



Founder's Award Winners Director's Interview

Fall 2014 North Carolina Film Award

Michael Weinstein
If The Trees Could Talk, Director
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NCFA: Are college courses necessary, and if so, where did you go?

Michael: College courses are very important because it gives you the foundation that you need. In college, you will learn about media theories, how stories and messages affect audiences, use of equipment, editing software, writing, and you get to study other filmmakers and their films. I attended Adelphi University as a Communications Production major where I was awarded with Best Creativity in Film & Video. If it weren't for college courses, I would probably have a limited knowledge of foreign film and classes that greatly impacted the film industry. I now see how I've grown as a filmmaker because I really don't like most of the films I've made in school (laughs).

NCFA: What are some qualities in yourself and others that make one suitable for film directing?

Michael: You have to be a good 'parent' to the film. What I mean by this is that you have to love what you're working on...it's a part of your being-it's your baby. You have to know exactly what you want. Film is a collaborative medium so you must be able to take in ideas from the

talented people around you but never compromise your vision. Never take the easy way out because you will only sell yourself short.

NCFA: Was there a particular event or time that you recognized that filmmaking was not just a hobby, but that it would be your life and your living?

Michael: Absolutely. I knew since I was eight years old I wanted to entertain people through film whether it was to make them laugh, cry, or even scare them. I went to the movies a lot as a child and I thought what could be better than creating tangible worlds on film. The turning point in my life was when I won the Grand Prize of the 2002 Showtime Youth Video Festival. My very first short "Runaway Wallet" aired on Showtime and was featured at the Museum Of Television & Radio. At this moment, not only did I love making movies but I discovered that I was good at it!

NCFA: Is it harder to get started or to keep going? What was the particular thing that you had to conquer to do either?

Michael: Everyone of course wants their first film to be great but it takes work to really master your craft and become a concise but effective storyteller. The hardest part is to keep

going and maintain that motivation. There are so many, young talented filmmakers whose films sometimes blow me away...it can be intimidating actually. It's becoming more competitive than ever because of the available technology, social media outlets...everyone has access nowadays so you must produce something really special that stands out from the rest. Sometimes, it can be discouraging especially when you're trying to raise money for your next project but at the same time, doing the best you can is a success in itself.

NCFA: What was the most important lesson you had to learn that has had a positive effect on your film? How did that lesson happen?

Michael: The most important lesson, as I mentioned earlier, is DO NOT COMPROMISE. Don't let budget, technical or time issues detour from the story you want to tell. I remember for one film, I cut out a scene because of time issues. I didn't think it would be that big of a deal but when putting the film together, I wish I could have gone back in time to make that scene work whether it be limiting shots or dialogue. As a director, you must be a problem solver and lead your troops through the storm. On the first day of shooting "If The Trees Could Talk," we had a lot of scenes to cover. Most of them were action scenes too. All of the scenes were critical, so I refused to cut anything out just to save time. Of course, I may have reduced the shot list but I spent so much time and money on the film, it must be the way I envisioned it. I am proud to say that film has realized my vision almost completely.

NCFA: What are personal attributes that make for a good filmmaker, and what do you do to foster them?

Michael: Personal attributes that make a good filmmaker are the three P's: patience, persistence, perseverance. You must realize that nothing happens overnight and you are going to hit a lot of bumps in the road but if you are dedicated to your project, things will work out. You can never give up even when you think you've done all you can. People around you are resourceful and share the same passion as you. Furthermore, I suffer from OCD a great deal but it can be useful when making art; you seek perfection and nothing less. If you have all these aspects, nothing can stop you.

NCFA: When you get angry at a movie, what sets you off? Are there common qualities in cinema today that you dislike? Is there something you try to subvert or avoid or rebel against in your work?

Michael: The most frustrating thing to me are reboots and remakes. There are so many amazing films that are not recognized because they are independent and not mainstream. At the end of the day, it all comes down to money in Hollywood and what could sell. If it's not about a superhero then it's a remake of a classic film that should be left alone. It's embarrassing to me that it's come to that because it's lazy...it seems like the independent world is really the only venue with original content that leaves an impact on people. I also dislike the fact that some films spell everything out for the audience. I like an audience to wonder what happens to a particular character. It makes the audience interact with your film and become a part of it rather than a witness. Towards the end of my film, I wanted the audience to question what happened to a particular character rather than reveal everything.

NCFA: We get noticed because of our successes – but we create them on the back of our failures. We learn best from the experiences where it doesn't work. And yet we still only discuss the success, not the failure. What failures (of your own) have you been able to learn from? How did they change you and your process?

Michael: People close to me have seen me grow as a filmmaker and noticed that each film reaches a new level. I believe you must fail in order to become successful because if you're not learning from your experiences you're at a standstill and the work suffers. I look back at my older work and often cringe. I ask myself, "why did I write that scene in such a way, or why didn't you correct that actor's delivery/performance?" I've learned to become a better editor as far as pacing for the storytelling. I remember one film was practically ruined because I didn't level the audio properly. I've learned lighting a lot more since earlier films with scenes too dark, etc. I feel that I've become a better writer which is the most important because writing is the foundation for all films. You can have the best equipment, actors, etc... but if the writing suffers, it all collapses. Most importantly, as mentioned earlier, **DO NOT COMPROMISE YOUR WORK.**

NCFA: How did your parents take to your desire to becoming a filmmaker?

Michael: I have the most supportive parents in the world. They knew my life was focused on entertaining people somehow. When I told them I wanted to be a film director, they were behind me all the way. Originally, I wanted to be a special effects makeup artist (ex: horror films) and they would take me to specific movie magic stores where I could get supplies and practice creating makeup effects. My dad would purchase almost the entire store for me

so I could be the best artist I could be. Shortly thereafter, I discovered that I liked all aspects of filmmaking so I asked myself, "why not be in charge of it all?" Since then, I've been making films and my parents even invested in most of them. I honestly could not ask for more loving, supportive parents whom I dedicate each film to.

NCFA: Do you have a day job?

Michael: I am actually a director and stage manager for a major television news network. Although it's not filmmaking, I still get to work in the industry as a television director for live programming which is a rush in itself. I never take for granted that I got to be a professional, paid director in some capacity. I am a freelancer who works four days a week, dedicating the other days to my filmmaking life.

NCFA: What did you learn from this project? Both the positives and negatives. Remember this will be read by a lot of first-time filmmakers, so you can get really detailed if you'd like.

Michael: Remember, as a director, your job is to articulate your vision so those around you can bring it to life. You can't do everything yourself. I've learned the hard way with other film projects. I used to produce, direct, shoot, and even AD my other films. I would think about miscellaneous issues which would divert my energy from my job as the DIRECTOR and the work would suffer. I would worry if we had enough cups on the catering table while directing an important scene. By surrounding myself with members who have amazing and specific talents, I was able to tell the story I wanted to. I had a production designer, costume designer, and co-producer which I never had before. I can't tell you how proud I am of "If The Trees Could Talk" because of the

amazing collaborative talents that surrounded me. Actually, many of the crew members and artists created a film more epic than I envisioned.

You don't have to be a control freak in order to get your vision. Everyone is on the same team and has the same goal as you- to make an incredible film. I also really encourage table reads with the actors because sometimes the dialogue in your head does not make sense when spoken aloud through the characters. Everyone would contribute their thoughts to make the scene more effective. This is really important to do at a table read rather than on the set wasting time trying to figure it out. In other words, collaboration is most important thing to succeed in this business. Take advantage of all the talents around because they can offer something you've never thought of.

NCFA: What limitations does a movie director have, in example can he also work as an editor or cinematographer as well as a director on a film?

Michael: So far, on all my films, I've been the writer, director, producer, and editor. I especially love editing the film because that's where your film comes to life piece by piece. It's definitely the most exciting part for me. Remember, you can't do everything yourself. There are so many talented people that specialize in certain aspects of filmmaking which can make your vision come to life.

I was the director and cinematographer for my 16mm short "Heart At War" and I would never do that again. When you are your own cinematographer, it takes away from your direction. The time you spend on lighting design, you can be giving your actors direction

and getting the performances you want. It's self-defeating because if you're doing everything, you won't have time to actual master the position you really want (ex: being a director).

NCFA: How does where you live influence how and what you make?

Michael: I was born and raised in New York where independent film is taken very seriously. There are also millions of actors and artists living in the city that you have access to. In New York, there's Broadway, independent film, television, etc. There is no reason you can't make the film you want to. However, it is expensive making a film in New York but I never let that stop me from making the film I want. That's what great about making films today: you don't have to live in a major city like L.A or New York to make a great movie (but it helps).

NCFA: Is the film business fair? Why or why not? How do you make the apparatus work for you?

Michael: The film business is very political especially nowadays. There are so many talented people that do not get recognized because at the end of the day, it's who you know; sadly. It's so important to self-promote because no one else will for you. I spend several hours a day posting work, films, and updates on social media just too constantly "get out there." It's not easy and usually takes years to build a crowd. I believe everything happens for a reason. If you work hard, make the film you want, you will have succeeded no matter what.

NCFA: Is it the filmmaker's responsibility to find and develop your audience? Why do

you feel that way? How will you collaborate with your audience, and how won't you?

Michael: In the independent world, it really is up to the filmmaker to develop and find your audience. It takes work! A lot of work! I am constantly promoting my work on Facebook, twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, etc. Honestly, I would have no idea how to get my work out if it weren't for the social media venues. The fact that you can upload your film for the world to watch is a miracle! Trying to stand out, however, lies the challenge because there are so many other artists doing the same. I really didn't get much of an audience until my latest film "If The Trees Could Talk." It's so important to collaborate with your audience. It's because of them your art is being shared by thousands. I offer prizes or memorabilia from the film when someone reaches 1000 likes, or 1000 views, etc. It's also important to join groups on social media that share the same interests; just to spread the word.

NCFA: What role have film festivals played in your life so far? Why are they necessary? How do you get the most out of them?

Michael: Film Festivals are absolutely amazing! I love them because it gives you the opportunity to not only screen your film in the theater (which is a dream in itself) but you have direct contact with other artists you can collaborate with. Film Festivals are the nuclei for networking, advertising your film, face to face contact (people remember you), and finding a possible team player for future projects. There are also workshops in festivals where you can learn more about your craft from experts. Some say why not just put your movie on YouTube instead of the film festivals but I disagree. Your film needs to develop a reputation especially when it comes to well-known film festivals. It makes your credentials more credible especially if you win awards.

Having film festival laurels on your film not only is honorable but gives merit to your film if your goal is to sell it!! Anyone can post their films whether great or bad, but getting into film festivals makes life in the industry a little bit easier. Film festivals put many great filmmakers in the same room giving you access to the best in the industry.

NCFA: Now that control and scarcity don't define the Entertainment Economy, but superabundance & access do, how does that change things for creators? There are 45,000 films generated globally annually, and the largest consumption market in the world – the US – currently consumes only 1% of the output. Recognizing that, are you changing the way you work, changing what you create? How? Why? Or why not?

Michael: The fact that professional digital cameras and editing software are accessible is fantastic! When I was younger, I was so frustrated that my Hi-8 camera images didn't look like a real movie frustrated the hell out of me. I am so happy to be part of a generation where you can make a film look professional without spending millions of dollars. It's quite magical actually. Now you can use the same editing software Hollywood uses right at home or on your laptop. I'm thankful we're in the generation of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube where you can actually share your work with everyone. However, because of this access, it leads to greater competition. Everyone has access to making a movie so the competition is very high. It's discouraging sometimes but I wouldn't want to be a filmmaker in any other generation.

NCFA: If there is one or more thing you think would make the film industry better, what would it be?

Michael: Originality would make the film industry a lot better or at least more interesting.

NCFA: Do filmmakers have any responsibility to culture? Do you feel that being a creative person requires that you give back or tell a particular story or not do something else? Why or why not?

Michael: I think culture makes us who we are as individuals and artists. It certainly affects the art we produce. However, to build an audience, you have to make what sells to the culture. People are also very touchy and politically correct nowadays so you have to be careful what content you make today. I try and make the movies I want to make regardless. You must be true to yourself first before reaching out to the world.

NCFA: Did you make this film for yourself or for an audience in mind while writing it?

Michael: I made this film for several reasons. I really enjoy studying that particular time period. Sadly, all the Holocaust survivors will perish soon so it's up to educators and filmmakers to keep history alive. As time passes, people know less and less about this horrific event so it's important to bring to share it with audiences. However, there are hundreds of Holocaust films so I had to make this different by adding a 'supernatural' aspect.

NCFA: What makes a film great for you? Are there certain qualities that make a film better for you?

Michael: A great film should have an original concept and be character driven. I have to really like a character so I can be immersed in their "life" for two hours. The movie has to have depth and not give everything away.

NCFA: It is said that there are only six stories. Maybe twelve. It's all been done before. And we have seen it all. What do you do to keep it fresh? Is there anything that you can do to subvert the process to keep it original?

Michael: It's getting harder every day to come up with original ideas. However, you can take a concept that has been seen before but put a new twist on it. For example, I know there are many Holocaust films so I wondered how I could make it different but still convey a powerful message. I was able to blend a 'supernatural' fiction to real time in history which really made a Holocaust period film stand out from the others in a remarkable way.

NCFA: Films evolve through the creative process – sometimes most dramatically in the editing process. It's often really hard to reconcile the difference between what we desired and what we achieved. How have you encountered this and how do you move through it?

Michael: Yes, it is difficult sometimes. You have a vision in your head for months and of course you want the end result to reflect it. Sometimes time, budget, and weather are fighting against you so nothing will be perfect. For example, I really wanted this sundown, silhouette shot of the family running...my heart was set on it but it was a timing issue and the sun didn't set behind the hill they were running. I envisioned the car scene with specific shots but car mounts were expensive so I had to come up with a different plan. I would say that I achieved 95% of what I wanted which I've never done before.

NCFA: Are you on social media and do you use it in your work? Why or why not?

Michael: Social media is your best friend as a filmmaker. I use Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, and YouTube on a daily basis to promote my work. If it weren't for social media, I would have no idea how to introduce my art to the world. Also, I am able to network with filmmakers all over the world. It's fantastic living in a generation where you can share your films with the world and for free! I wouldn't want to live in any other time as a filmmaker.

When I got started there were two screens: the movie screen and the television screen. Now there are also computers, tablets, and phones. And screens are everywhere: the home, the bus stop, the elevator, the taxi cab. As a creator how does this affect the stories you tell and how you tell them?

What's amazing is that there are so many media venues, it's impossible to not find an audience. It's fantastic because your work really get out there. However, it's much scarier to watch Jurassic Park and King Kong on a big screen as opposed to your iPhone (not really as effective). I wanted to be a filmmaker so my films could be seen on the huge, silver screen with incredible surround sound. That's the dream! Watching films on small devices is not as exciting. Nothing is better than watching a movie in the theater...nothing!!

NCFA: Have you done any other films before this? If so, how many others and what format did you shoot it in? If not, how did you convince these guys to go in on this project (esp. if done w/ favors)?

Michael: I have done several award winning films before this one, including "White Knuckle" and my first film "Runaway Wallet" which aired on Showtime. "Erie Road" was shot on 24p p

which looked like film back then and "Heart At War" was shot on 16mm film. "If The Trees Could Talk" was shot on the Red Epic in 5K. "White Knuckle" was shot on the Red One camera (the first in the series). All the others was show with High-Def cameras or digital cameras. When I was in college, we only had digital cameras that weren't HD yet...so the quality is yucky compared to today's standards. If I had the money, I would shoot everything on 35mm film. That's my dream! A lot of people focus on the technology and the image they're getting as opposed to the actual content of the story.

NCFA: How did you finance your first feature/short film?

Michael: I financed my first film by asking family members for money, investing my own money...but my first short hardly cost anything. As far as this film is concerned, I needed a lot of money (\$30 K). I was more successful raising \$5 K by approaching people at work and friends rather than social media campaigns. I raised a couple of grand from Kickstarter and Indiegogo but everyone uses it now so it's hard to stand out. However, I had a difficult time raising the remainder of the money so I invested my own money which I don't recommend. Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices to make it happen and I have no regrets.

NCFA: What kind of salary would a director expect to make in the independent scene, or is it completely dependent on the success of the movies?

Michael: It is very much dependent on the success of the film. Rarely will anyone give you money upfront or a salary to direct a film unless it's a Hollywood film. In the independent world, everyone wants their film to be successful so

we make them and hope we can make a living doing what we love. It certainly can take a long time for that to happen (realistically).

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NCFA: Film, perhaps more so than any other popular art form, is the compromise between art and commerce. How has your art been shaped by both the money you have had or not had? Do you create with budget limitations in mind?

Michael: That's what's great about writing a book. You can create any world you want with endless imagination. When you make a film, you have to be realistic about what your budget can afford. I write what's in my mind first and then I worry about the limitations after or I come up with an alternative creation. Since I'm trying to discover what film I want to do for my first feature, a lot of investors want to know if it's going to sell....what sells? Sex, horror movies, comedies, etc.? If a story is dear to your heart but not marketable, people will hesitate giving you any money. NEVER SELL OUT! I'd rather make the movie I want than to just do what's in economic interest. It's as important to be a good artist as it is to be a good business person. You are constantly marketing yourself.

NCFA: Is it possible to sell out? What would that mean to you and would you like it to happen or not? What do you do to encourage the professional approach you want?

Michael: I would rather have my film sell out in sales than to sell out my artwork. In other words, like I always say, do not compromise your work. Tell the story you want to tell! Be true to yourself but do it in a way that relates to an audience.