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As told to Elle Nash, 2923 words.

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# On achieving goals without compromise

Screenwriter, director, and actor Robbie Banfitch discusses sticking to your vision, how day jobs can be useful, and the beauty in even just attempting something.

**This movie was done on a very small budget, it's very indie. Can you speak a little bit first to how this film, as the idea, began for you?**

I started making little movies when I was about 10. This was my second project made with the purpose of getting a feature film into theaters and making my debut. The first project I shot while working at Greenpeace. It was a feature-length silent black and white arthouse drama, which I still haven't finished because there's no original score. Once I realized there was no way for me to pay for getting a score that elaborate, I felt that I had better make another movie real quick.

The idea for *The Outwaters* was inspired by the word itself. It's not a real word. It came from watching *Outland* with Sean Connery and I loved the title. The word "Outlands" is so evocative. I thought *Outwaters* would be a good horror movie title.

I also had always wanted to make a found footage film due to my love for *The Blair Witch Project*. The concept of the film came from thinking about what the word *Outwaters* might look like in relation to horror, with a found footage framing.

**The script feels so tight, there's not one thing that is missed. Every detail in the beginning matters all the way up completely until the end. Where did you cut your teeth with scriptwriting?**

I think most of my scripts were pretty bad until I started watching Woody Allen movies, and looking at dialogue a little bit more. Part of what I studied at School of Visual Arts in New York was screenwriting. That was one of my classes. But I would say I learned a lot more from watching the films *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, for example, and reading different scripts of movies that I thought were really beautifully written. For *Outwaters*, there wasn't a script in the normal sense. There were shot lists and images in my mind that had congealed over years and stayed there, so I didn't really need to write them down, and part of the "script" for this was knowing what I wanted to explore with each scene and not having anything rigid.

**So you have this vision for the film—you also directed and starred in it, as the main character. There's certain scenes towards the last third of the film, when we're with that main character (which at the time I did not know was played by you) for all these moments, his madness or his crying for his mom, I kept thinking, how would a director get someone to act those exact moments of desperation and madness to match your vision in such a real way? That sense of loss and confusion seemed so authentic, on the brink of ineffable. Do you feel like what you saw in your mind was what you were able to produce in the film?**

There were tons of moments like that, but I knew since I did not have a crew or a producer or anyone telling me I need to be done at a certain time, that I could just redo it. I kept redoing the things that I didn't like or that didn't feel right. I shot the whole film, put it together, and it was definitely something, but it wasn't the film that I quite wanted to make. So I shot new scenes.

There were two and a half to three years between the initial main shoot (which a lot of the movie is), and

the final shoot. I could just go out to the desert and shoot for a day if I had an idea, because my friends are the stars in it. I'd be like, "Hey, can we go to the desert next weekend? I just have to get this shot." There's nothing in there now that I wasn't happy with, or I just would've re-shot it or cut it out.

**What do you think was the hardest part about getting the film to a place where you were really satisfied with it?**

I could just keep trying to improve it for the rest of my life. I'm notorious in my family and friend group for just not finishing movies because I keep thinking I'm going to work on them. So the hardest part was when I did find distribution for the film, they liked it as it was, but I wanted to keep working on it.

The hardest part was deciding it was done because it had to be done, because it was the last day I had to submit it. That was weird. It was like, all right, let me watch my movie for the 500th time, which at that point you're like, is this what I want? I don't know, I've seen it so many times. Then just being done and knowing that's the movie forever. That was the hardest part, thinking, oh, it's done. I can't go back and change it if I think of a new idea.

**How do you deal with thinking about its finality now that it's out in the world and being received? You're getting feedback from it, there's press, there's a ton of Reddit posts.**

I've never had a Reddit account, so I don't look at Reddit. I do have a Letterboxd account, so I see what's being said there.

**How do you deal with reading audience feedback, which is different from journalistic criticism?**

This was my first film so I had to consciously decide that I was going to read as much as I could. I do want to know. I don't care if it's good or bad, I'm going to read everything. I wanted to know what people think of my movie and how it affects certain people, whether they like it or not. It was a conscious decision. I'm curious. I'm sure I'll get bored of that at some point when I have a new movie. I'm probably not going to go back and look at the old.

**What is it about found footage that feels so effective for this particular story for you?**

It's hard to say because the ideas were born out of just thinking of my favorite found footage movies, knowing the title and getting images. Although, one thing I was conscious of was never wanting to make a found footage film where there was not a legitimate justification for the camera running. So from the very beginning, I would say that was always very clear to me. Another element is, my character couldn't see anything during certain stretches, and that's why I made the most elaborate sound design I could muster. When you can't see, there's a reason you can't see, and there's some painting with the sound.

**Did you ever have qualms when you were filming the very final scenes?**

No, no. I thought it's a horror movie, so deal with it. When I see people say the ending is just for shock value, I definitely didn't make the ending thinking, "how can I really fuck up the audience now?" That ending was born of the story and everything that came before and how I thought this person might deal with that, and this is just the instinct, it's what I felt based on everything this person would do, the self annihilation. That was always going to be the ending. So no, I wasn't worried about it, and actually I wasn't even thinking it was that weird.

**Some people participate in shock value simply because it's shocking, but then there is transgression in art where there's something behind it. Do you think that one is better than the other? Does it matter?**

If I was watching something and there was something in there that felt like it had nothing to do with the movie and was just there to upset me, but it didn't tie into the movie, I would probably be like, that's bad writing. But I don't think that sitting down and thinking of ways to shock people is inherently bad if it ties into the story. The scares that you get out of your favorite horror movies were literally written to scare and shock you.

**Do you still work a day job? What are you doing now to balance the creative life and the real world responsibilities?**

Well, right now, I'm still in debt from student loans, and my producer lent me money while editing the film. I initially shot the movie when I didn't have a producer, with my own money. I worked at a nonprofit and lived in LA, so I was pretty broke. I'm just starting to see some money from the movie, and I do need a day job, possibly in the new year. I have to finish editing my new movie. Depending on if I sell that, if I can find distribution and a good deal right away, I may not need to get a day job yet. This is what I would say: If you're actually making your stuff, it doesn't matter if you have to go get a day job, because you can still make your stuff on the weekends. You can find ways to do it. Even though I have a movie that was in theaters, I have no problem going to work at Amoeba Records or Barnes and Noble. You know what I mean? I do have to worry about getting a day job, but if I can pay my bills that way and still create, it's fine.

**How did you go about getting distribution?**

The goal from the beginning was to make a movie that I thought would get into theaters. It wasn't just a hope that it would. It was the main goal. Decide where you want your movie to wind up and make it with that in mind. Once I felt like it was good enough to enter festivals, I learned how to enter them. I made sure the trailer was awesome and the poster was professional, and I wrote thoughtful cover letters for the submissions. I knew that it would get into some fests and I was pretty sure it would be well received.

**You have to have a lot of self-belief, right?**

Other festivals that I didn't enter started asking for it. Then it got into Panic Fest, which was its first bigger genre festival, and that's where it found a large audience and distribution. Bloody Disgusting had seen it via the festival. That's how I got involved with Cinedigm, now Cineverse. We started having initial talks with a bunch of distributors.

This is where people can get ahead of themselves, thinking, oh my God, someone's interested. And then they can end up just giving their movie away. I held to my original goal. I believed it deserved a theatrical release, even if that was just New York and LA for a week, so I made sure that was part of the deal. Also, I wasn't going to sell the movie if it didn't get a physical media release. Audiences deserve that option.

Listen, if for months no one was offering, then I would have reassessed. But I got what I set out to get. There was some anxiety around waiting too long to say yes, worrying they might lose interest. There's a book called *Producer to Producer*, by Maureen A Ryan, which I recommend, as well as *Eight Days in the Woods* by Matt Blazi, and it's literally everything you can imagine about the making of the Blair Witch Project, from the very initial idea to how they got it into festivals and marketed it and how they made it. That combined with *Producer to Producer* is a really nice tangible toolkit.

**You talked about as soon as someone expresses interest in it, there's probably that temptation to be like, this is my shot, this is my only shot. Would you say trying to resist that temptation was the hardest part?**

The hardest thing from beginning to end is just procrastination. I'm a procrastinator and it shouldn't have taken me until the age of 30 to start making feature films. My first feature, the one that I made before this, that's still not done. I started making that around the age 29 or 30, and it shouldn't have taken me that long. I've been making movies since I was 10, and I went to four years of film school, and I worked in the industry initially, so I should have been doing what I'm doing now, much earlier. During post-production for Outwaters, I spent too many watching Real Housewives and not editing. You could say that's part of how I was able to do it: relaxing and taking a break is important too, to get fresh eyes on it. I'm bad with that in life. I've known for days I have to pay my dental insurance and I haven't yet, but it'll take two seconds.

**Did you ever get burnt out when you were going through heavy periods of development on the film? You talked about watching it 500 times, right?**

Oh, yes. Take a break. There were a couple instances where I could not take a break because I had a deadline. There were a few points where normally I would've stopped after editing and watching and editing and watching. I would've taken a couple of weeks and then come back to it. But with a deadline, I didn't have that. So I was like, when you have to do something, you do it. I found alternative ways of getting fresh eyes on it, one of which was calling my friends over that I respected and being like, "Please watch this and tell me your thoughts, honestly." And these are people I trust that I know are objective, so that helped.

There were many times where I was brain-fried and didn't know what I was looking at anymore. It's almost exciting to look at it again once you've been away from it a while. So take breaks. Take as many breaks as you can when you feel that way.

**What is it that makes a horror movie really good? What do you think is absolutely crucial for a film that you watch that will scare the shit out of you and make you question your life?**

It's hard to point to one thing. The best horror movies that I've seen are *The Shining*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Candyman*, *Session 9*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. They have a lot of things in common, amazing performances, amazing cohesion of vision—all the elements working together to create the feeling of horror; the music, the acting. But the one thing I know all of those have in a really strong way is really heavy mood, atmosphere.

They also all have beautiful fine details, like little detailed things that contribute to the atmosphere. In *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* you see little spiders scuttling in the corner of a ceiling. *The Shining* has some really beautiful, thoughtful cinematography, extra little moments that linger that you wouldn't find in a lot of movies. *Blair Witch Project*, there's the detail of the marshmallows that they decided to keep in. I don't know if you remember when she's pushing the camera into the marshmallows at the food store—that's something that if you're fucking around with your camera, you would do, it feels real. Keeping that little detail. One answer amongst many is little details that add nuance to the story or the atmosphere, whatever it is. Pay attention to your details!

**Are you going to stay in the horror genre?**

I mainly want to make horror movies, dramas and musicals. After editing *Tinsman Road*, I'm going to go write a script that I would need a studio to finance. I'm also going to write a script that I can make

with my friends, in case the studio situation doesn't pan out. I'm not going to get into this place where I'm waiting for years to possibly make a movie with a company—I need a backup so that I'm not trapped. I have plenty of stories, and not all of them need a lot of money to be effective.

At the end of the day, if you like making your art, whatever it is, then the act of doing it and finishing it, it should be enough. Of course, it's nice to have that be able to pay your rent if that's what you want, but there's always beauty in the attempt. I think that's a line from Before Sunrise, Julie Delpy says that. "I believe if there's any kind of God,, it wouldn't be in any of us, not you or me. Just a little space between, the answer must be in the attempt." It's not the exact quote, but the idea of that is stuck with me. When I saw Before Sunrise, I thought it was such a beautiful thing, so I live with that.

Robbie Banfitch Recommends:

8 Days in the Woods by Matt Blazi.

American Movie

Dead Man's Bones by Dead Man's Bones

The Art of Acting by Stella Adler

Gummo

Name

Robbie Banfitch

Vocation

director, filmmaker, actor

Fact

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