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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2893 words.

Tags: Film, Education, Beginnings, Time management, Mental health, Collaboration.

# On making things happen for yourself

Screenwriter, director, and producer Iyabo Boyd discusses deciding what your bandwidth and abilities are, realizing that those can both change over time, and creating your own opportunities.

**Do you remember the first time you realized that you wanted to be a filmmaker or an artist?**

I started doing acting in kindergarten, so I was doing plays from a very young age, which was super influential to my growth as an artist later. I went to arts high school in Denver and I studied acting there and then I switched to film because I didn't fully realize there was a film program. I was obsessed from an acting point of view, and then I realized that filmmaking was a job and I was like, "Oh, wow. I didn't realize that was a thing. I think I could have something to say, I think I have a voice that can be shared in a format that's more conducive to my expression than being an actor." So I was like, "Okay, behind the camera there's a lot more ability to express myself. There's more power. There's a lot more fun to do with creating spaces, music, and thinking about shots, there's just so much more room to play in my mind."

**You were the writer, director, and producer of your short "Me Time." What motivated you to take all these three roles and back in time would you do it again?**

I share the producing credit with three other folks working in different kinds of communities and capacities. I had produced feature films before, so I'm a producer kind of person, it's hard for me to not do it. I'm sure it'd be easier if I didn't do that, but it just comes so naturally. And I think as an independent filmmaker, filming is not everyone's skillset but if you have the ability it makes sense to be involved in the producing stuff as much as you can, just because it is your vision, it's your career, and it's important to make sure that certain things are happening in the way that you envision. No one's going to fight for your film more than you will. Of course, you want to build producing partners that will be as excited about it as you are, but in order to make things happen, I believe that you need to really make them happen for yourself.

**You are currently the Founder and Director of Brown Girls Doc Mafia. How do you balance your time between being a filmmaker with your creative work and being the leader of an organization? What have you learned during this process?**

It's tough. Basically my whole 30s I've been juggling both and I think ultimately something is going to suffer especially getting older where I just have less energy. In my 20s, I had a full-time job and I also produced my first feature, *Sun Belt Express*. I would wake up at 6:00 am or 7:00 am, work on producing for the film from 7:30 am to 9:30 am, then go to work, be at work all day, and then go home. And I was producing the film from 6:30 pm to 1:00 am.

That's something I could do in my 20s when I was single and I had a bunch of energy and I was excited. But now in my 30s, I don't have that kind of energy anymore unfortunately and I've just had to bring it in and find ways to narrow my focus which kind of sucks, it's a loss. I liked being really good at juggling when I was younger and having the brain capacity for that but I think I just mentally don't have that capacity as much as I would like. I have a different life, I have other things that I want to do besides just hustling on my projects to be completely honest and I think that the pandemic is shedding light on this hustle culture that has been so prevalent in New York especially, and questioning whether it's advisable these days in terms of how we talk about the quality of life. Something always suffers but I'm trying to come to a place of acceptance with suffering and just being like okay, something's not going to be, I have

to delegate. I have to trust that someone else is going to do this or if I don't get this thing sent this week, I have to accept it.

**In our professional lives, but particularly in projects related to creative work, people end up working with their friends and close networks. Predominantly, people who have more access to resources, and other kinds of privilege are white and men, and therefore the projects end up in hands of the same people. I'm wondering if this system can be dismantled or, in your opinion, what can be done to reshape these kinds of professional and even personal networks and relationships?**

It's complex because, on one hand, I completely understand wanting to work with people that you have experience with because you grow trust. By working with someone over and over again you deepen your trust with them. You also deepen your creative connection and that can grow. And you want to work with people that you like, that you enjoy being around. I don't think that we need to disrupt those three elements in order for there to be better diversity in film crews or in executive offices. I mean, one of the things that I talked about in the early days of BGDM, when I was doing more work on the subject of diverse crews, some of the earlier conversations I had about this were about friendships.

My original thought on this was connecting the dots between who you know with interracial friendship. I don't have the stats, but I believe there's a stat that shows there's a huge percentage of white adults that don't have diverse friends. That's one of the baseline start talking about, okay, you want to work with who you like, great, make friends of color and get to know their work and find out if you connect. And it's about seeking genuine organic relationships that lead to who you know and collaboration on those film sets.

We're in this new world where maybe 70% of people on your crew or are people that you already know and trust and you need to find new people, especially if your crew is already primarily a white crew. That's when it's everyone's responsibility to start looking for ways to enact our collective goals of justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and representation. I don't think it's about dismantling, I think that we're on the road but there are some opportunities for us to pinpoint these trouble areas that continue to prevent diversity to happen in the crews. Friendship is just one of them and that's kind of, it's like a medium silly one. And to push back a little bit on this question about privilege because I want to make sure that we give people of color their due as well. There's a lot of power and privilege that folks of color bring to productions and have access to that maybe white people don't. So it's just about kind of letting this question of privilege and continue to be multifold, letting it be textured. It's not black and white that you have it and I don't, I think there's complexity in that.

**You have mentioned that it is important to dismantle this notion of what a filmmaker looks like. Could you elaborate a little bit on why do you think this is important?**

It's just about visibility representation for the greater public. That visibility component is about public education, acceptance, and encouragement because when you repeat the same image of a certain kind of person, it continues to affirm that image, and that image continues to be the norm, and that normality breeds trust in the public.

If the public assumes or continues to be told by our industry that white men, either a young white man who's coming early in their career and it's special visionary or a white man who's been around for a long time and he's still kicking and has a long career, those are kind of the only two categories that the public thinks about filmmakers. And what it does is that it consumes all of the energy of the public and the public has less awareness of the diverse voices that exist in filmmaking. It's important that we, as a people in general recognize and appreciate the diversity of everyone's voices. So the way that white men are made more visible as filmmakers are not only incorrect because it continues to omit huge populations of other kinds of filmmakers. It's our job to try to even out that historical disparity so there can be more equity.

**It must be hard to be a filmmaker and, at the same time, have to advocate or educate people about why this is important.**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you have to decide for yourself what your bandwidth and abilities are. During the pandemic, the first part of the pandemic before George Floyd was killed, I have stepped away. I was doing my own thing and I was like, okay, I need to mentally process what is going on in the world. And then when George Floyd was killed and there was so much more visibility about filmmakers and journalists covering the huge culture shift that was happening globally. I kept seeing in my own personal Facebook feed friends of mine who were white men, who were getting great opportunities or taking opportunities upon themselves, which is great for them to find ways to frankly further their careers around this period. And sure, people of color, filmmakers did the same thing. I'm not saying that's a bad thing because journalism is what it is. Something happens in the world, you got to jump to it, make a story and that helps build your career. I'm not saying that that's a problem. What I'm saying is that when we continue to see especially stories about people of color and especially stories that have specific and greater implications for communities of color like the pandemic, those are stories that I'm sure can be told by anyone, but as we continue to invest in our collective goals for diversity, representation, equity, injustice, etc, that was an opportunity for all of us to get behind and to uplift filmmakers of color to tell those stories.

When George Floyd was killed, all of that came rushing into my mind and I just wanted to make sure that the people that were hired to cover these stories were thinking how important this moment is for a diverse

workforce. And again, it goes back to the public, we want the public to experience these stories from a point of view that may have more proximity to the stories and people on screen. Because probably a large population of audiences is watching films about communities of color or subjects of color from a white gaze and in the past that has been normalized. It's been like, "Oh, it's just a movie I'm watching," but it's not that simple. There are certain kinds of nuances, perspectives, points of view, processes that happen on production best practices, relationships, communication, where you are putting the camera, what questions you ask, how you're editing a scene...There are so many creative and logistical decisions that happen that it does matter, you can see a difference in who's directing it.

Every film is directed by someone who has a director's voice. They are creating a story. The fact of editing means that a story is being created by the editor and the director. It's not just that the people are talking and the story gets told from their mouth. It does, but it's shaped by an editor. That's an agreement that we all understand as documentary filmmakers. Let's keep in mind that there is a process in which stories, ideas, and what people say, and how something progresses is controlled by a separate human being from the person on camera. We need to know and be mindful of who that human being is, what their values are, what their hang-ups are, what their interests are, etc. They're speaking from their voice. That's why we talk about the filmmaker's voice. They're creating a voice at that moment. So we just got to be mindful about who that voice is speaking for.

**In the past few days, people that work in the film industry have expressed that it is time to stop the notion that sleep deprivation, stress, low salaries, and bad working conditions are part of the job. This is unsustainable because what happens is that most people quit, families break up, people get into accidents, etc. Is there any hope to break this cycle?**

Well, I'll speak for America, and it's the practice of cutting your teeth and paying your dues. That's an American capitalist philosophy that has been there from day one and is a bigger thing that is being discussed because of the pandemic. Now people are able to reconsider the workplaces that we've been assumed that we have to go through or the processes are something that we really want to do.

I feel like Millennials are kind of influencing older generations. I would guess that there are people in their 50s who agree that they don't want to work these kinds of hours. Their bodies could have been destroyed from 30 years of doing this or have not been able to see their kids. I think that's one beautiful thing about this moment is that Millennials have been able to flag loudly and collectively that we are not happy about something. And this is one of those moments where it has influenced and infiltrated the thinking of older generations who are also still vested in these workplace conditions. I don't know if this is a social thing that's really happening, but this is my perception that it has brought more visibility to this issue.

Do I think there's hope? We'll see. I think hope is connected again to capitalism. The only reason why people work 12-hour days on a shoot, is because they're trying to get as much done as possible in the shortest amount of time. It's functional, in terms of film production because the longer your shoot is the more money you're spending. So it's up to the industry to decide that spending more money on production time in order to alleviate the challenges of the work conditions is a good investment for them, that's where they have to decide. And the people who work on these productions have to decide for themselves. We have to decide for ourselves whether it's worth it for our personal lives, but the amazing thing about having a union is that you can bring your voices together and work towards it.

Iyabo Boyd Recommends:

N.K. Jemisin's book *The Fifth Season*: There are three books in the series and everyone should read them

This summer really got into roller skating. I roller skated growing up and that's been so lovely, taking walks is obviously amazing especially in a pandemic context but this roller skating is life-changing. It's like a dance party, it's like you're taking yourself to a meditation dance party. And the cool thing about it is that when you're skating, people are very interactive. People talk to you and it's cool to feel especially in New York, we're reconnected to other strangers, New York is the city of strangers but we have different connecting points and it's nice to tap into that.

The Brown Girl Doc Mafia member directory. It's a place where the public in general, and also industry people can go to learn about filmmakers of color, who are women or non-binary or trans who work in documentary. It's really pretty and colorful. It has folks' bios and links to their work. It is sortable by geography, by ethnicity, by languages they might speak, etc So if anyone's hiring or looking to hire for crew productions or for executive roles, it's a great place to look. that's a good place to go.

My favorite song right now is called "Reach Out" by a band called Durand Jones & The Indications. I just got to see them at my first live concert since the pandemic in Brooklyn. And it's a great song. It's kind of got, the whole album has kind of got a 70s disco vibe, but this one is I think a really good song for the pandemic because it's kind of about if you need me reach out, it's very much about asking for help, looking for support and knowing that someone is there for you, it's kind of kind an emotional element but it's really fun and pretty too, and just a good vibe.

I've lived in New York for almost 20 years and it's it can feel hard to get out, transportation wise So I recommend an app called Turo, that has really made renting cars a lot easier.

Name

Iyabo Boyd

Vocation

Screenwriter, director, producer, executive director

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