

Hollywood Makeup Artist Reveals the Secrets of Creating the Perfect Movie Look with Donald Mowat

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino society. With Owen Shapiro. Today's guest is Donald Mowat, it's one of the film industry's most sought after makeup artists. He has served as makeup department head and designer on such films as The Fighter eight miles sicario Nightcrawler, Prisoners, Nocturnal Animals stronger Blade Runner 2049. And as a personal makeup artists of Daniel Craig on Skyfall. And Spectre recent work includes first men and The Darkest Minds, let's get to know everything about the makeup world, the film industry. So now, Donald, you're clearly a master on the makeup field. But how did you realize that this was truly your passion?

Donald Mowat 00:47

You know, I think it's, it's definitely a passion. And I think that you just, I don't I think the best way to explain it to people is when you, I think when you get to be quite good at something. I mean, that's suggesting I'm good at it. But I think when you're young, and you're starting in a particular craft, I think once you start to confidence, people tell you, you're good. And I think that's really what fuels that passion. You know, once you you get a sense of it. So that's really the only way to describe it. Because I wouldn't have lasted for 35 years, if I didn't have bash, it's too hard. The film is too hard for any job in it to last for 35 years if you don't love it. So it's always been a dream of yours, basically to work in the film industry. Yeah, I mean, I think it was, I think I love films, and I love them from a very early early age, maybe more than most people. But it seems to be a common thread of most filmmakers will tell you whatever it was 789 10 for me was around probably seven or eight. And certainly by 1213, I knew I wanted to work in theater or movies or TV. So yeah, I would say it was a dream. And I didn't believe it was I guess as many young people don't believe it's a reality until it becomes a reality. Because it's so far removed from the way I grew up. Or, you know, the environment I was in. I never knew anybody who worked well, I did actually, I knew a sound very good sound next to the live next door. So I knew it was a real business. Does that make sense? You meet people who actually, you know, because everybody's got a parent who's a nurse or a teacher or a doctor, you know, a mailman, or a hairdresser, but you never meet anybody who's in the film business till you meet them.

Owen Shapiro 02:42

So let's now deepen on your work. Could you just describe exactly what a makeup designer means?

Donald Mowat 02:48

Well, I mean, I think it's, it's not really self explanatory, because I think a lot of people see those shows on television like face for the reality shows, I think what you're, you know, highly fabricated, I think are makeup artists, I mean, is in a sense, and a makeup designer is more somebody who conceptualizes can go to a director, and the producer and be able to present having read the script, an analysis of the characters, maybe drawings, photographs, references to say, you know, we're doing is this what you're looking for? Is he this person that looks scruffy and terrible? Or is this person does she look, you know, does she look like a secretary from Queens? Or, you know, I mean, it's all in stereotypes, isn't it? So I'd

say that's really what the job is. And of course, then you have to be able to do the actual makeup. So whether it's beautiful, or, you know, mess, beat up, you've got to be able to do it all and or at least aspects of it. So prosthetics, you know, so I kind of work a little bit and everything. But that would be the job as you work up in the industry started as a junior, he worked mostly with the background or crowd, then you maybe do second unit. When I started, it used to be you worked, theater, went to television commercials went to feature films. And it's still very similar to that. But commercials were the entry point into feature films because they were film and television was considered, you know, more videotape, exceptional television shows. So that's a whole other story. But yeah, the job is you're there to help the actor and director tell the story. You are there as a kind of a it's not an sillery you're there to really you perform a craft that is cohesive, it's part of the storytelling the way the costume is or the props or anything else. I think we're just a bit more intimate because we work so close. So the actor um,

Owen Shapiro 04:51

how much of it would you say is the vectorization How much would you say is the vision of the makeup artist?

Donald Mowat 04:57

I work with certain directors who I know Who I think have a very definitive, very distinct style, which I like I like it when it's their vision. They're in charge, that sort of thing. Because there's no, there's no room for mistakes. I think I also work with people who are extremely collaborative, who is a little bit of what I think what they think. Sometimes that can go awry. Sometimes too many people can be involved. But I like collaborative. I like working with Denny Villeneuve very much, because it's collaborative. But it's also insightful and he makes you work, he challenges you to do very good work, and try something that you may not necessarily think is a great idea. So it's a little terrifying. I've worked on jobs where they don't, the director is not that interested in the makeup. And that's okay. They might be a director who's more interested in the writing. And it's like cinematography or sound, every director is different. Some are focusing on things that don't involve or they don't want it to be part of what they're doing. They just rely on your expertise to do what you do. And you're invisible, which I also don't mind. Because sometimes I feel like it's the highest form of respect, where people let you do your job. Many of us in my job feel that the newer generation of filmmakers are a little either too indifferent, or they're getting out of their lanes too much. And people are, you know, jumping around and other people's areas too much. Which is never a good sign to me.

Owen Shapiro 06:41

What's the difference between a makeup designer and a makeup artist?

Donald Mowat 06:45

Well, the makeup artist will be part of the team. The makeup designer is the head of department. So in the US, we usually say makeup department head, it's shifting a little to the European standard of makeup designer, which is a more British term. I think that's become it is slowly shifting, we used to be called the key makeup and now the key makeup is the Assistant department head. It's the business has changed tremendously of what we're calling people, which a lot of it comes from our unions, a change, generational change. I think moving like even things like new media I never heard of, but that's a real term of new media for certain types of TV shows, I guess on the internet. So makeup designer makeup

or makeup artist is part of the team, a working member of the team who is assigned. The makeup artists is not responsible to speak to the director or cinematographer or producer only the H od or designer would be that would be their job. The key is the next person under the H od.

Owen Shapiro 07:52

So going back to your role in the movie. Could you describe a typical day in the life of a makeup artist? I mean designer?

Donald Mowat 07:58

Well, it's a hard You know, it's a very hard life because it's European before most people I think only transporter and before us so makeup hair are the first ones in last ones out. A lot of preparation, you might start your call time might be 4am. You might have to leave home at 230 or three in the morning. You could be on early days, you could be on nights where you're starting at 6pm starting at 6pm work until 6am then the next day you're starting early so it's a very hard I can't say it's an easy job because it's not and film filmmaking in general is not for sissies. I mean, you have to be tough, you have to have a lot of you have to be enthusiastic, but you need to have a lot of stamina. Because the hours are killer. They're just killer and, and it doesn't get easier I would say. So today's Are you know you can start a day a short day for me is 12 hours, I'm really happy to work. I love where they take me off. If I'm staying on location, they pay me out at the hotel it perfect for me would be 7am get back to the hotel at eight or 9pm I'm very happy. When I get back at 11pm I'm miserable, and I start to get cranky. But that's a typical day. We work very hard, I think a lot of pressure, a lot of stress, but I think most of us love it.

Owen Shapiro 09:24

So is there a specific procedure that you follow when doing a director's makeup?

Donald Mowat 09:29

Well, no every movie, you know, it's depends on the character on the actor. I've been on films where it's very quick. It's very, we're doing the most basic corrective makeup on a leading man or leaving lady and it's so simple. I mean, it takes 20 minutes half an hour. It just makes them look better. And then you're doing something more complicated with continuity or the film is shot out of sequence not chronologically, so you're always having to reference notes or pictures of what you did or mud or dirt or You know, but every day is different, which is the beauty of it why people love I think the industry because unless you're on a TV series, most of the time you're doing something different. Every job,

Owen Shapiro 10:13

most of it is following the rules of the director.

Donald Mowat 10:16

Well, I mean, yeah, I don't think it's rules. I mean, I think you're following up. I don't know, you could be doing something like 1917. My good friend, Naomi Dunn designed the makeup. Brilliant. But that was hard. I mean, that was following a set look in chronological order, but not shot chronologically, having hundreds of people ready with all the mud and dirt and once and be prepared all the time to shoot. Or you could be on something like a comedy where you're doing

Owen Shapiro 10:46

is there any makeup so that you like doing most, I

Donald Mowat 10:49

probably like working on things based on reality. So for instance, I like things like Blade Runner 2049. Because I love the look, I love the style of it. I like the there's just something about it for me that I tend to like we used to call it cinema variety or docu drama. I like things that are based in reality. I'm not a fantasy guy. I have colleagues who do brilliant work on things that I would never work on. And that's better for them. But we all have things we're known for. I don't work in caricature or comedies, much it's not what I really enjoy. I've done a few like years ago with m&m I did a couple of his music videos that weren't very heavy makeup caricature like we made you. But it was fun. And it's very challenging, but it's not really in my wheelhouse, like, say, SNL is not really in my wheelhouse, but I've gone and worked there before. But I like things more like prisoners or sicario. Or, you know, I'm just thinking of another movie nocturnal animals. Nightcrawler is one of my favorites, things that are based on real people that I can reference and, or recreating a world rather than recreating something that was already created, if that makes sense. So, I used to love period films, but now I'm not as interested in them. Because I feel like you're just recreating a book, rather than creating a new low ditch your login successful career,

Owen Shapiro 12:29

you have participated in a lot of low recognized films. And I'm curious to see if you have undergone this situation, an actor or actress or even the director is not happy with their look that you have just finished doing. How do you respond?

Donald Mowat 12:42

Well, I mean, it happens, I'm proud to say not very often, but it does happen, especially when you're starting out. You know, I think it's a very difficult, you know, I think what's very difficult to explain to people outside of this is that you have to separate you have two sons, you have an actor who is an actor, actress, whatever. And then you have somebody who's a personality. And sometimes when someone's a personality, playing themselves can be more difficult because they have expectation to look good, or to look better than they actually look. And that's a tremendous pressure. And then you have people who want to look a character. So that's really more exciting for me, but I have had it where somebody doesn't agree or they think, or they don't even give you the opportunity, they tell you what they want. And that's maybe their prerogative. I'm not so interested to work on those films. Hardly. I've I've seen friends of mine have to work on films, they have no input. And I think it's very demoralizing. Because then you think why don't I just go work at a bank if I have to work this way. But you know, the business is also very corporate. So you have a side, I learned that a lot of television when I used to do movies of the week, which they don't really make anymore. But when I started we had all these NBC, CBS, even HBO starting, where there was a lot of input from the studio, how people had to look. And this tremendous pressure for makeup hair costume designer, because it's the way they look. It's selling a product. And that was for me very demoralizing. Other people love it. So it's doing commercials, you have to love to do that. But yeah, I've had people say, I don't want to do that. I'm not interested in that. And you go, Okay, let's try something else. And sometimes you you're exasperated and go listen, I don't know what to do. I've tried five different things. But I'm very happy to say I very rarely have had that.

Owen Shapiro 14:51

So to wrap up your vision on your own profession. What is in your opinion, the most quality, the most important quality in it. a makeup artist or designer was inside performance.

Donald Mowat 15:02

Every time you read a script, every time you meet a director, every time you meet an actor, you have to see between the lines, you have to read between the lines anticipate, does the character need this? Does the character have that? You have to ask questions and be prepared? The director you never say no, you want to always be saying yes. So can I make him look like this? Can we make her look younger? Older, better? prettier? You know, bita? You have to be prepared to answer that question. And I think the most important thing is the anticipation and being prepared. You have to know what you're working on. You have to do the research. What films is the director looking at? What is his or her inspiration? So you ask questions to be prepared you, you do the homework before you walk in there. So you should know, you know, are you doing this type of film or that type of film?

Owen Shapiro 16:01

Do you have any films in particular that you think really influenced you or your love of cinema?

Donald Mowat 16:07

Yeah, I would say when I was very young, I obviously the exorcist because Dave Smith was brilliant genius, probably the most important makeup artists of our lifetime or my lifetime. And he died a few years ago. But I think that what he said on movies like taxi driver, those makeup designs and applications taxi driver Amadeus. Oh my god, I mean extra seats were stupendous. Then there were people like Wally Schneiderman who did the Elephant Man. I'm gonna say Barry Lyndon because the period makeups exquisit. Barry Lyndon is one of my favorite films I saw when I was I'll tell you, I remember. I was in grade six. And I saw it and I remember I was probably the only child in the audience but it was so beautiful and impeccably well done. And, and Brody who's still around and Brody lives in England now. She must be well into her 80s I thought her work was exquisite. I thought the makeup was exquisite the hair the color Millau Milan, about the Best Costume Designer living? Did those costumes were it's just a perfect film. I think Amadeus but there's also a lot of modern films, I'd love to know the wrestler and things that were really well done. But I get inspiration every once in a while this film you go, I can't get over how well done that was. And the Godfather. The makeup is amazing. Last of the Mohicans. I mean, there's so many, but I just think of Barry Lyndon is the one as a young person. I look back and going that was pretty spectacular.

Owen Shapiro 18:01

So what am I my favorite movies as well. It's one of the most in terms of cinematography, as well, one of the most gorgeous movies I've seen, if not the most gorgeous,

Donald Mowat 18:09

amazing. And they don't make films like that now, because it's too expensive. And it's too detailed. And you film you do a film like that in Europe or in Ireland or the UK. It's very, very costly. The costumes, the

makeup, the amount of people to do the work you see is very, we don't see that very often. So it's very impressive for what 1975 76 right. So

Owen Shapiro 18:33

now that you build a steady career in the film industry as a makeup designer, what's next for you have any projects coming up?

Donald Mowat 18:41

Yeah, I'm gonna start a little thing here in LA, with my old friend, Juan Fuqua interacting with Jake Gyllenhaal. We're gonna shoot here in LA, a very quick COVID movie very quick, very limited cast. Yeah, a couple things coming up. So, you know, we're trying to reinvent ourselves a little how we're going to make films in the pandemic for the duration, however long. So it's exciting. And Jake is an old friend of mine. We've done many films together. I've worked with Anton before. It's kind of nice right here in LA. To shoot very briefly.

Owen Shapiro 19:22

Yeah, so that's pretty much it. All right. So finally, where can my listeners find and connect with you?

Donald Mowat 19:27

I think people should go to Instagram. I'm always doing something on Instagram. I work with a lot of youth programs here in LA for BAFTA, la so people can find me. I'm always doing something outreach. If we're in the United Kingdom. I'm with the British Film Institute, BAFTA, London with the mentors program. It's called BAFTA crew, so people can find me on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, all that stuff. I'm trying to be Very modern and beyond everything. So yeah, check me out on Instagram. Yeah, that's basically the best way to find me and I'm always up to something. So if it's not filming, I'm involved in something else.

Owen Shapiro 20:13

Thank you so much for your time. And that's so that is all for today. Don't forget, you can subscribe to kidness society on iTunes and Spotify.

Donald Mowat 20:22

Okay, everybody, take care. Thank you for having me. Stay safe, as everybody says. But really Everybody stay safe. Thank you so much.