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July 31, 2024 -

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On being ambitious while managing the pressure of expectations

Director Bola Ogun discusses swinging high, being brave even when you're afraid, and how to handle feeling daunted by big career moves.

What made you want to be a director?

I didn't know I wanted to be a director until after I had moved to LA and I was a PA [production assistant]. I wanted to act first. I did musical theatre. I played Dolly at high school in *Hello Dolly*. I was also a drill team person, so I was very much a performer. Directing came later when I realized that I could tell more stories and have more power from behind the camera. I was very much inspired by Lena Dunham and Issa Rae, those actresses who were doing it for themselves. Though they were writer/actresses, and I'm a much more visual thinker, so it just made sense for me to be a director. Someone who moves the camera visually and emotionally.

Do you remember a specific moment where you thought, "I want to be a director." Something that you saw or a moment on set?

It's funny, I think about this moment a lot. I didn't know what a director was. I think, when you're a kid, you're just watching movies and you just think, "Oh, those actresses are so witty on their feet. How do they do that?" You just think it's all magic. But I've realized I had been directing already in daycare. I remember we were going to see *Pocahontas* and we had this musical book of all the songs. And I literally cast it and made a little play that we did based on the book right before we went to see it. So there was that. But then also, I think, watching MTV's making of the music videos. I remember watching those and really just being like, "This is just cool. This person just comes in and creates this vision and creates this vibe." I've actually met some of those directors now. Some of them are my mentors, and it's really crazy. I'm like, "Oh, they inspired me to be a director before I knew I wanted to be a director."

So there was a time where you said, "I want to be a director." When was it that you said, "Oh, I can do this."

After being on sets for a couple of years. Really getting to know how sets work, understanding the dynamics on sets. Of course, being a director is more than just on set, but understanding how that world worked gave me a little more confidence. And then I did my short films in the middle of working as a PA.

Let's talk about the first short film that you directed, *The Water Phoenix*, which you also wrote and starred in. It was an incredibly ambitious project for your first short. How do you think reaching high early helped your career trajectory?

I highly recommend it because that short film changed my life. I went at it with the idea that this might be my only swing, so I better swing high. I better swing for everything I want. I wanted to do VFX, I wanted to do stunts. I wanted to do sci-fi, fantasy, big sort of things, which I'm now directing. You know what I mean? It all worked out. And I just felt like if I went small first, people would think that's all I wanted to do. Which is funny, because *Are We Good Parents?* was the smaller project, and that launched me in a different way. That launched me officially, and then *The Water Phoenix* kind of sung my heart. I highly recommend for people who are looking to be creative to just swing high.

Are there certain things that you use, as a director, to communicate your vision to the rest of the team? Like look books or mood music?

All of the above. I pull from everywhere. I pull from Shot Deck, I pull from music videos that have inspired me, I pull from movies, magazine ads. I mean, creativity comes from anywhere and everywhere. It's really just about what speaks to you.

You've jumped into some very big franchise material that have a big established fan bases. Does your prep approach change when you're jumping into something like that?

It doesn't change on an execution level, but the prep is more in depth because I want to know what [the fans] love.

Do you feel a lot of pressure to please the fans?

Absolutely.

Do you get scared?

Oh yeah, absolutely! You can be scared but still be brave and have courage.

In directing TV, you bring own vision of how you want to see an episode come together, but you're also trying to realize expectations and visions of showrunners, writers, and producers, cast, crew, as well as the fans. Everyone has an expectation of what they want to see delivered. How do you handle and manage that pressure of this expectation?

Honestly, I'm still working on it. But I've learned to set aside all expectations. Including my own.

Are there any little things that you've found that have helped you when that kind of pressure or those expectations are getting too loud in your head?

Yes. Breathing, meditation. I have a whole playlist that is specifically geared to lower my heart rate.

Nice.

You just listen to it and change. You literally can change your mind with music. So I listen to that and it helps me calm down. Just anything that reminds you, "You are here now," really helps relieve that kind of stress so you can focus and gain some clarity.

That's amazing. When you are on set, do you have any favourite types of scenes that you like to direct?

I really like working with actors who are great at improv, and that's what I had on *Are We Good Parents*. All three of those actors, they hadn't met until that day, and nobody can tell. They just vibed with each other.

You've worked with varying budget scale. Does budget level change the way that you approach things creatively?

Yes. I am learning to ask for what I want and compromise less.

Has there ever been a day on set that you come into the day and it feels so daunting that you're not quite sure you're going to be able to get everything that's needed?

Oh, every day!

So how do you tackle every day? How do you tackle that feeling of daunting-ness?

You really learn how to hone in on your prep. The better you prep the less daunting it is.

You talked about working as a PA before becoming a director. Was that good prep for directing?

I think the only thing that helps you with directing is directing. Directing your own stuff, shadowing directors you admire, or watching movies that you love, that can help you be a better director.

When you're looking for new projects, what would make you say yes to a certain job? Or no? And what makes you push for certain projects?

A lot of it has to do with the people or the subject matter, I guess. I've been very lucky, I'm not going to lie. I'm so grateful for the opportunities that have come my way. It is beyond what I dreamt, the things that I would get access to. And so everything I've been doing has definitely gotten me to where I wanted to be. So now it's like, I just want to work with really cool people, good people at the end of the day. Because you're spending 18 hours with these people, and we're all making believe for a living. I don't want it to be stressful. So just working with other people who are geeks like me, who love it, and just want to have fun doing it. That's kind of what drives me these days.

At this stage of your career, how would you say you define success? And has that definition changed for

you through the different stages of your career?

Yes, success has definitely changed from "achievement" to "connection." And I hope everybody reaches a point in their life where they can see that.

Bola Ogun recommends:

The Daily Stoic

Eucalyptus shower bundles

Motivational Water Bottle w/ Time marke

The Lobster (If you get it, you get it.)

Marfa, TX (The Joshua Tree of Texas)

Name

Bola Ogun

Vocation

director

Fact

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