

MAKING IT BIG ON THE INDEPENDENT FILM WORLD

WITH DARREN COYLE

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino society. With Owen Shapiro. Today on Kino Society, we have Darren Coyle, an independent director who has worked in all aspects of television and film production in New York City, Washington, DC and Los Angeles for the last 16 years, fully concentrating and producing True Crime television and other unscripted content. Most recently, Darren wrote and produced his own short film called chasing sunshine, which was featured in various film festivals. Want to know more about the indie film world? Listen up. Welcome to the show, Darren?

Darren Coyle 00:42

Sure. Well, first of all, thank you for having me. So yes, I'm a writer, director, and producer, I got my start actually working in television of all things. Way back about roughly 16 years ago, is around 2003 2004, when there was a big boom of reality TV shows. And so there was a lot of there were a lot of jobs at hand. So I started off as an intern, and then that moved into a PA or production assistant position. And then I just kind of worked my way up the ranks working on a bunch of different reality TV shows in New York City. And then with all with the understanding that I eventually wanted to make it out of reality TV and make movies. So that's where I was headed. And I basically considered all of my work on the reality TV shows kind of my film school, so to speak, you know, just like learning on the job learning from whomever would talk to me and about, you know, talk to the cinematographers about their gear, and their cameras and talk to sound guys about their, you know, their gear and how they do their job. And that kind of a thing. I just tried to absorb as much as I possibly could. So that eventually, I did start making some like, like, short, you know, short movies. And the first couple of them were really bad. And that's just the way it goes. But you learn, I approach everything as a learning experience. So that it's okay to make some mistakes. But as long as you don't make them twice, then you're doing okay. And eventually, I made my way out of New York, I was in DC for a few years. And then now I'm out in Los Angeles, I still do produce television. But now it's mostly true crime shows, that's kind of the niche or genre so to speak. That's the job that I do that really helps to pay the bills, my bread and butter jobs, so to speak. And, but you know, when I can, I'm an independent filmmaker, and I write a lot of scripts. And sometimes they get made. Sometimes they don't, and they sit in a drawer. But that's the that's also the way it goes. But I finally made a couple of shorts that I was willing to show other people and they got

into some festivals and stuff. And then a couple years ago, I had an idea for a movie, I really wanted to make a feature. So I approached my friend, Cassie Thornton, who is an actress and a fellow producer of reality TV shows. And I kind of pitched her the story idea. I showed her the script, and it was for my movie chasing sunshine, which she was into, and she was gonna play the lead. And that was kind of my big foray into feature films. And we were able to scrape enough money together to shoot it, and post produce it. And now it's out there in the digital world. And people can go see it on go rent it or buy it on Amazon, or they can go to chasing sunshine movie.com and rent it or buy it there.

Owen Shapiro 04:15

So you never actually went to any university or anything you just learned from the people around you. You were working.

Darren Coyle 04:23

Well, I did go to college. You know, right out of high school, I went to a school called Connecticut College, which is a liberal arts school. I mean, they didn't they didn't have a film program or anything like that. So I double majored in English and theater. I come when I was a kid, I have like a theater background as a theater kid. But no, I didn't really have any formal training and film or anything like that. Anything that I've learned, I've learned, you know, through experience or through a reading of just reading a book. I mean, there's how hundreds of books on how to make films and direct films and shoot films and stuff like that. Some are crap, some are good. Some are in the middle of that. But yeah, never had any real formal training or anything like that.

Owen Shapiro 05:14

Do you think that English in theater might have helped or affected your work at all?

Darren Coyle 05:19

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the English I mean, an English major, I mean, outside of the literature, part of it, and reading, you know, reading books and stuff like that. It also helps you to write it, it teaches you how to write and how to effectively get across your ideas to someone else who's starting from scratch, they don't know what your idea is, they're in your, you've got a blank canvas. So you need to be able to effectively and concisely express yourself and what your ideas are, so that other people understand what you're talking about. And if you can't do that, you're not going to get very far as a writer or as a director, because no one's going to know what the heck you're talking about. And, and it's not going to go, you're not going to get very far, you know, and then the theatre background itself is just, it enabled me honestly, to have a small, at least a small understanding of every aspect of that of how like, you know, play production happens, whether it's props, or you know, sound or costumes or anything like that gave me a pretty good background, knowledge about that kind of stuff, which is something that you really do need to know, you don't need to know how to do it well, but you need to have at least some knowledge about it. So that again, you can talk to others intelligently about it. And also, it helps you to talk to be able to talk to actors, as a director, it's important that you're able to talk to actors, and you can talk in their language, you know, about characterization and intentions, and all that good stuff so that you don't just so you can't just say, okay, go in there and do a good job. And I really want a lot of energy, like an actor doesn't know what to do with that. So you need to give very precise directions. So they're going to give you what, what you need. And

Owen Shapiro 07:21

you talked about how you start in reality TV, what was the transition from reality TV to film? Why?

Darren Coyle 07:31

Well, I mean, it's a lot of the same skill sets. I mean, you've got a lot of them, you've got, you know, same crew, you've got cameras, you've got lights, you've got all this other stuff. It's just when you're doing reality shows it's a lot more Veritate or just stuff that's really happening live in the moment. And you have to just follow it and cover it, the difference in the transition between that and to like scripted film, is that for scripted film, there's a lot more planning involved. And you're you're not exactly you're hopefully not working, you know, by the seat of your pants, you've got you've done a lot of pre production, and you've planned out all your stuff, so that there's not a lot of element of chance. So the the thing is, there's a lot more work, there's a lot more work to be had in reality TV and unscripted television and documentary television and stuff. So and there's fewer jobs in film, which is one of the reasons why I don't really work in studio films, I work in independent projects. There's a lot of the skill set that bleeds from one to the other. But in a sense, I kind of have a foot in both of those worlds, currently. So I don't know if I transferred completely out of TV eventually is the goal. But we haven't gotten that far yet.

Owen Shapiro 08:59

So what about the so you've done short films, feature films and television series? Have you done anything? Any television series outside of reality TV?

Darren Coyle 09:11

Well, I mean, I don't consider true crime to be reality TV so to speak. I consider True Crime a more like documentary programming. I mean, we're probably splitting hairs. And a lot of people probably do consider that to be reality programming, but I have worked on a bunch of different documentary projects, whether some for TV and some, a couple of actual documentary features as well. So and that's a whole different ball of wax, scripted film and scripted TV versus like, unscripted documentary stuff. I mean, they're, they're both fruit but they are definitely apples and oranges.

Owen Shapiro 09:53

Yeah. So what about short films and films particular what's the different experience between those

Darren Coyle 10:02

Well, a short film, as, as you can imagine, from its name, is generally, you know, somewhere around five or 10 minutes long, you know. And so it's something that you can probably shoot in like two or three days. So you could actually like you can get, you can scrape a couple bucks together, you can get a crew together, and you can probably shoot it in a long weekend. And then when you expand that, I'm not saying it's easy to make a short film, by no means but it does take less time to shoot it, obviously, because you have less content in your movie at the end. But when you expand that out to a feature film, which is anywhere between 60 and 120 minutes long as you can imagine it, it takes all this stuff from a short film, and multiplies it by 20, or 30. So that way, when you're making a feature, you're shooting, maybe 2530 days, maybe even more than that, like, you know, like the Avengers movies and

stuff like that they shoot for like six months, just because of everything that's involved in it. But you know, you're smaller features that are a little more dialogue heavy and just have fewer characters. You can shoot in a month. But I mean, it's all the same skills and all the same practices that you're doing, it's just, you know, multiplied many times.

Owen Shapiro 11:42

So what about the movie, you just worked on what was filming that one like?

Darren Coyle 11:48

Well, that was a bit of a roller coaster, just because we had a shoestring budget. And and, you know, we had lots of content to shoot, but not too many days to shoot it in just because of our budget constraints. So we really had to plan it out. And make sure that whatever money we did spend on it, we were spending it wisely and spending it on smart things that were going to get us good return for it. So in this particular case, we had a lot of driving shots in chasing sunshine. So we had to do, at least one of our days was spent with a car on a camera car that was on a trailer rig behind it. And we had a lot of lights and a lot of cameras and stuff like that. And we had a bunch of scenes to shoot in the car. Now there's other ways we could have done that using special effects or, you know, a green screen or something like that. But I really wanted to have more of an authentic feel to it. So we drove around LA for a day, and did a bunch of scenes in the car. And that way you have you know, the real things going by them. And they're actually, you know, going up and down the street. It's a lot more realistic for the actors. But that was something that we didn't really plan on. At first, when we were first putting everything together. I think we would just like guerilla style, steal the scenes and just have the DP in the car. But as it turned out, it was really a safety concern for the actors, as well as all the other people driving around. So we wanted them to not have to worry about driving and acting at the same time. So that was a difficult day. And it was an expensive day. But for most of the other days that we shot, I did my best to plan our days out so that we didn't have too many surprises. And I'm one of our executive producers. Christie likes to say we'll fix it in pre A lot of people say oh, we'll fix it in post meaning post production meaning in the Edit. But she and I are on the same mindset we we like to we like to fix it before it starts, which means we plan ahead in pre production so that those sort of problems don't pop up. But we had a very small crew, we had a very small cast. So we it wasn't luckily we are able to move have company moves from one location to another without too much fuss. And one thing that I one thing that I really tried to do when I was writing it was to write it so that it was something that was producible. I didn't write any scenes that take place at the top of the Empire State Building, or there's no scenes that are you know, happen on a yacht or something like that. It was all practical locations that I knew that we'd be able to have that too, as well as the car. And, you know, stuff like that. So, it there is definitely the possibility for chaos. But I'd like to think that we avoided it by just being smart and planning ahead.

Owen Shapiro 15:16

So what was the movie about?

Darren Coyle 15:18

So chasing sunshine is a couple buddy movie that it takes place. Basically, during a road trip, the two main characters go on a scavenger hunt. So they go from location to location, solving clues that lead

them to the next location. And eventually, at the end of that, search is supposed to be Darcy's secret admirer. And so that's the basic plot of the movie.

Owen Shapiro 15:56

Yeah, where can people watch this movie?

Darren Coyle 15:59

Well, they can go to the website chasing sunshine movie.com. Or they can also find us to buy or rent on Amazon. And we're working on getting on to more more and more platforms. But at this point, those are the two platforms we're on.

Owen Shapiro 16:17

So you obviously don't write direct and produce every project you work on. So how was it that you were assigned projects before?

Darren Coyle 16:25

Ah, well, they kind of find you. If when you work with other people who make movies, eventually, at some point, your friend will be making a movie or your former colleague will be making a movie and they need a first ad, or they need. They need someone to help with, you know, grip and electric or something like that. And so or they want you to read their script and give your notes on it or something like that. I think it kind of a lot of jobs kind of come through osmosis through the network of people that you meet upon reading and writing and working on, on projects. And I'd love to tell you that there's some sort of magical sauce of how to get jobs. I mean, there's plenty of God knows there's plenty of websites and stuff like that, of people looking for crews and or producers looking for writers or directors and stuff like that. I personally have never got a job through any of those websites, which doesn't, it's not to say that they don't work. But honestly, mostly, it's just through people that you know, and I'm not saying that, like you have to go to all these cocktail parties and like work the room and like, give out all your business cards and stuff like that. This is mostly like, just people that I worked with on other projects, and like six months later, they're like, Oh, hey, I'm, I'm making this short, or I'm doing this commercial? Are you available these dates? I'm looking for people. And honestly, that's the way it works. And you got to put it out there too. I mean, you gotta you got to give your friends work when when it's available as well. But yeah, that's kind of how it happens.

Owen Shapiro 18:15

So do you think that's writing something yourself or producing it or directing yourself helps with writing, directing or producing is

Darren Coyle 18:25

a well, yes, it's a double edged sword. If you're directing a project that you wrote, and you're producing it, then I don't want to say it's like your baby, but like, you have a lot more personally invested in it, than most of the other people who are working on that movie. So which is a good thing and a bad thing, a good thing means you're very motivated to work on it, and you'll work on it, you know, 80 hours a week, and make sure it gets to be the best it can be. And that also means that you know, the project inside and out, you know, the script, you know the story, there's not going to be too many surprises there. But

at the same time, and I found I find this every once in a while other people are not going to care about your movie as much as you care about your movie. So sometimes, especially if you're dealing with a small budget, you want things to happen faster and better than they are happening. And you can bang your head against that wall all you want, it's not going to change anything. You know, if you're waiting on an editor or you're waiting on a color correct or something like that, that person is not as motivated as you are to make your movie. They're getting paid. It's their job. But so. So sorry to be wishy washy on the answer, it's a good thing. It's a bad thing. You know, some days it's a great thing. Because when things go well it's your project and you can feel pride in that. That's a lot of that's really nice thing is when you actually work on one of your own projects ends up good and other people watch it and like it, and it's a good feeling of pride. At the same time, if it crashes and burns and you fail, that's also on you. And you have to own up to, to those failures as well. I mean, you learn more from failure than you do from success, but it doesn't feel doesn't feel as good. Certainly.

Owen Shapiro 20:30

Of course. So do you have any favorite projects that you've worked on?

Darren Coyle 20:34

Well, that's like saying, who's your favorite child? You know, they're, they're all, you know, special and wonderful in their own way. Even the stinkers. But I will say this, there's a, there's a short film that I made each like 10, eight or nine years ago, I wrote it, it wasn't, it's not a comedy, a bunch of my stuff are comedies. This one in particular was not. But I recently acquired a camera, an HD SLR, I was working at a production company, doing True Crime shows, and they had a bunch of equipment that I could borrow for free. And so I wrote this script, it was way too long, it was like 30 pages long. And I just said to myself, I'm going to make a movie, and I'm going to shoot it. Like, I'm going to like, literally be the director of photography on it and everything. And I had never done that before. It was a real, it was a real, you know, taking a chance. But at the same time, it was a short, I wasn't spending a lot of money on it. There was basically just two actors in it. So and I knew I was in over my head, but I figured, you know, screw it, I'll just jump in the deep end, and we'll see what happens. And I ended up shooting it over a weekend. And I did it myself, I shot it myself. The end result was exactly what I what I was trying to shoot. That said it was great. But it actually did edit together according to plan. The cinematography of it was serviceable. And I take that as a compliment. But so I guess that was one of my, and no inside. I did it didn't get into any film festivals or anything like that. Like, I had a screening for a bunch of friends and stuff like that. They all, they all said that they liked it anyways, because they're nice. And they're my friends. I didn't think it was terrible, but it wasn't great. But the important thing there is that I took a chance. And I put myself out there. And I did a bunch of things that I didn't know I could do. And I learned a lot from it. Which is kind of as a filmmaker, I think what you need to do a lot of people are reticent. They go well, how do I make a movie? what's what's the first thing I should do? Blah, blah, blah, I say just just go make a movie. You've got an iPhone or you know, or you know, a camera in your phone, make a make a two minute movie with your phone about your dog, follow your dog around the house for a day. So that project was called Sleeping Dogs was like my just like jumping in the deep end kind of moment, so to speak. And I'm glad I did it because it taught me a lot. And I think that as any aspiring filmmaker needs to do, you have to sometimes just do that. Just go for it. Yeah.

Owen Shapiro 24:00

What are some of the mistakes that you really made in the past that you think that you can learn from now though,

Darren Coyle 24:06

in the past, I have underestimated the importance of good sound? A lot of people Yeah, well, a lot of people, when they're making their budget, they look at all their budget lines and whatever. And they look at all this money that they're spending on audio and they go

24:22

well,

Darren Coyle 24:24

you know, my brother can do that. He doesn't know what he's doing. But he can he can press some buttons and point a point on microphone in the right direction, you know, and so they you cut corners like that, not that I've done that necessarily but I have I have had some bad sound in my day, especially working in TV. And when sound when the audio is bad, it's bad. And the audience will check out if the audience if you're if you're, if your camera work and your cinematography is a little Weird are off or out of focus. You can explain that away, as you know, oh, well, that's just the style. If the audio is bad, your audience will check out within literally 60 seconds or two minutes. They'll just literally say, Oh, well, this is the work of amateurs. I don't really want to waste the next 90 minutes of my life watching this crappy little film, I'm going to turn it off or change the channel or whatever you do. So I would say, that is a that is a big mistake that I think a lot of people make is not not caring enough about audio and not spending the money on audio to get good audio. Yeah, I

Owen Shapiro 25:44

definitely see that. For example, I do read a lot of reviews for films. And people rarely ever mentioned audio. It's so such an underlooked aspect of film.

Darren Coyle 25:55

Yeah. Well, if you don't notice it, that means the audio guy did his job. Yeah. If you do notice that that mean, that means they didn't do their job, or at least they did do their job, but they did it very poorly. It's because it's Yeah, it's just one of those things where it's just like, if you don't notice it, that's a good thing.

Owen Shapiro 26:15

All right. So this will be my last question for you today. Are there any movies that inspired you or stood out to you? Ah,

Darren Coyle 26:24

well, um, yeah, there's a couple Actually, I'll name two. There's one movie that lots of people know called swingers, it came out, I don't know, roughly, like 20 years ago, or something like that. I formed Amazon, early 90s, or late 90s. That was one of the first movies I watched where I thought to myself, Oh, this isn't an independent movie. I can maybe do this. As opposed to like, up until that point, I've been watching Ghostbusters, and Raiders of the Lost Ark and stuff like that. And I didn't look at those

movies and say, Oh, I can do that. I just said, Wow, that's an awesome movie. Isn't Harrison Ford cool. But swingers was like one of the first movies I watched where I was like, Oh, this is a funny, quirky movie. I think I can do this too. If you just sit down and, and write some funny dialogue. And you you know, these are just like five dudes, you know, hanging out in their living room. And now I'm, you know, watching it on HBO, or whatever. So that was one movie that really kind of like, not influenced me so much as style or artistic, you know, integrity, or whatever you want to call it. But like, it did open my eyes to the fact that, you know, I could be a filmmaker. And then another movie that I watched. It's called Blue ruin. I think it came out roughly, I want to say 10 to 15 years ago, it was a real indie movie, clearly, they, you know, had a very small budget, they they kept it very simple. It's very simple storytelling. The main character doesn't even I think the main character doesn't even talk until a half hour into the movie. But it's very good visual storytelling. with not a lot of with not a lot of resources. Like, you can just tell it was a small budget and movie. And when I say that, I don't know what their budget was. It was probably somewhere between 507 \$150,000 something like that. Maybe less, I don't know, maybe a little bit more, I don't know. But what they did was they just made it a very simple story and told it very visually. And it was a compelling story from beginning to end. If you are listening to this, and you you should go check it out. Blue ruin. It's an awesome movie.

Owen Shapiro 29:01

I've heard of that one.

Darren Coyle 29:03

Yeah, you should check it out.

Owen Shapiro 29:04

I know it had its poster ripped off, ripped off by another movie blew up. I think 1917 completely ripped off this poster. Oh, really?

Darren Coyle 29:14

Okay. I'll have to take another look at that.

Owen Shapiro 29:16

So yeah, thank you so much for your time. It was greatly appreciated. Thank you all for tuning into Canaan society. See you next time.