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February 27, 2024 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2732 words.

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On not being limited in what you do

Filmmaker and actor Rodney Rikai discusses using your experience to play all roles in a production, finding time to rest, and creating your own opportunities.

You're currently getting ready for an audition, which makes me think you're an actor, but I know you more as a filmmaker and a producer.

I run the gamut. Outside of thinking I have stories worthy of being told, the main reason I became a storyteller was that it's really hard to get work unless you've had work. I became the storyteller to create stories I can actually be part of, creating my own opportunities and not waiting for someone to hand them to me, crafting and curating stories that I myself could also play in.

Lately Early, your production company, came from you having lots of time on your hands during the pandemic. Can you talk about the process of creating something from nothing?

The word "nothing" is tricky, right? Creating something from your experiences is how I describe it. I was a television host for 12 years, hosting shows like *106 & Park* on BET. I had been on set for so many years, and by virtue of being on set as talent, I was absorbing what it meant to produce and direct. This world, this industry, is my passion. It's been that way since I was young. When I was afforded the opportunity to learn in an environment where I was also being compensated, I really wanted to absorb all roles while on set. I even took time to figure out what it was to be a PA. I volunteered my services as a PA on music video sets.

When I started *Lately Early*, it was a culmination of all the experiences I had over 12 years in entertainment, from talent to directing and producing. It was putting together all these ingredients into this centralized pot, because in addition to being a host, I had a lot of brand deals, so I knew how branded content was so coveted and knew people who were able to execute.

I had all these relationships from being talent, so I was like, "Why am I showing up as simply talent? Why am I not showing up as somebody who can ideate, conceptualize, execute from birth to post-mortem?" *Lately Early* was in the pandemic, when from a talent standpoint, things were slow and I couldn't be on set, so what could I do? I thought, "What other talents can I put to service so I can generate some income and opportunity for myself and others around me?"

It's interesting to hear you talk about working as many types of creatives. What doors has that opened for how you create?

I still wrestle with explaining the full breadth of my abilities, capabilities, and experiences. People are branded multi-hyphenates, but in some of the spaces I exist in, my experiences almost loom so large for certain people that it doesn't make sense. It doesn't really make sense that the guy who hosted *106 & Park* is the same guy who's running a set for a Nike commercial and has ideated the commercial, or is producing a television series for TBS in which he also is the talent and helped build the set.

My experiences, from a creative standpoint, allow me to not be limited. Whether it's digital, linear, a commercial scripted series, non-scripted series, film, television, there isn't a space, as a content creator and storyteller, where I can't create worthwhile stories.

Whether that's a micro-series, short-form content designed explicitly for social media to be consumed in minute-and-30-second-long increments, I'm proficient in that, but at the same time, I've written feature

films. The film I had at ABFF [American Black Film Festival] last year is a short documentary, so it's unscripted. My experience has allowed me to not put a limit on what I can create and allowed me to pivot if I have an idea that I [initially] felt was going to be good as a feature, but maybe is better as a series, as an episodic. It's allowed me to put an iron in the fire in every bucket.

Between your short Instagram videos with your kids, being on the set of *Chicago Fire*, and creating ads for Nike, what commonalities are there across your creative process?

The pre-production aspect. If I'm acting before I get on set, I'm creating a world in my head, and I'm diagramming, journaling, or writing things out. I try to envision what the end result will be before we start the process of getting on set. As an actor and storyteller, that preliminary work grounds you into a role. Creating or being a producer or director, you need to have that same level of visualization. You've really got to visualize, sit back, and think about how you want to execute things so you can arrive at the end result you're gunning for. If you can't visualize it, then very seldom is it attainable. That's the common thread in all the areas I've touched professionally. I have visualized almost all of the aspects and elements of each project.

Have you ever had a project you weren't able to visualize beforehand? If so, how did you address that?

I did a project for TBS/Blavity in which my company was the production company on hand. We ideated pretty much every aspect and element of this six-episode unscripted series on which I was also the talent, and it was such a tight turnaround. This is a project that generally would've taken three to six months to plan out. We won the request for proposal, and we had three weeks to build a set from net zero, get talent on board, a full production team and everything.

I was too in the weeds to be able to take a step back to see the full scope of what we wanted to create, and admittedly, it was really chaotic. It was one of the toughest experiences I've had professionally but also the most rewarding, because I learned that I had to delegate. I learned that I had to have certain people around to help me execute so that, even though I'm in the midst of the trees and I can't fully see the forest, if there's enough of us, we can have a better purview of everything in front of us.

Reaching out to phenomenal friends who are also exemplary professionals was the only way I was able to make it through. I was calling in favors from people who hadn't necessarily worked in this capacity but who I knew had a certain level of taste. The fact that I was able to explain to them what we were doing and what I needed them to do made me a better leader. Because the task was so tall, there was no way I was going to knock it out on my own.

I barely had enough rest, let alone time to sit back and visualize. Once we hit the ground running, there wasn't any time to sit back, close my eyes, and do any of my visualization and manifestation work.

How else did the lack of rest affect your process?

Rest is pivotal. As somebody who has always prided himself on having an endless well of energy, as I've gotten into bigger, better productions and things that require more emotional investment, I find that rest is the foundation of good muscle memory. If I don't rest well, I look different. As someone who's sometimes in front of the camera, when you look different, it might change your ability to generate more opportunities for yourself. I work out five days a week, and rest allows my muscles to recuperate, recover, and grow. Similar to my other skill sets, without rest, they don't function at their best capacity. If I'm not rested, I'm irritable, and if I'm irritable, I'm not a great leader, and then that can snowball. Rest is a good way to quell any potential obstacles or hurdles because, at the very least, you're focused.

How have the processes you were privy to at BET shaped the way you create your work?

The devil's in the details. BET was so meticulous with our aesthetic. I remember being on set and them switching out my socks because they didn't go well with the backdrop of an episode of *106 & Park*. Those details helped me nurture my own eye for detail. If I'm directing and even a hair is out of place, my eye has been taught to be critical. Although this can be overbearing for some people, I still think the best among us, the people who are adamant about getting as close to perfection as possible, are so coveted, so valuable.

If you look at a Scorsese film, a Spike Lee film, there's very seldom anything that's present or prevalent by happenstance. On my sets, in my productions, and in the worlds in which I'm creating, I'm so detail-oriented. Whether that's aesthetically from color-blocking to set design, my eye has been trained to be mindful of the entire world in which we are in and creating. That really is a testament, first and foremost, to BET and then, secondly, Oxygen.

From the other sets I was a part of, mainly The CW and Music Choice, I learned how to deal with talent, which, as talent, can be very challenging. Everyone has jokes about what talent is and is not, but learning how to communicate and navigate pre-production conversations with not just talent, but also their management, has been vital to me because now, in the space where I'm running a full-scale production, I know how to work, communicate, and talk with a variety of people. I know when I need to be more aggressive. I know when I need to dial it back. I know when I need to butter somebody's biscuit.

I feel like it's a rare combination in which somebody has been immersed in so many different facets of the industry. Normally, if you've acted, sure, you'll direct, but to be a talent booker and then a producer,

all these different elements are a byproduct of the experiences I've had and make me much more of an efficient production house.

How does your creative process differ when coming up with your 90-second Instagram videos versus your films?

I don't think there's much of a difference. I think, just, certain concepts require more expansion. I find value in all stories, whether they're short-form or long-form. There's not a different level of professionalism or care. Every opportunity, whether a short-form Instagram post or a film that'll be a feature film, requires the same level of care because you never know what opportunity is going to springboard the entirety of your professional life.

Sometimes, you can be part of certain projects or put certain things into the world that make people look at you through a lens of, "He's not really that good," so I'm always trying to put my best foot forward. I'm always trying to be mindful that the story that I'm telling goes deeper than the surface. In conceptualizing stories and worlds, the only thing is the time it takes to write out a feature as opposed to writing a 90-second spot on Instagram. It's time, but it's never effort, because I try to treat everything the same. [Even when] it's something that, for other people, feels like a fly-by Instagram post, there's still a level of care and elevation that I put in the same way I would in a film.

The short-form series I do called Dunkle with my children on Instagram is what allowed Walmart and the American Black Film Festival to ask me to create a film about fatherhood. They consumed that content and they were like, "This is a unique story told in an elevated capacity. We wonder if this will translate to [the] big screen." From that Instagram series I created, I was afforded the opportunity to create Just Breathe. There's a lot of synergy between those smaller projects potentially leading to larger projects.

Just Breathe is eight minutes long, and that's shorter than what I usually think of as a film. What does the duration of a work mean to you? How does it play into your creative process?

The way people consume content now, it's hard to keep someone's attention. One of the things I've tried to be better at is being efficient in my storytelling and trimming some of the fat. Short-form films and content have always been highly regarded and can really further someone's career, but it's all about being efficient in small windows.

You always want to shoot more than you actually need, but you have to be so definitive and decisive in what you keep in that final edit. Sometimes, that's challenging because there are things you love that you have to get rid of because it doesn't flow with everything else you've made, and it almost feels like choosing a favorite kid. You're going back and forth between takes and perspectives, and you're like, "This feels better to me individually, but in totality, does this flow, and does this help this story be told in an efficient manner?" Sometimes, the answer is no, and you got to be okay with that. You got to be okay with removing ego from the decisions you make in a shorter-form film because you don't have the space to keep it all, and that can be quite challenging because anyone who's investing time, energy, passion, love, sweat, tears, [and] their own money into a project may be a bit egotistical about that. It's a humbling process to nurture a shorter project because you leave so much behind that you think is valuable, and of course it's valuable, because you shot it.

On the Lately Early website, you name truth, love, and consideration as your three primary elements. How do these elements play into your process?

Whether I'm consuming content or creating it, I try to—and I've been nurtured this way through acting classes, which sometimes is a pain in the ass because it's hard to remove the actor lens and not just enjoyably consume things—figure out the truth of a scenario. Even in vile characters—let's think about a role in which someone is a rapist—as an actor, I've been nurtured to have empathy for this person. What is this person's truth? What could this person's core trauma be? Despite whatever disgusting, abhorrent behavior they've exhibited, how can I still find a way to love this character and consider their perspective?

As I started to create my own content, I asked myself, what is the truth of what I want to say? What is the truth of this character explicitly? And then, do I actually love this story? Do I actually love this world I'm creating? Sometimes, the answer is no, and I'll scrap something entirely. And then, I try to consider people outside myself, someone else who has an entirely different upbringing, someone who's culturally not from the same background as myself. I try to consider all perspectives. What could this story look, sound, and feel like to somebody who does not come from my world? I try to the best of my ability to create stories that are relatable and, at the very least, explain a part of my world and culture to other people in a palatable way.

Rodney Rikai Recommends:

Watch Love Jones - A film that encapsulates the complicated nature of love and passion, that's shot so warm you feel like a part of the cast.

Listen to Jesse Boykins III album New Growth - An audio dessert with the ability to awaken suppressed and overlooked emotion.

Read Joe Dispenza's Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself - Even if it's too scientific and wordy, the inspiration and reminder to monitor your own thoughts is transformative.

Read *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch - For the benefit of knowing that it is you who is capable of architecting the life that you dream of.

Honor who, what, and where your spirit says is and isn't for you. Even at the expense of your own loneliness and comfort.

Name


Rodney Rikai


Vocation

filmmaker, actor

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