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CONVERSATION: Adam Salky

What started as a short for film school turned into a four-year labor of love and a Sundance-quality feature for first-time director ADAM SALKY. Here, he talks with Ovation about his collaborative process and what's next on the horizon.



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OVATION: Where are you from? Were you raised in an artistic environment?

ADAM SALKY: I grew up in New York City as the youngest child of a father who is a surgeon, and a mother who was planning to become a surgeon before she had my brother and me. So this is to say that no, I did not grow up in an artistic environment. It was a very middle-class values kind of home where the concept of being an artist when you grow up is not talked about. However, my mother has creative talent and perhaps, in a different life, may have been an artist. She could always draw - there is a painting that she made of her younger sister that hangs in her bedroom that is pretty fantastic. My parents saw that I had creative tendencies early on and offered to put me in drawing classes, but I never really wanted to pursue that when I was a pre-teen. My first individual choice to do something artistic was photography in high school.

How did you become a filmmaker?

My process of becoming a filmmaker was the completely organic destination in a long journey of self-discovery. Since I didn't grow up in an environment that was pushing me to do something creative, I eventually came to it on my own. In retrospect I did what felt right to me, and that led to filmmaking. Photography led to writing - poetry at first - which led to writing fiction, which led to making another short film in college (I made one in high school but it was SERIOUSLY low budget - we read from our scripts on camera!). After college, I moved back to New York and started working on movie sets as a PA, grip, camera intern, etc. As I worked, I continued writing and directing short films. After college, all of the other creative outlets I had tried prior to filmmaking naturally fell by the wayside, and any other job I had in the past (ranging from restaurants to corporate experiences) felt unsatisfying. Filmmaking emerged as the thing I loved most. There was no one specific moment where it clicked, but rather a collection of feelings and small realizations that amassed to the decision to dedicate my life to filmmaking. There were some big moments, though: deciding to go to film school was one. During school there was a period of coming to terms with my choice - realizing what it means to be a filmmaker, how hard that life can be - and still deciding to pursue it.

What is your education? Did you go to film school?

I majored in creative writing and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Emory University. I received my MFA with high honors in film directing at Columbia University's Graduate School Of The Arts Film Division.

Have you made any films so far?

My first feature film, DARE, premiered in dramatic competition at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009. It's a story of high school seniors at the crossroads of their adult lives. When a famous high school alum (Alan Cumming) tells good girl Alexa (Emmy Rossum) that she hasn't lived, she embarks on a bold journey that takes her to mysterious bad boy Johnny (Zach Gilford). Envious, her shy best friend Ben (Ashley Springer) also dares to pursue Johnny, complicating Alexa's romance and pushing the boundaries among the three friends. Rooney Mara (THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO), Sandra Bernhard, and Ana Gasteyer (MEAN GIRLS, SNL) also star.

Talk a bit about the origin of the idea. How did you and the writer come together to work on this?

I met David Brind, the writer of DARE, in film school. There's a first-year project where everyone directs a short film that someone else wrote. I thought David's was the best in the pool, and we made the short version of DARE together that summer. We had a great collaboration and the short left us with a strong "what happens next?" feeling, so we decided to develop it into a feature. The process of making DARE took almost four-and-a-half years. We were working very closely together during that whole time – developing the script and plotting to get it made by hook or by crook.

Which came first, the script or the funding?

The script almost always comes before the funding. That's pretty much how it goes in the independent film world. The chain of events is: write the script, find a great cast, and use the cast names to raise the money.

However, DARE is unique because we raised money before having cast. DARE is a high school movie, and there are almost no actors in that age range who can finance a film based solely on their name. We sold shares to 14 different individual investors.

I am looking for financing right now for my next project, THE GOOD BROTHER, so if you're reading this and you want in on the ground floor on great film, send me a Facebook email!

What sort of specific choices did you make with regard to the visuals to create the look and feel of the film?

DARE is a triptych movie. The film is divided into three acts: 'Alexa,' 'Ben,' and 'Johnny'. The central concept behind the visual style of DARE is 'growing up,' or 'maturation.' The characters begin the story as innocents, and they step into young adulthood by the end. There is a real emotional and psychological progression to the individual character stories, and the visual style and music choices were intended to support that.

Alexa's act was shot to be very bright, colorful. At the outset of the film, she is still very much a young girl, and the brightness and youthful colors were intended to support this innocence. The camera style was classical Hollywood, which suits Alexa's character – organized, put-together (at least on the outside), structured. It also suits the psychological state of the Alexa in the beginning.

At the passing of the baton to Ben's act, the characters have begun a transition into a new level of maturity so the visuals become a little more adult. The colors are a little darker, more mature. There are some unusual camera moves.

Then we switch to Johnny's act and the camera work is almost entirely hand held, and the colors are muted and stark. At this point in the story the character relationships have become so real that I wanted the visual style to feel the same way.

Who is the producer on the project? How did you meet?

DARE was produced by Mary Jane Skalski (DARE, WIN WIN, THE STATION AGENT, THE VISITOR), and Jason Orans (GOODBYE SOLO, NIGHT CATCHES US). David and I met Mary Jane at Columbia, where she was teaching a low budget indie producing class. Two weeks into the class a film she was working on got financed and she had to leave, but we kept her email and started what I call "tactful stalking" her. We would email at persistent but non-threatening intervals (about once a month) until almost a year and a half later she had read two drafts of the script and agreed to come on board the project. One of the first things she did was introduce us to Jason, who came on to help produce.

What is currently happening with the film?

DARE was sold to Image Entertainment and had a theatrical release in November of 2009. It's now on DVD, Blu-Ray, Hulu, Netflix, Hollywood Video and Blockbuster (remember Blockbuster?). It has also been distributed all over the world and just recently had a theatrical release in Germany. The German trailer is my favorite of the ones I have seen. For comparison:

[German Trailer](#)

[US Trailer](#)

Where did you shoot?

We shot in Philadelphia for four, 6-day weeks (24 days). 24 days is not bad for a small film, but 6-day weeks are grueling. There is no time to sleep, regroup, prepare for the following week, or even to watch dailies. I wouldn't recommend it unless you are almost 100% prepared to shoot the entire film on day 1, and by that I mean completely shot-listed, storyboarded, and prepped to go.

How long was post?

We cut for 5 months, and then there was the rush to get to Sundance. After that, we continued to make a few small changes to the film (mostly soundtrack-related) and then prepped to deliver to the distributor. All in all the whole process lasts almost a year: the first half is working everyday, and the second half is periods of working every day, followed by a couple of weeks off every now and then.

What lessons have you learned in this process?

There are so many, and I'm still learning them. One of the things that makes the choice to be a filmmaker so exciting is that the ground beneath you is always shifting, so no six-month period is ever the same: new projects, new dynamics, new paths to production/distribution, new daily life. This can also be nerve-wracking and a bit unsettling, but you either get used to it or get out of the game.

As far as production goes, the biggest philosophical lesson I learned is that creativity is born out of financial restriction. The less money you have, the more you have to really hone and focus your ideas down to the bare essentials and think creatively. That thought and effort is where the best storytelling choices are made.

In DARE, we lost the location for Johnny's house about a week before we were supposed to start shooting those scenes. Over 30 pages of material and three of the most crucial moments of the story were to take place there - all of those scenes were already planned, storyboarded and designed to take place at the lost location. The new location, which was essentially forced on me out of lack of time and necessity, seemed (at first) to be completely unworkable.

Despite what the location was lacking and the very little time we had to plan out those scenes, the crew really banded together and we all rose to the occasion to make those scenes happen. In the end, those 30 pages of crucial moments came out better than what was planned at the original location. How is that possible? The extreme restrictions of time and money forced us to dig deep and become more resourceful and creative - we found new and better ways to get it done. But man, it was a dark, stressful time.

One thing that I have found very useful is to divide all of the scenes you are going to shoot into thirds. The first third are scenes that are absolutely essential to the success of your film: the most important emotional/character/plot moments that need to be captured perfectly and with care in order for your audience to laugh/cry/be on the edge of their seats. The second third are the scenes that are important, but not necessarily the most crucial climactic, emotional, or plot turning moments - scenes you could be a little less precious with. And the last third are the scenes that are the least potent in terms of character/story development. Think to yourself, "Can I shoot these scenes in the last third simply? Can I do these in such a way that will create more time for the other two-thirds of scenes; can I do some of them in one simple shot?" What I am suggesting is a system of prioritization. If, going into your shoot, you know where the heart of your film is, then you know how to weigh your plan and can design the schedule to support those choices. That way you have the best chance at leaving production with everything you need, and the proper amount of attention allotted to every moment.

What is the film you are currently working on?

My next feature is a dramatic thriller called THE GOOD BROTHER, which I am attached to direct. It's about two con-artist brothers who have been taking advantage of widows until the younger brother falls in love with their next victim and derails the plan over a 24-hour period, while one of their previous victims hunts them down.

It was written by Pablo F. Fenjves (MAN ON A LEDGE) and will be produced by Mary Jane Skalski (DARE, WIN WIN, THE STATION AGENT, THE VISITOR). It's a complicated character story wrapped up in a simple, yet very suspenseful premise. I met Pablo at a dinner party in Los Angeles and we started talking. We ended up exchanging work - I sent him DARE and he sent me the THE GOOD BROTHER. When I read it, I loved it, and he loved DARE. We met and talked and decided to move forward together.

I also made a 60-minute documentary called WE WANT YOU, which is currently in post-production. WE WANT YOU is the candid story of what it takes to build the future of the US Marine Corps. Part soldier/salesman, "Gunny" is on a quest to accomplish his latest mission: find 8 recruits to enlist in the Marines.

***For more information on Adam, follow him on Facebook, Twitter (@adamsalky), or visit www.adamsalky.com.

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