I have freedom of choice. So it is commercially viable? I think I'd make enough to get by, but I think I'm artistically wealthy right now because I haven't had to compromise as much as a director. But as an actor, I've done it plenty. I've taken jobs for money all the time. And I've resigned to that. That's okay. I don't have a problem. I don't feel bad about it either. I'm okay with taking jobs for money as an actor. But as a creator? As a writer, director, that's so much more of a time commitment, that I don't think I could do that. I'd rather see what's out there as an actor and maybe do a season of some show so I don't have to sellout as a writer, director.

But I've learned some lessons. I've been hired to write a book adaptation and very quickly I realized, "Oh, this is not the space for me." Dealing with the people and what they expected, and the commerciality of it. It didn't feel like art to me. It was just, "How do we package this in order for us to make the most money," and I didn't want any part of that.

Have you come across acting jobs which also helped you to fulfill those bigger guiding principles? Have you seen any sort of changes in the industry that give you hope that you're not the only one fighting this fight?

Personally, as an actor, not so much. What I see as an actor is kind of more of the same. You know, they're like, "Let's get an Asian guy in this show. We've got to fill the quota." But there are other creators and my peers that have been doing just fantastic work, that are truly respected, are doing what I think aligns with my philosophy. Say, a Lulu Wang or an <u>Andrew Ahn</u>, <u>Christina Cho</u>. There are people that I feel have similar agendas. And they are making films in that space, on a more commercial level.

Do you find that you sometimes get stuck? And what do you do, practically speaking, to loosen yourself up when you're creatively stuck?

Oh, my god. Every day. I listen to a lot of podcasts about artists, screenwriting and stuff. Some people say they don't get writer's block. I'm like, "What the fuck? How?" I get writer's block every day. I get stuck all the time because you always hit a road block. You think what you planned before was going to work out so smoothly and then you start writing and it doesn't quite flow the way you want it to, or the structure may not be working. Happens all the time. But for me, I have a lot of people I trust and can bounce ideas off of… I'll send the script to other filmmakers and ask their opinions. I have a lot of people that I trust and that I can really talk things out with. I think the thing that's helped me the most is being able to talk it out.

Do you find that getting further into the work clears the block?

What I've found is that when I hit a block I have to just keep trying to power through it because in the act of powering through it, I end up coming up with creative solutions. If I hit a road block and it's kind of difficult and I walk away, I couldn't ever address that actual problem. It's very painful. Very, very, very painful. It's also the speed at which you are comfortable working. I like to work quickly, I like it to be propulsive. I don't want to be writing a script for five years. That's just not constructive for me. For some people that's what they love to do. For me, the art of creation is what's important because I'm changing. If I start writing a script and five years go by, I'm then a completely different person from when I started the script. Then it's, like, I don't even know why I'm writing that script.

So, it needs to be–at least with writing–it needs to be about the time, which requires me to work faster, which requires me to face problems head on. And that's the other thing about creativity, or just being craftsmen—If I don't step up to bat over and over and over again I'm not going to get better. I know so many talented directors that make something and they wait five, six years to make something again. How could you possibly not be rusty? How could you possibly be growing as a technician of the work?

It sounds like there's a real momentum to the way that you work.

I would hate to spend all my time making one thing, like, "I think it's going to be my masterpiece," and then make it after five years of development and then it just doesn't work. The disappointment that I would feel. As I get older I'm sure I'll slow down and be a little bit more thoughtful and a little bit more meticulous about certain things, but as of now I think there's a propulsion in momentum. That really fuels me.

Do you have some kind of tent-pole ambitions that you know that you're aiming for? Or are you a figure-it-out-as-you-do-it kind of person?

I have goals in terms of milestones. I have goals for certain accolades. Not necessarily because I care about those accolades, it's more an acknowledgment that I'm headed in the right direction with the type of work that I want to be doing. So, for example, my purpose isn't money, right? So one of my goals isn't to get a show on network TV that runs for 10 years, it's just not one of my goals. Because, for me, that would most likely be driven by money.

Are there things about being a writer or director that you really didn't expect when you first started out?

The biggest thing for me is the concept of responsibility. As an actor you show up, you go to your trailer, you ask for a breakfast burrito. And you wait for them to set up the lights, and then you show up and you've done all your prep and you go. You only have to be responsible for yourself. As a writer and a director…you are responsible for a lot of people.

I just wasn't prepared. I think the first time I stepped into the seat in a long-form project, I underestimated. I would see people on set, directors, and just be like, "Oh, yeah, it seems pretty simple enough. You just do this and this and it all comes together."

Right.

Wrong.

I learned that very quickly on my first directing day. I would have to make decisions constantly, and I would have to be responsible for those decisions. I'd also have to be responsible for the actors' wellbeing and their mood in order to get the film that I wanted. People's feelings. If someone's angry at somebody else in a different department ultimately that becomes toxic on set, and then that is my problem.

And that is something I never yearned for, to deal with that kind of problem solving skill set. And I'm glad I didn't because if I had known how difficult it was I probably wouldn't have even set out to do it at all. That's definitely the biggest epiphany—how much I've had to grow up in order to be a director. So, yeah, responsibility. I'm not the most responsible person, but I've had to learn to become one.

I'm sure that at this point in your career you're now asked to give advice frequently. What are your go-to pieces of advice that you find yourself giving aspiring directors, writers, actors? Or another way to look at this question is, what do you wish you knew when you were young and coming in?

One thing I've heard, and that I can never forget, is "A lot of life is making a decision and then making that decision right." So, whether it's writing or acting, you have to make decisions. That's our job, we have to have opinions, we have to make choices. You might not necessarily make the right choice, but our job as creators is to

make the choice, and then you have to come out and make it right. If I make a choice as a director and it just doesn't end up being the right choice in the moment, then I've got to figure out, "Okay, how do I readjust to make it work?", instead of going back and being like, "No, I want to change the whole thing."

Justin Chon Recommends:

Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse, the documentary that Francis Ford Coppola's wife made while he was making *Apocalypse Now*. — "It's fucking funny as shit, man, because it's just like everything that could go wrong, went wrong."

MMA fighter, Nate Diaz. — "He just doesn't give a fuck. I think that sort of singularity is really inspiring. Not that who he is or what he stands for is inspiring, it's just how he conducts his life. Tunnel vision."

A Perfect World, with Clint Eastwood directing Kevin Costner. — "It gives me perspective on the fact that I should always be telling stories for people who don't have a voice, whether they're right or wrong. Whether they're in the right or wrong."

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. — "I hope that I'm poetic in kind of a dirty way, you know, in a messy way. But he's just very poetic in a very eloquent way."

The artwork of Monet, Manet and Degas. — "In that time in France, they were kind of like indie filmmakers. They painted whatever they thought was interesting. And it might not have been that popular at the time, but what they were doing had value."

Name
Justin Chon

Vocation
filmmaker, actor

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