

## Foreword to the Second Edition

### Absolute Beginnings: sage advice about film-making from a complete novice

by Neil LaBute

When the good people at Wallflower Press asked me to write a foreword to their Critical Guide to Contemporary North American Film Directors, I replied with an emphatic “Yes!” I leapt at the chance. Now, after some five months of stalling and basic procrastination, here it is. I think the reason that it took me a little while to get going on this is because of that simple yet primal fear of having nothing to say. Don’t get me wrong, I can ramble on forever, blathering on endlessly about practically nothing at all. No problem. But actually having something informative and useful to impart is another matter entirely. What could I possibly have to say about film-making or film-makers? True, I make films and have met a few directors over brunch, but that’s about the extent of my expertise. I realise now, however, that that in itself is a kind of expertise. I know as much as the next guy about this weirdly fascinating world we call movies. I’ve made five of them and I still consider myself a complete novice. Take it from me, I know as much and as little as anybody else on the subject.

So, if you’re looking for answers, keep reading. And no, I don’t mean this foreword, I mean ‘elsewhere’. To bastardise a quote by Brigham Young and use it for my own means, “This is surely not the place.” Don’t get me wrong, I’m going to do my best here, to say something about the process of film-making and my involvement in that process, but the actual usable answers will, no doubt, be few and far between. I’ll do my best to be creative and honest and helpful, but that’s about as good as it’ll get. Answers, like most things in life, are hard to come by.

Maybe that’s a good place to start, actually. The concept of ‘answers’. I used to ask a lot of questions about my profession before I was a working member of that profession. I would pour over magazines, books, articles ... anything I could find on the subject. My first love was the theatre, but I was a constant moviegoer in my youth and had a pretty healthy interest in the subject. I could tell you who won what Academy Award in a given year, but precious little about how they did it. Actually, in much of that reading, the guiding force for me was usually a fairly simple set of concerns: “How did they do it? How did they get started? How can I do what they do? What were they doing when they were my age?” The answers, happily, were all over the proverbial map. I say ‘happily’ because what that meant was that there was no one way to fail or succeed. There were as many possibilities and variations as I could dream up.

The greatest piece of information that I’ve learned in this ongoing process called ‘my career’ is that there is no direct, obvious or singular path to follow. Unfortunately, that’s also the bad news. I have never been able to find a universal way in which things would work out, if only I would utilise the simple, easy-to-use set of directions. I came into the world of film-making through the backset of doors, stumbling in blindly and with little thought or care of it becoming my profession. I simply made a film because I was sick of waiting for other people to make it. I should explain: I was approached by a film company – a good one out of New York – to adapt a play of mine into a screenplay. At the time, this simply meant that I should type “Fade in” at the beginning of the play and that was about it. However, the company liked what I did well enough to try and raise money to make the thing. This process, the ‘financing’ portion of independent film-making, turned out to be a nightmare of high expectations, dashed hopes and interminable waiting. I did not have the temperament for it. After the initial option period for the screenplay ran out, I refused to hand over another, opting instead to try and make a film on my own. A silly idea, really, for someone with no formal (or informal, for that matter) training, limited resources and no cash. The result was *In the Company of Me*, shot in eleven days and filmed for the tidy sum of \$25,000. No matter what one thinks of the results (and the critical reaction ran the gamut from ‘classic’ to ‘snuff film’), the end product was a film. True, I was older than Orson Welles when he made his first film (one of my earliest ‘how did he do it?’ heroes) and I hadn’t followed any of the rules that I’d been searching for along the way, but I did have a motion picture under my belt for the effort. I don’t advocate that anyone pursue the quirky, serpentine route that I followed to make that movie, but it does help prove two of my pet theories about films: 1) No one knows anything, and 2) You must make your own way on this journey.

My calling card to the world of film-making was also my first foray behind the camera. No film school. No short film paid for with the money set aside for my braces. Just a wordy, static think piece that went against most of the established conventions of American film. It garnered

a few awards and got me over to the Cannes Film Festival, which was about five thousand miles further than I had ever allowed myself to dream. So it goes. One success story in a million. And I have no idea how I did it. Each day I just went out with a small group of talented, committed people and worked away at it, setting up each shot as we went and finally, days later, a film existed. True, it was a pile of rushes that had to be waded through, but it was in there somewhere. And so far, some four films later, that's the way it always seems to go. You go to work, you listen to everybody, you make decisions and, eventually, you start shooting. It doesn't matter what the budget is (I've worked with everything from \$25,000 to \$25 million), you always need a little more money and a lot more time. You always spend up to your means, and then a bit more. It never seems to get easier (or much harder, for that matter) and the pressure always seems to be about the same: steady, constant, noticeable.

The process of film-making still feels new to me and so I remain something of a zealot. I love what I do and am thrilled that I have the opportunity to do it on a semi-regular basis. The controlled chaos that is a film set has become addictive to me and I long for it when I am away from it. I still haven't found a useful set of rules to follow, to get to that next step in my 'career'. Actually, I'm not much of a planner. The idea of a 'five-year plan' is almost laughable to me. I can barely plan the next five minutes. But I do know that I'm going to keep at it. If I can't follow in the direct footsteps of Elia Kazan or Eric Rohmer or Federico Fellini or Sidney Lumet, then I'll have to make my own way. I've been doing it a few years now and it seems to be working. And that's the best advice I can give, I suppose. Keep going, believe that it's not a matter of 'if' but 'when'. Don't take 'no' for an answer. 'No' simply means ask again or ask somebody else.

This is the best I can do. To tell you that if I can do this, God knows anyone can. Your greatest weapon and virtue is yourself because there is no one quite like you. Before I begin to sound like Oprah I'm going to shut up, but I will tell you that this is it. There are no rehearsals, no do-overs. The world has never been more open to different ways of making films, different formats of presentation, different voices calling out with new ideas about technique and content. Whether it's *Dogma 95* or your grandmother's Super 8, the world is poised and ready to have its collective breath taken away. People like Harmony Korine, Paul Thomas Anderson, Todd Solondz, Lisa Cholodenko and Vincent Gallo are out there pushing the envelope. Folks like Steven Soderbergh, The Coen Brothers, Todd Haynes and Atom Egoyan have already pushed through and are on their way to the next envelope. Are all these people just genius-freaks, dripping with talent and so completely different from you and me? Well, yes, they are talented, no doubt. But most of them are also just hard working dreamers who refuse to give in, give up or give way. They start from scratch each time out, fitting the format and film stock to the needs of the dream. The dream is all.

As this collection shows, contemporary American and Canadian film-making is rich and varied. Many of the directors included here no doubt started by taking polaroids, playing with images and ideas, and worked hard to bring their visions to the screen. So begin to dream... tomorrow may be too late.