

Miguel Arteta on learning how to run a movie set



September 15, 2017 - Miguel Arteta is a Puerto Rican film and television director best known for his films Chuck & Buck, The Good Girl, and most recently, Beatriz at Dinner. His next film is the experimental comedy Duck Butter, starring Alia Shawkat. Here Arteta recounts the practical education he received on movie sets working with the likes of Sidney Lumet, Sydney Pollack, and Jonathan Demme. "His curiosity and the way he was just actively responding, like letting himself respond in a joyful way to people and to situations, was incredible," says Arteta of Demme. "He was directing, not controlling. He was responding. If you control it then it's going to be a boring movie. You have to respond so that you feel there's life beyond the frame. The audience feels like they're coming on an exploration with you."

As told to Charlie Sextro, 3026 words.

Tags: Film, Process, Collaboration, Beginnings, Education.

Did you have much experience on set before you started directing?

I did. First of all, I worked on student films when I was at university, but when I moved to New York, my friend hooked me up to be a location scout for Sidney Lumet on two of his films, Q&A and Family Business. I didn't know New York. I had to lie because they were shooting in Spanish Harlem for Q&A and I said, "Yeah, definitely. I'm Puerto Rican, I know." My job was to drive the van to meet Timothy Hutton, star of Q&A, and Sidney at his house in the Upper East Side. The location manager was like, "Have ice in the cooler with all the drinks and meet us with the van there." I saw Timothy and asked him, "What are you doing on the movie?" He was like, "I'm starring in the movie," so I started already on a bad note.

Then I had forgotten the ice and the location manager was in front of Sidney, "You forgot? You don't forget in the film business! You don't understand!" He was ripping me such an asshole that Sidney was like, "Cool down. It's his first day." Then he was like, "Let's drive to New Jersey," and I didn't know what was north or south, east or west. I start driving. He's in the seat next to me like, "You don't even know where the fuck is south or north, how long have you been in New York?" I was like, "Two weeks, sir." The location manager was going to explode.

I think since the location manager was such an asshole Sidney was like, "You know what? We've all lied to get into our jobs." And he gave me directions. I watched him work. Sidney was very hands on. He rehearsed all his films from top to bottom for a month. He would take his actors to the sets before to start the rehearsal process. Timothy and Armand Assante were rehearsing scenes on the locations. I got to see all that process, which was great.

And what was the main thing you took away from observing his process?

Just watching him deal with the actors and his passion with the sets. In Family Business, he was dealing with Dustin Hoffman who at that time in 1990 was like a big, big star who wanted to take control of the set. Watching him figure out how to manage such a super intelligent star was really interesting. He made himself a partner with the stars. He didn't let them run over him, but he also didn't make them feel like he was totally controlling them. It was a real partnership.

One day we were shooting in Hell's Kitchen and a group of African American community organizers descended and surrounded Sidney and the actors were saying, "You're not hiring people from our community." They shut down the

production. The producer and the production manager could get nowhere. I saw Sidney go and talk to these people. I could see how he could make people his partner right off the bat. It was pretty amazing to watch him negotiate all that.

How do you feel over the years your approach to running a set has changed?

When I was in New York, I was very lucky that my car mechanic introduced me to Jonathan Demme, which was just an incredible experience.

Your car mechanic?

My car mechanic! God bless him. He was this old hippie who half of the time was very mentally unstable and very political. If I talked to him about Latin American politics he would fix my car for free. I had made this little musical with singing and dance. I paid a dollar to put it on VHS, which was like so much money for me. I was like, "Should I give it to him? I don't know. It's a lot of money to just give him my VHS. Fuck it, he's such a nice guy."

He found me when I moved to New York through my sister. It was very eerie because Something Wild is one of the movies that got me off my ass. I was so in love with the filmmaking in that movie. The energy is just unbelievable. That's the movie that was like, "Okay, this is what I'm really born to do. I want to do this." For my car mechanic to call me and say, "I love your movie, do you know who Jonathan Demme is? Listen, you have to go meet him. My ex-wife is married to his cousin. There is a radical minister in Harlem that used to be with the Black Panthers. He's an incredible guy. Jonathan's making a documentary about him and I set up a meeting. He's going to get him to come watch your movie next Sunday." Jonathan made a documentary called Cousin Bobby about his cousin who was an amazing, crazy minister. I put my VHS on and Jonathan was like, "Awesome! Do you know how to change magazines for an Aaton [camera]?" I said, "Yes?" He laughed and said, "We'll teach you." I ended up working with him for a year and I learned.

It's a long-winded way to answer your question, but when I saw him directing that documentary, I realized that's the way you want to run a set. I'm still trying to get to that. He's the ideal benevolent dictator. You have to be, in some way, a dictator when you're managing a group of 60 people. It takes a lot of skill to do that.

He would be in flip-flops with his baby and a cigarette in the other hand, just walking around, so enthusiastic. Everybody was energized by him. He would take suggestions from the boom guy and say, "Hold on, hold on. Eric has a great idea! We've got to go. No, no, no, let's go do that." His curiosity, and the way he was actively responding, like letting himself respond in a joyful way to people and to situations, was incredible. He was directing, not controlling. He was responding. If you control it then it's going to be a boring movie. You have to respond so that you feel there's life beyond the frame. The audience feels like they're coming on an exploration with you. You've got to respond to the idea. You've got to respond to the script. You've got to respond to the location that day. You've got to respond to the mood of your actors that day. It is about responding. He really was advocating being really present and just igniting people with this earnest curiosity. It was amazing. He would start all his shoots an hour late because there would be an hour of hugging every morning. Anyone working with him knew, "Okay, we've got to schedule 45 minutes of just hugging before the thing got started."

I would imagine under the pressures of production that having the strength to be present could present a challenge.

I was doing Six Feet Under in the first year. I really didn't want to fuck it up. It was clearly an amazing show. I did the second episode after the pilot, and Alan Ball was so impressive and the pilot was just so great. I thought, "This is big. My first HBO job." Not only is it cumbersome, but there's so much fucking pressure. The pressure's on you to be the guy that needs to look like there's no pressure, because you're going to energize everybody.

It's so easy to turn into the opposite of Jonathan Demme. To turn into a nervous worrywart that's just like,

"Fuck, we're not going to make it." The actors are getting nervous. This assistant director came up to me and said, "Miguel, we're here. This is it. Isn't this what you want to do? This is what we want to do, man. This is it. We're doing it." It was like a major step in realizing how to get there with that Jonathan Demme way of doing things. Yeah, it's horrible and yeah, we're not going to make it, and it's a disaster but fuck it, it's beautiful.

Were there any other directors that gave you memorable advice about how to run a set?

I was very, very lucky to develop a script with Sydney Pollack. He was a great teacher. I got to spend a couple nights drinking with him and a few other filmmakers, and I really knew his early movies, so he would give me shit, but also was pretty happy that I knew the stuff. I think he was very kind with a lot of filmmakers like Jonathan Demme. Those people, who are kind, you start to realize, they help so many people.

First of all, Sydney taught me that you never argue with an actor. He started as an acting coach to Burt Lancaster in The Leopard, which is very weird. How did Sydney Pollack end up in Italy helping Burt Lancaster perform his scenes? Sydney would say, "Never argue with an actor. You will lose. Between action and cut, what control do you have? None. Think about it. Never, ever engage. Your job is to never let it become an argument."

It was such a revelation. People who don't understand that are a little bit fucked. You're asking an actor to take a swan dive into an empty pool. That's the only time they're really alive. You can't argue when somebody's taking that kind of risk. You know what I mean? You have to be encouraging. When an actor comes with an argument, I always think of Sydney. You have to find a way to become disarming. That's the best compliment I've been paid by an actor, Martin Sheen. I got to work with him. He said, "You're very disarming." I was like, "Yes, that's what I've been striving for." I was hoping Sydney was looking from above, proud.

For some reason, I got hired in 2000, after I had done Chuck & Buck, to do a pilot in New York City for Martin Scorsese. It was his first venture into television, way before Boardwalk Empire or anything. I don't know how he landed on me. I had done Star Maps and Chuck & Buck. It was not a good pilot. I think that's why he landed on me. He's another amazing teacher. One thing he taught me that you have to understand that when an actor asks something from you that you need to make them feel like you've got them. That you're making them safe. So when an actor says, "There's someone in my eye line," and they're being kind of unfocused, he would say to just make a big fucking show. Go there and tell all the fucking crew to move, just don't ever get annoyed with that. It's your job to make them feel like you've got them. That was incredibly, incredibly helpful.

Beyond other directors passing along advice, are there any crew members from one of your productions that taught you more about your role as the director?

Definitely. I was very lucky for my first film. I met with this Mexican independent director named Gabriel Retes. He did Bienvenido-Welcome and El bulto in the 90's. He was a crazy man. I had loved how those two movies looked and I found out it was this guy Chuy Chavez, very young guy. Chuy really taught me a lot about how to be a director. First of all, he was incredibly resourceful and undefeated. We didn't have any generators so he started climbing a lamppost. I was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. In America, we don't just go and plug it in up there."

I was struggling as a director with my first film, trying to set up a scene, trying to be like, "Maybe in this shot you see them go here, and in this shot they won't see this." He said, "Just shut the fuck up about the shots. I don't believe it. I don't believe it. Your job is to make me believe it. I don't believe any of this. If you make me believe it, we'll know what the fuck to do with the camera, so just make me believe it." It was a real moment of understanding of what my job was on set. With limited amount of time, actors with many different personalities, location is chaotic, you've got to get everybody to come together like boom. If you can make that happen, all the technical things around it just fall right into place.

How long did it take you to feel comfortable on set?

Oh god, I still struggle with that. I remember at AFI I wanted to work with with a Golden Era Hollywood actor. I'm obsessed with Golden Era Hollywood. I found Ruth Roman, who was in Strangers on a Train. She was in her late 70's

and in my shitty little AFI film. She was talking about Hitchcock all the time and she was like, "You're not a director. You have to be so much more aggressive." It was so humiliating. Thankfully, I had Jonathan Demme's influence to remind me that's not the only way to do it. There's no correlation between niceness and talent.

What does it take for you to become comfortable on set? Or do you always have a general unease in the midst of it?

There's a lot of pressure. I did two movies last year. For Beatriz at Dinner, I had eight actors and 18 days. I had to keep them all happy at the dinner party, particularly you have to keep them like they're having a relaxed time. So, I have to just find a way to be awe-inspiring, even though I was still under so much pressure. And then like nine days later I shot Duck Butter with Alia Shawkat and Laia Costa. They had a blast. They helped produce it. That's an experimental movie. What I found out doing Duck Butter, I had the best time on the set ever, even though I had the least amount of days. So, the whole shoot was nine days but the majority of it is shot in 24 hours without stopping. It was so daring that it was a joyful relief. I think I learned something, even though I've been doing this for 20 years. I feel like last year I learned something about truly pushing yourself to take risk. It can become much more fun.

I wonder about the opposite of that. Do you feel like going through a really tough production likely has a negative impact on the final product?

I've heard people say, "A polite set doesn't make a good movie," but I think that is bullshit. I think the same way when I hear, "Nice people make boring movies." No, that's bullshit, too. I think it's the level of engagement that the actor has to the material that really drives it. Kubrick said this thing that was incredible, which was like, "It doesn't matter if you hate your actors and if you don't get along, if you honestly admire their talent, it doesn't fucking matter. It will all just work out." I've had that experience where I've had a really, really, really hard time with an actress, but I think she's one of a kind. We did a TV show that I think is one of the best things that I have ever done.

When you're in the midst of production, who are you relying on most behind the camera?

I asked Jonathan Demme once, "Obviously, the DP (Director of Photography) is the most important position, right? It's you and the DP in the trenches." He told me, "That's not the most important position. It's the producer." When I was 25, I was so baffled by that. He said, "The producer sets the tone where everybody can do their best work." There are many producers that do many things but there is somebody who is the producer setting the tone, putting it together. He was like, "Miguel, there are movies that I would have done anything to direct, but if there wasn't the right producer, I would leave. I would not do it." I was like, "He's crazy. What is he talking about? Clearly, the DP is your more important person." I had the joy this year to work with Mel Eslyn, the Duplass brothers, and Natalie Qasabian. The way that Mark [Duplass] and Jay [Duplass] have set things up is great. They've been amazing producers. I think part of the reason, maybe, I had such a beautiful time on Duck Butter and everybody had such a beautiful time making that movie is also because they are just amazing producers. Their priorities are so right on.

Miguel Arteta recommends:

Watch Joan Crawford in Dancing Lady (1933) for the sheer fun of her performance

Listen to the Modern Lovers live version of the song "I'm Straight"

Register one young person to vote (who's never voted before) for the 2018 midterm elections, take them to vote on Tuesday, November 6th, 2018 and feel great about it

Read The Denial Of Death by Ernest Becker (one of the books that Alvy gives to Annie Hall)

Eat a Beyond Meat burger at Umami Burger and see if you can tell the difference

Name

Miguel Arteta

Vocation

Director, Writer

Fact

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