

On working on both sides of the camera



Filmmaker Desiree Akhavan discusses how the experiences of acting and directing can inform each other, and why you should never wait for someone else to enable you creatively.

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As told to Charlie Sextro, 2928 words.

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You must have a unique perspective on acting considering you've directed projects that you've acted in, directed others you haven't acted in, and acted in films for other directors.

I think I've done it because I'm an attention whore, to be honest. I grew up wanting to be an actress, but then I saw an agent once at 16 or 17. She took one look at me and she was like, "Well... do you speak Arabic?" I was like, "No," and she was like, "I'm never gonna find you work," and I was like, "Fair enough."

Acting is not something I'm skilled at. I know that not because I'm modest, but because I've watched people whose gift is to be in front of the camera, and I know that's not me. It's just this job I always wanted to have. I felt like it was glamorous and outside my realm because of the way I looked, and that's why I felt so motivated to put myself in my own stuff. I mean, for a sense of authenticity, because my work was so personal that it felt disingenuous to hire a more attractive person to do an impression. I might as well do it myself.

Right now I'm editing a TV show that I star in. After the experience of making *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, which I'm not in at all, I feel like I should've just hired professionals to do this. This is such a compromise in so many ways because I wasn't able to look at the monitor. I think that being an artist in any medium, you really have to know your own skill set. I'm much happier behind the camera than I am in front of the camera. I have ideas of things I'd wanna be in, but they're a little bit sillier, not so dependent on the aesthetic of it, very casual projects with friends.

I learned a lot from acting in front of the camera, but at this moment in time that you're catching me, I'm only feeling regret. I really don't know how other people do it. I keep telling people around me to remind me that I don't wanna do this again. Everyone's like, "You should call Lena Dunham and ask how she does it," and maybe I should. She does it beautifully. I think it's about who's around you and how protected you are. I usually rely heavily on my producer, Cecilia Frugiuale, who's also my co-writer on *Cameron Post* and on the TV series. But she had just given birth when we went into production on the show, so she wasn't there every day. When she was there it was kind of a game of catch up, so I couldn't always rely on her and I think that made it really difficult.

What specifically did you gain from remaining behind the camera on *Cameron Post*?

You have perspective. You're not exhausted. You're just there. And I don't know what director I heard say this but I think about it a lot, it's a male director and he said, "I don't make the film. I am the film." Like the craftsmen around me, they make the film, but I am the film. And that's how I felt on that set. Directing is evaluating what everybody around you needs to get their best performance, be it an actor or costume designer. What do you need, what slack do you need to pull, who needs you on top of them and who needs you to back the fuck off? That is such an exciting position to be in.

Are you planning to tell less autobiographical stories going forward?

I think that the way I will approach projects for a little while is gonna be kind of different. I'll be more interested in material that's outside myself. I've been making things that have been so personal and I'm a little exhausted. If I were to write something so personal again, I think it would be really hard to cast an actor, because you know that's something that was inspired by people and situations in your own life and you wouldn't wanna half-ass it in that way. But I also think my taste is changing, and these are things that I don't need to express anymore.

The thing about *Cameron Post* that was so great was that it was based on a book. It feels very personal to me, but it's not taken from my own life. I'm not Christian, you know, the parallels to me are symbolic so it was so great being able to hire actors to build that world. The challenge was to find where all those parallels lie while we were writing, and then while we were shooting it, and then editing it. Where is my in? I really got off on that and it made me realize I'm a director.

But, I think there's always a crisis of identity. Before shooting that film I was like, "I'm not good enough for this. I just tell stupid fart jokes. Why am I directing actual actors? This is gonna be humiliating." And then once I was actually there, it was the best creative experience of my life. You can't know unless you put yourself in a situation where you're in over your head.

Do you feel more vulnerable putting autobiographical work into the world?

Definitely. You have these moments where you're like, "Am I a fucking idiot? What kind of a sociopath does this?" And then other moments where you're like, "That's self-serving. I clearly wrote this because I thought it was universal. It's not the truth of me, it's a version of the truth." Scripts go through so many versions and so many hands, so it's hard to be like, "This is the truth." It's no longer this thing that happened to me, but becomes this thing that we all kind of interpreted and everyone else brought their own personal experiences to the table. It takes on a life of its own. I'd like to think that I have the ability to (a) be fair to the people in my life, and (b) understand what's entertaining and what's masturbatory and be able to divide between the two.

Did it take you long in life to start sharing your creative writing with people?

No, no, I came in bursting with ideas. I started writing scripts at like nine or ten, but I don't know if they were very personal, they were like sketch comedy stuff. I didn't have many friends. I watched a lot of television, all the time, and so I made my own script of an episode of *The Brady Bunch* that we put on for school. I always had a lot of excitement and confidence... But I don't even think it's a confidence. It's just an idiot's ability to share things before they are ready to be shared.

It's a stupid tendency on my part, but growing up, I always shared things and I was always excited about my scripts. It was my only way of reaching out to people, too. It's not like I hung out with other kids my age, ever. I just watched TV all the time, so if I had a script, I was really excited to share it. I think I have a lack of shame when it comes to creative things. Other people are inherently nervous to share things that are personal, and for some reason, I don't have that gene in me.

When did you start creating more personal work?

Making *The Slope* was such a eureka moment because I had been making short films at NYU's film grad school, and so was Ingrid Jungermann, my co-director on *The Slope*. We were dating and we were both so frustrated because we had just spent so much money, like loan money, to make these films that we shot on Super 16. I spent \$1,000 sending my short film out to different film festivals and was rejected from all of them.

Basically what happened was that I had homework to do for a class taught by Ira Sachs. This was before he made *Keep The Lights On*, but he was just about to and had this arc of excitement about making things. He told us all, "I don't care what you do this semester. I'll give you inspiring things to read and inspiring films to watch. At the end of this semester, I booked this room, invited your whole class, and you have to show something." So I had this looming over me.

I kept having these conversations with my girlfriend where we were like, "God, we're so homophobic. I think we hate lesbians." And I had just come out of the closet, so it was really early in my gay life and we thought, "Wouldn't it be funny if we were characters in a show and could be like really homophobic lesbians?" And she was like, "If we just recorded this conversation, that would make a really funny short film," so we did. We shot it in two hours with our friend holding the camera, and it was a shitty camera.

When it screened, it was this feeling of excitement that I hadn't felt since I was in high school doing theater. That kind of magic—that's how you want to feel in the room when you're screening your work. You wanna feel not alone. And for the first time since going to film school, I felt not alone, like people were laughing with me. So, we made another and then we made another. We made a bunch of these stupid short films that we wrote on Monday, shot on Wednesday, edited between ourselves Friday, and put online the next day.

And the best piece of advice I got was actually from Michael Showalter. We were asking him like, "What should we do? We wanna make a TV show. We wanna go to the networks," and we had no idea what we were talking about. He said, "Your career is a marathon, not a sprint. Take your time. Make more of these. Figure out your voice, learn how you wanna work." And making those, I think, 16 little shorts, was some of the most fun I've had making anything, and it made me figure out how I like working, where my strengths lie, and it set the stage for *Appropriate Behavior*.

How have you grown in comfort with acting in your work since *The Slope*?

I'm not comfortable at that. I'll be super honest with you. With this last time directing and starring, it felt like writing with my toes. In terms of performance, though, it's exciting. Everything is happening at once, and it just feels like there's no time to waste and you just follow your instincts. In that way, it's very exciting. And in writing it, it's super exciting, because you're writing for yourself and you know your abilities. But, the experience with *Cameron Post* kind of spoiled me and I think you're always gonna compromise. Unless you have an endless supply of money and you can take your time, most things that people make will require a lot of time compromising and I think it's really hard.

So what has driven you to act in other people's projects?

I think wanting to learn from them and wanting to watch how things are made. Wanting to see how Mark Duplass makes shit was really important to me, and I learned a lot watching him and Patrick Brice shooting *Creep 2*. Also it gives you empathy for the people who work with you. I love the idea of acting in someone else's film or television series and getting to enhance that, but there is definitely a big part of me that feels like I'm not making it better and that I shouldn't do it anymore.

I think I do a decent job. I'm happy with everything that I've seen that I've done, but I'm never more insecure than when I'm on set as an actor. I feel like you do your best work when you feel like you get to bring yourself to the table, and that you did something that only you could do. Some directors really enable you to do that. You can feel it when a director gets to know you and relies on that. And then you can also feel it when you're just a prop, and it feels shitty to be a prop.

I wonder if acting is feeling insecure and I'm just spoiled by being a director and leaving set being like, "I got what I need." I think that it's something I grapple with a lot. I don't do it that often. I don't audition. It's not the center of my focus, so it's sort of like if something comes across my plate, I'll do it. I think acting is really hard and the actors I know live their life in that arena of 'I don't know if I did it well.' And, as a director, you're able to look at them and be like, "Fuck yeah! I got what I needed." I think it's a hard job and I may not have the constitution to leave that set feeling secure, but that's also maybe just the nature of the job? I keep going back and forth.

Have your experiences as an actor influenced your casting process?

I don't know if it's acting that's influenced my casting, but I'm much more confident with my casting now than I was before. If someone ever dropped out I would feel super insecure, but now after having made two films and a television series, I'm much more secure that it sort of just... people know what's right for them. If someone drops out, it wasn't right for them. You can't strong arm someone into being in your project.

I think people know what they are good for and where they wanna go with their careers. Before I took it very personally, and now I have a really zen attitude about casting, where it'll just happen the way it happens. You roll the dice or you take a leap of faith. And in terms of auditioning people, when you have the luxury of auditioning people, I think it feels less loaded, where you follow your gut instinct, and everyone's a winner. If it doesn't work out, you shouldn't be in this project, and if it does work out, then great. I think I'm much more chill about the process now that I've been on both sides, and now that I've done a few things.

Any other key advice you've learned as a filmmaker?

If there are two other pieces of advice I would give: (1) Don't wait for someone else to enable you. In the UK, people wait for government money and approval, but it's not that much money and it's not that much approval. Find a way to make something cheap and enable yourself. Even if it's not gonna support you, get a 9-5, but do things that you can control, which is how *The Slope* felt to me. It cost no money to make and it was exactly what I wanted.

And (2) Don't get into bed with people you think are bigger than you, someone who you think is doing you a favor. I've been in those situations and I've watched other filmmakers get into situations where they got hooked up with EPs, producers, financiers or whatever, and they were the smallest thing on their slate, and they always got screwed. They were not respected. When I've gotten into bed with people who wanted it and needed to prove themselves as badly as I needed to prove myself, it's always been lovely. And I like to remind myself to do that. When you are both in the trenches and you both have so much to prove, it's been such a good situation. Whereas, sometimes it looks so good on paper, and then the reality of it is... it's just a mess.

Desiree Akhavan recommends:

My First Movie, Take Two: Ten Celebrated Directors Talk About Their First Film by Stephen Lowenstein - Most informative, inspiring and now (unfortunately) nostalgic book on filmmaking.

Zojirushi travel mugs - You'll lose it and your third set of sides about 30 mins into your day, but once you find it 11 hours later your coffee will still be hot.

King Spa & Fitness in Fort Lee New Jersey - Most relaxing place I know in the tri-state area

Friends seasons 1-10 - My constant companion when trying to coax myself in and out of sleep while shooting. Start watching from a place of judgement to feel better about your own crippling deficiencies as a writer/director, until you find yourself in awe of Joey's physical comedy skills and jealous of the subtle depth they put into Monica's relationship with her mother.

Headspace App - I'm just starting to try to meditate with this app after the trauma of the last shoot. I want to be the director that meditates at lunch. I am currently the director that eats her feelings before passing out under the props table. The best makers I know meditate. I'm trying.

Name

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Vocation

Director, Writer, Producer, Actress

