

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
FILMMAKER AND SCREENWRITER
ANDREW COHN
September 30, 2020
Host: Bryan Smith

Andrew Cohn (00:00:00):

I remember calling my wife and just saying, "I just got a phone call from Alexander Payne." And she said, "What?!" And I said, "Yeah, he read my script and I think he wants to direct it." And she said, "What?!" And I said, "Yeah, I know, right?" But I remember walking down the hill and thinking: I think this changes things.

Bryan Smith (00:00:24):

Bryan Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath podcast. Where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now, let's jump in.

Bryan Smith (00:00:42):

Andrew Cohn's on the show. Andrew is an Emmy award-winning filmmaker and screenwriter. His most recent film is *The Last Shift* which he wrote and directed, starring Academy Award nominee Richard Jenkins, Shane Paul McGee, and Ed O'Neill. The film was executive produced by two time Academy Award winner, and film legend, Alexander Payne. You probably remember Alexander from his films *The Descendants* with George Clooney, *About Schmidt* with Jack Nicholson, *Election*, *Nebraska*, and *Sideways*, among others. *The Last Shift* premiered at Sundance this year, where it was picked up by Sony pictures and released last week in theaters. I was lucky to see *The Last Shift* at Sundance, where I interviewed the film's production designer, Adri Siriwatt, but I wasn't able to connect with Andrew. So it was great to talk to him last week, right before the film's theatrical release.

Bryan Smith (00:01:33):

Andrew cut his teeth in the documentary world with films like *Medora*, produced by Steve Buscemi and Stanley Tucci, for which he won an Emmy. He went on to direct a series of compelling documentaries, including *The Warriors of Liberty City* produced by LeBron James. *The Last Shift* is Andrew's first narrative feature, but you would never know it given how adeptly he subtly weaves themes of race, class and identity into beautifully communicated, tragic performances from the cast. In this interview, Andrew talks about how his approach to documentary filmmaking helped him transition smoothly into narrative features, how he was able to learn the craft of screenwriting and filmmaking without ever going to film school, how he was able to shoot *The Last Shift* in 20 days and come in under budget, how he was able to secure A-list talent and producers on his first narrative feature, and how Alexander Payne got involved in the project; which was a burning question for me going into the interview, because I'm a huge fan of Alexander's work.

Bryan Smith (00:02:34):

For me, Andrew's approach to filmmaking is inspiring, because it's not centered around preparing to become a filmmaker with film school or masterclasses or books. Andrew just jumped right in and did it in a very trial by fire way, learning through mistakes, but also through friends and colleagues he met on that journey. Very early in his career he worked with some of the most talented actors, producers, and crew in the business. And I think the importance he placed on professional relationships put him on an incredible trajectory in the film world. So, without further ado, let's jump into my chat with Andrew Cohn.

Bryan Smith (00:03:10):
Hey, Andrew.

Andrew Cohn (00:03:11):
Hey there.

Bryan Smith (00:03:11):
How you doing, man?

Andrew Cohn (00:03:15):
I'm doing great, man. It's good to see ya.

Bryan Smith (00:03:17):
Good to see you. Thanks for making time for me.

Andrew Cohn (00:03:20):
Yeah. I'm excited to talk to you. I'm sorry we didn't get to connect at Sundance.

Bryan Smith (00:03:25):
Oh, you were so busy there.

Andrew Cohn (00:03:28):
I was?

Bryan Smith (00:03:28):
Yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure you were just inundated with press there.

Andrew Cohn (00:03:33):
It feels so long ago.

Bryan Smith (00:03:35):
It does, it feels like an eternity ago. And also there's this, I don't know the sense of like- That may have been the last festival where it was this COVID-free feeling of anything is possible, and we can go anywhere we want and there's no restrictions. And I don't know when we're going to get back there.

Andrew Cohn (00:04:00):

I think maybe you should print those t-shirts, Sundance 2020: the last film festival ever.

Bryan Smith (00:04:08):

It really was the last film festival. In fact, I think I read an article where there were COVID positive people at the festival and it's one of the theories of how it's spread worldwide, because of all the people that were there.

Andrew Cohn (00:04:23):

I was deathly ill when I was at Sundance and I am curious of whether I had COVID back then. I didn't have- I haven't had the- I've been tested since then, but I haven't had the, what's it called, the...?

Bryan Smith (00:04:34):

The antibody test?

Andrew Cohn (00:04:35):

The antibody test. But I don't know if you remember, but here in Los Angeles, there were large swaths of people that were getting sick the month up until that, and this was before COVID was coming out. And I was told that I had bronchitis, but who knows?

Bryan Smith (00:04:54):

Yeah. As I was listening back, I went and listened back to the Adri Siriwatt interview to prepare for your interview. And I'm listening to my breath and my- I was trying to hold back coughs in the microphone. And I was like: Wow, I was sick back then. So- And it was toward the end of the festival when that interview took place. So, it makes sense that maybe I caught something there.

Andrew Cohn (00:05:21):

She's fantastic. I can't even speak highly enough about the job she did. She's so brilliant. And yeah, a funny story, we were looking for production designers and Adri was in Chicago, which is where we shot the film. That's where she's based out of. And I got on a call with her and I said, "Oh, where do you live?" And she said, "Well, I split time between LA and Chicago." And I said, "Well, where are you now?" And she said, "Oh, I live in LA. I'm in LA right now." We lived two doors down from each other.

Bryan Smith (00:05:51):

Oh my gosh.

Andrew Cohn (00:05:52):

And didn't know it until we met, when I randomly interviewed her for the job, so...

Bryan Smith (00:05:58):

That's crazy. And I agree. She is a very impressive creative, from the standpoint that not only is she just super talented, but she's so understated and modest; the way she talks about her own skillset and the way she talks about luck and fate and there's- I don't think she attributes a lot of her success to her own talent necessarily, which is a testament to her character.

Andrew Cohn (00:06:25):

That's very Midwestern of her. I'm from Michigan and yeah. I mean, I think that we certainly connected that way, as you always want to push the credit, as you should, to others. And I think that she- We just had a great connection from the beginning and both wanted to make the same movie. And she understood the textures and the energy that I wanted the main space to be. She's so kind and she's so sweet, and she's just a great collaborator. I mean, I think her work speaks for itself. And I think that that's the kind of the way I approach my career is like, I love my work and I really enjoy the process and everything else that comes after it is great, but I almost just would rather allow the films to speak for themselves.

Bryan Smith (00:07:16):

Yeah. It's interesting how you phrased that, "I want to allow the films to speak for themselves." I was interviewing a director recently named Tommy Avallone, who directed The Bill Murray Stories documentary, and Ghosthead, and he's done some fun stuff, but he talked about this concept of sales. Like, if you're a producer or a director you're expected, to a certain degree, to sell your work, and this is why you should watch it. This is why you should make this or help me make this. And he said that he just is terrible at it. And he's just not interested in that aspect of it all. And so when people ask him, why should I watch this film? Or why should I help you make this use? He says, "You know what, don't bother."

Andrew Cohn (00:08:06):

Yeah, yeah. I mean, for me, it's also, when people ask me to dissect my work or to be critical or to analyze my own work: What does it mean? Or what are you- What stories are you interested in? And I can try, but it's, for me, filmmaking is such a spiritual thing. And I don't mean that in a religious sense, but it's just such an instinctual thing of how I feel in the moment, how I- What I'm interested in. Then it's hard for me to go back-

Andrew Cohn (00:08:33):

And yes, I'll find some themes that I'm interested in, but I'm really interested in characters and just seeing the world through their eyes and really allowing the audience- Asking questions, not pretending to provide any answers for some of these larger societal questions, but really letting an audience come to a decision on their own about how they feel about the movie, how they feel about these characters. And I think that that's important for me and that I kind of get frustrated in these- A lot of times when I do the Q&As afterwards, if people ask me questions that I hope that the movie answered for you. I don't...

Bryan Smith (00:09:16):

Yeah. Well, I think good art is supposed to provoke and evoke certain emotions and questions, but not answer things for the audience.

Andrew Cohn (00:09:29):
Exactly.

Bryan Smith (00:09:29):
And that's what I liked about *The Last Shift* is there was not an agenda of any kind in terms of, you obviously have this intersection of race and class and identity, that these themes of race and class are clear, but they're not agenda driven. They're very just character driven. And you feel this heartbreak for these characters because of the situations that they're in, and their own inability to be self-aware enough to see their own shortcomings. You know what I mean?

Andrew Cohn (00:10:07):
I mean, I think that that's come a lot from my documentary work, which is that I really- When I started making documentaries, I was really interested in just telling stories of regular people sort of living on the outskirts of society. Those are the films that I was really attracted to and I loved and- *Hoop Dreams* and *Harlan County* and *Go Down the Line*. And one of the things I realized when I started making films is, I wasn't really interested in finding a sort of a social issue. And then somehow searching for faces and people to kind of explore that social issue through, which you see a lot in documentaries. What I was more interested in is finding really interesting human stories and then listening to those stories and letting the themes and issues come out through them organically.

Andrew Cohn (00:10:58):
And so, whenever- And it's the same with my narrative process in terms of writing, I'm really interested in interesting characters and interesting worlds, and then listening to those characters and letting the themes sort of bubble up organically. So, I had an idea for Stanley the main character, I wanted to do something about this aging fast food worker who kind of takes pride in his job. And there's something kind of funny and sad about that, and this kind of generation of people that are in some ways left behind. I would see the clerk working at Walmart and just think what their lives were like, but the themes of white victimhood, and you identified class and race.

Andrew Cohn (00:11:41):
They really didn't start to bubble up until I really started exploring the character and thought, how would he think of this? What if he was in this situation? What would he say, what did he do? And that goes into the backstory, everything else. But I really just started from a purely character standpoint and then really listened to where he wanted to go and what if he was in this particular situation, what would happen? And that's where the themes kind of bubbled up. I didn't sit down thinking I want to write a film about white victimhood. Well, who could I- Who are some characters that can be mouthpieces for both sides of whatever argument, it was a much more sort of organic process for me.

Bryan Smith (00:12:24):

Yeah. I think the the duality of man is something that I'm fascinated by. This is a concept that we're all capable of good and evil, we're all capable of massive flaws affecting other people, like with the case of Stanley and the high school. And I won't give it away, but there's an incident in high school that is talked about in the film where they could have handled a situation differently. And they didn't; he and his friend, Ed O'Neill. But that duality of man- And especially with the Jevon character too. I think it would be easy as a screenwriter to write in Jevon as this heroic character who is being held back by the system, and he just needs to find a way for someone to help him shine and become who he is. But he's flawed himself. I mean, he can't even connect with his own child, he's not able to empathize with his girlfriend's situation. And so you have these characters in *The Last Shift* that, they're sympathetic, but they're also kind of aggravating at the same time. And it brings out the humanity in these characters and makes them, I hate using the word authentic, but it's more authentic that way, than if you paint it out, like maybe a movie producer in Hollywood would want you to tell this story, if that makes sense.

Andrew Cohn (00:13:50):

Yeah. I think that- I hope that that's true, and I think that that comes- A lot of the films that I was influenced by, Alexander Payne, who -crazy story of how he ended up being an executive producer on this movie- but he's always been someone whose work I've deeply admired. Because he puts forward these flawed protagonists, and you see Paul Giamatti in *Sideways*, you see George Clooney in *The Descendants*, these guys that are kind of bumbling their way through life and the absurdity of it, right? But they're deeply flawed characters. They're, a lot of ways, fucked up, which most of us are. And I think it comes from his really gravitating towards, I think a lot of European cinema, and you see a lot of antiheroes and things like that.

Andrew Cohn (00:14:42):

And so I always just was attracted to those types of films, and you don't know if it breaths any sort of humanity into them, but- Or authenticity, but I think it certainly makes them more relatable, I would hope. I think ultimately we go to the movies, because we want to see people like ourselves. And I try to find those universal attributes in all of my characters. We've all kind of felt like Stanley at some point, said something we didn't really mean and have regrets- And not that everyone can relate completely to him, but- Or like Jevon. I mean, there were certainly times in my life where I felt lost and didn't have a- It didn't feel like I had anything. Wasn't sure what I was supposed to be contributing, and was irresponsible and was trying to find my way in life. So, yeah...

Bryan Smith (00:15:43):

And I think too with a character like Stanley, what is so... What's the word that I would use to describe Stanley? He- Stanley is a character that, we may not see ourselves in him, but we've seen him. We've met him before.

Andrew Cohn (00:15:59):

Right. Seen him on the bus, or have an uncle, or...

Bryan Smith (00:16:04):

And you realize when you see what his social skills are and what his emotional intelligence is, you understand why he is where he is. Why he's spent 38 years in a fast food restaurant. He thinks he's funny, he's not...

Andrew Cohn (00:16:20):
Not quite all there.

Bryan Smith (00:16:23):
Right. And that kinda creates a humor in and of itself where the awkwardness of: Ooh, when someone tells a bad joke, you're like... You kind of feel embarrassed for him. And then you really scripted that brilliantly, where you wrote in these- Or I dunno, some of it was improv or if it was all in the script, but...

Andrew Cohn (00:16:40):
No improv in the movie.

Bryan Smith (00:16:41):
Just very like these mixed metaphors and these weird laughs at the end of his statements.

Andrew Cohn (00:16:50):
That was Richard. I mean, unbelievable.

Bryan Smith (00:16:53):
Yeah.

Andrew Cohn (00:16:53):
I'm sorry to cut you off. I just have to get so much respect to Richard Jenkins who is just unbelievable in this role. But yeah, sorry.

Bryan Smith (00:17:01):
Yeah, he really pulled it off, but the script, the way that these jokes were written, the way that these rifts were written makes everyone understand why he is where he is. So, it totally makes sense that he'd be there for 38 years and then where it goes from there and how it ends. And I won't give it away, but there really is no wrapping it up in a Hollywood ending, like a 'feel good' ending. And that's- There's some beauty to that. There's just, it's a heartbreaking beauty because that's the way life is. Rarely do you see a saga wrap up so clean and nice, like you see in a typical Hollywood film.

Andrew Cohn (00:17:47):
Yeah. I mean, one thing I love is the comedy's ability to sort of, I don't know... There's a way to get to truth in comedy that is hard to get any way other way. I really love disarming people with some of the comedy to bring them in as an entry point, and then sort of laying bare some hard, honest truth. In terms of the ending, and I wanted- It goes back to the original, my original sort of process, which is: What would Stanley actually do in that situation? And I think a lot of times I

was talking with my producers, a lot of my collaborators, we wanted to make this sort of anti-Green Book. Like, what is this- What are these relationships actually like?

Andrew Cohn (00:18:37):

And to take a very familiar premise, which is a sort of black and white two-hander where it's like the white guy teaches the black kid responsibility, and the black guy teaches the white guy how to loosen up. And take- Like, what if you took that and just totally flipped it on its head and made something that was just more honest, just like a little bit- Not a little bit, but just more nuanced and honest about the world that we live in. And these two people that are seemingly worlds apart on the surface, but when you actually- And this is what the movie I hope does get into the politics, and get into where they stand in the world, actually have much more in common than you would think and much more to gain by coming together rather than these political forces that are constantly pulling them apart.

Bryan Smith (00:19:41):

Right, yeah. I think that's a powerful message in the film and it's definitely not an agenda item, but it certainly is a takeaway that they- If they would just see beyond their own shortcomings, and this is more on Stanley than it is Jevon, but- Because I think Jevon was ready to be open to learning from Stanley, whatever he had to offer, but Stanley just wasn't there and probably was just emotionally incapable of that, in that last scene, of doing anything other than what he did.

Andrew Cohn (00:20:19):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:20:20):

And it's interesting too, going back to your documentary background, I watched Medora and the first four episodes of The Warriors of Liberty City, and there's some parallels, I think, between The Last Shift and these documentaries; in how you explore character and how you really don't focus on the importance of the neat ending that's tied up in a bow. What it does for me, as a viewer, is it just adds a lot of emotion, because you're seeing- Especially in the Medora documentary, these are some of the most downtrodden... I mean, these people are living hard, hard lives, and there is almost no hope that they're going to make it out of this town. And if they do, whatever has happened to them in this town is going to be- They're going to be burdened with that trauma their whole life.

Bryan Smith (00:21:26):

And maybe I'm overstating it when I say trauma, but it is a tough, tough life that they're living in this small town. And you just kind of lean into that despair and follow these kids around, and their mothers and their deadbeat dads. And you realize that the story isn't about whether they're going to, in a Hoop Dreams type of way, win the state title at the end, that's not what it's about. And so you're not getting that neat ending. And you're- The payoff is not going to be there in that way. But the payoff is understanding these characters like you will not understand any other filmmaker's attempt to show their humanity.

Andrew Cohn (00:22:15):

Yeah. It's about getting to know people and walking in their shoes for 90 minutes, getting invested in them. And I think that- I remember when my co-director- I would watch their games, and just for your audience to know, it's a documentary about a high school, one of the worst high school basketball teams in the state of Indiana. It's in this very downtrodden town called Medora, Indiana, about 500 people. I remember watching the games, and they hadn't won a basketball game in a couple of years, and the movie is kind of about them trying to break this losing streak, which the stakes couldn't be lower. I mean, whether they win a game or not, it makes no difference in the grand scheme of things, right? But I love those stories. I love- It's about the small victories. It's about- I just remember watching the games after being there.

Andrew Cohn (00:23:08):

I lived there for six or eight months when we were filming, and towards the end they'd get so close and they'd lose. And I would- I was so emotionally invested and I was behind the camera, and I just kept telling Davy, "If we can get the audience to feel how we feel, they're going to root for this team as much as we are." And that was always the approach of just presenting these characters and all their wants and all their flaws. And I love that kind of bittersweet feeling you have at the end of a movie. Where, I will give away the ending, they win the game. They win a game and they break the streak and it's an incredibly joyous moment. They go for a ride around the town on top of the fire truck. But there's a sadness to it too, that this is maybe the highlight of their lives. This is it.

Andrew Cohn (00:24:05):

And I think that's been a kind of a through line. And I think that goes back to just wanting to tell American stories. And I think that America has such a bittersweet- There's things that are heartbreaking about this country, and then there's things that still, in my opinion, make it the greatest country in the world. Which is an unpopular thing to say, but we are deeply flawed, but people are striving every day to be better and to progress their lives. And they make mistakes and it's messy, but in pursuit of that, I think there's such great honor.

Bryan Smith (00:24:43):

Yeah. So how did that Medora story come together, and your involvement with Steve Buscemi and Stanley Tucci as producers?

Andrew Cohn (00:24:54):

It was pretty- We, I- My co-director Davy who I've known since forever, we grew up together. He showed me the article, which was by John Branch, who's a great art writer for the New York times. He had written the article about this town, and Davy and I just looked at each other and just knew that this is it. This is the movie we were born to make.

Bryan Smith (00:25:17):

Davy Rothbart, right?

Andrew Cohn (00:25:18):

Davy Rothbart. Never made a film before that. I'd done a short and Davy was doing found magazine, but just felt like this is it. We moved there, and yeah, like I said, lived there for six months making the movie. And really, that was kind of like my film school, was just making that movie from beginning to end. And shot it and did a lot of editing on it.

Andrew Cohn (00:25:36):

A woman that Davy and I went to high school with named Rachel Davies, she was a producer on the film. She worked for Steven Stanley's company and showed them some of the footage very early on and said, "I'm doing this little documentary with a couple of buddies I went to high school with." And Steve just was very, especially Steve, was very taken with the kids. And yeah, it just kind of snowballed from there, and put a lot of time. And that movie was not a straight line, it was a lot of going back and forth to Medora and really learning on the fly. But at the end, the movie did really well, it went on to win the Emmy and sort of launched my career as a full-time filmmaker.

Bryan Smith (00:26:19):

Yeah. And the through line, I think takes you all the way to Warriors of Liberty City as well, where you're not necessarily focusing on any particular outcome- Although I'm only four episodes in, so maybe it's gonna change...

Andrew Cohn (00:26:35):

Oh, you're right though. Yeah, no, you're right.

Bryan Smith (00:26:37):

Maybe it will be a Hoop Dreams episode six, but the depth of your exposing what is happening behind the scenes with these families and the struggles that they're going through. Same thing with Medora, with the Warriors of Liberty City, there's just this immense amount of humanity that comes out of seeing what's happening behind the scenes. And you have polar opposites in terms of, you have the garbage truck driver and I forget his name, but he's the head coach of boom squad. And then you have the guy that ripped the uniform off his son after a game, because he was pissed off at a call that was made.

Andrew Cohn (00:27:17):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:27:20):

He's really struggling too, but they all have- It's like the duality of man, you have this capacity for being super annoying, but also charismatic and engaging. And you care about all of these people despite their flaws, but you really empathize, especially with these kids who are just fricking adorable kids, who are in this situation where this might be the only way out of a really bad economic situation, is sports. And at least that's what I'm taking away from it so far in the first four episodes.

Andrew Cohn (00:27:59):

Yeah. I mean, I think there's a power in just sticking your nose in there and showing what people are, how people are living in. You don't need to explain it, you don't need statistics, you don't need to give a lot of backstory. I think audiences, especially American audiences, watch a lot of TV and digest a lot of media. They're very savvy, once they're in the room with these people, that they can pick up on these internal conflicts and things that you typically see on a societal level. You see on the news or you see people talking about it politically, but when you really just open the back door of some guy's apartment and go inside and see what's really going on, these statistics and these larger social issues become much more palpable than when you really get to know somebody and understand what they're going through. And, as I said, hopefully see some of yourself in these people.

Bryan Smith (00:29:03):

So your background is creative writing in college, right?

Andrew Cohn (00:29:07):

Yeah, yeah. I initially went to school, I wanted to be an English teacher. That was my goal. And I got sidetracked originally I was doing screenwriting. And then had some minor successes after college in Los Angeles and got frustrated, and turned to documentary just because I sort of lack the resources to get my foot in the door. And I probably lacked the patience too to get my foot in the door, on the narrative side at that time. And turned to the documentary and then fell in love with the form.

Bryan Smith (00:29:41):

Well, it certainly seems to be a more accessible way of making movies, when you can just kind of find a story somewhere and grab a camera. But how did you learn the skillset, and lenses and cameras and editing? I mean, you did not go to film school, right?

Andrew Cohn (00:30:03):

No, I didn't go to film school. I think one of the things that I learned really early on is that I wanted to lean into my strengths, and I wanted to surround myself with collaborators who could make up for my weaknesses. And so I really, from my creative writing background and doing screenwriting too, I wrote three or four, maybe five screenplays- Really bad, but it was really learning, really the nuts and bolts of storytelling and character development and structure, and really had a good grasp on those things. So I knew I had that, and kind of how to structure a story and develop character, that I felt confident in that. And, to be honest, Davy Rothbart, he is a little bit older than I was and is a very- Was a very seasoned- He did a lot of stuff with This American Life and he really- I don't think you can really... He was a kind of a mentor for me and he was my best friend, but he taught me a lot.

Andrew Cohn (00:31:15):

And then, I think applying what I had learned in screenwriting to my documentary work, I always just loved talking to people. I mean, it was just- My wife will get frustrated with me now, 'cause we'll stop at some gas station and I'll be talking to the attendant for 10 minutes about whatever happened in the football game earlier. I've just always been- Just had a curiosity about people.

And so I knew that I was like, I wasn't afraid to get my nose in there and just talk to people. And then if I had a camera, I was able to kind of put people at ease. And I have a pretty humble background, and I think that people see that in me, they don't see like a big Hollywood guy who's going to come in.

Andrew Cohn (00:32:01):

And I feel like I can gain people's trust and disarm them in a way that's sincere and genuine. I think people want to tell their stories. They do, they want to tell their story about how they see the world and their hopes and their dreams. Some people, it takes a lot more work to get them to the place where they feel vulnerable, will be vulnerable, will let you in. And I feel like that's my job as a documentary filmmaker, where you put the camera and what lens you use, and what kind of lights we- That stuff didn't really interest me. It does now that I have more grasp on the other things. I remember even Alexander Payne, when we would talk about *The Last Shift* he would say, one of the pieces of advice he gave me, which I knew early on and figured out was:

Andrew Cohn (00:32:57):

A film set is like a construction site, it's just- There's madness going on everywhere, there's people running around and people asking you questions. But in the center of it is this really, really magical thing happening, which is the relationship between the camera the actor and yourself. And you have to protect that. And I think I've always had that mentality of, like when I would go in- And even doing *Warriors of Liberty City*, which was a pretty big production, it's always about blocking everything out and making the connection with the human being. And that's what I've really taken pride on is putting the relationships forward and being a good collaborator too. I think that like my instincts as a filmmaker are not to jam my ideas down everybody's throat. That's just not fun for me. And I've been on the other side of it, it's awful. I feel like my job is to, again, know my strengths and my weaknesses, and then surround myself with people and really empower them to bring themselves to the process.

Bryan Smith (00:34:05):

The Alexander Payne connection that you have is, just from an outsider looking in, amazing. Just the opportunity to...

Andrew Cohn (00:34:16):

Inside, looking out it's amazing.

Bryan Smith (00:34:19):

I'm just like, I mean- When I was preparing for this and I saw that Alexander was attached to the project, *The Last Shift*, and that he was actually going to direct it at some point and decided not to, because of other obligations. I was like: Okay, how did that happen? But more importantly, what does it mean to you as a filmmaker to have access to that type of talent and creativity to help move your projects forward?

Andrew Cohn (00:34:49):

It means everything, so much confidence. This was after I did Warriors of Liberty City, I was very exhausted with the documentary form, and I think I even posted something on my social media of just how bored I was with doing documentaries at that point in my career. Warriors of Liberty City was a really hard production. We were in Miami, it was 115 degrees with hurricanes. Not only was it physically exhausting, but I started getting very political and it just got kind of ugly. And I was just exhausted. And at that point I just told my wife, I said, "If I'm going to make a narrative film, it has to be right now."

Andrew Cohn (00:35:30):

I got into this writing screenplays, I took a 10 year...10 years, sort of re-rerouted doing documentaries, which I love, and I will do more documentaries, but I just felt like now is the time if I'm going to do it I want to sit down and take the next year and write and finish- Write the script and try and get it made. And that's what I did. Every day it was my full time job. And I was back in front of my computer writing, which I just love, which is my favorite place to be in the whole world. And so I had a script and was starting to send it out to a few producers. And at one point I had gotten Alexander's assistant's email address to a friend, and I cold emailed Alexander's assistant and...

Bryan Smith (00:36:24):

Wow, that's pretty gutsy.

Andrew Cohn (00:36:26):

Yeah. Well, like I said, I'm always the guy that's sticking my nose in there, right? Just tell him I'm from the Midwest and I'm a huge fan, I'm in writing my first script and just sent it, whatever. Just hit send and didn't expect a reply. And lo and behold, one day- Yeah, this is three or four months later... I'm on a hike in Los Angeles and my phone rings and it's this unknown number. And I figured it's probably a bill collector, right? So I figured out whatever, I'll answer it I guess and see what they want. And it's Alexander, calling me from Greece and he says, "I just read your script and I think it's fantastic. And I'm interested in directing it. I know you want to direct it, I'm not much of a producer."

Andrew Cohn (00:37:15):

And so after that, we just really connected. I just think that he's brilliant and funny, and we just connected on a personal level. Just had a love for films and wanting to tell earnest stories in the Midwest, and feeling like that part of the country is a little misunderstood and yeah. And eventually he had to take on another project, and he's the one that put me in touch with Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa, who produced Election and produced Nebraska. And-

Bryan Smith (00:37:45):

Right.

Andrew Cohn (00:37:46):

-After that it was kind of off. We were- I think we went out for- We went out to Richard and I think in like six months we were financed, and shot the film last summer.

Bryan Smith (00:37:58):
Man, producer royalty.

Andrew Cohn (00:38:00):
Oohh...

Bryan Smith (00:38:00):
I mean-

Andrew Cohn (00:38:02):
You really- Albert and Ron those guys- I don't know if you're familiar with their work, they did Cold Mountain and they produced Little Miss Sunshine. You really, really start to understand what makes a great producer, which is, I think for a lot of filmmakers, is this gray area. Every producer has a different hat that they wear and these guys, man, they're so calm and they're so- They inspire so much confidence in the director and understand the role of the director, and understand their role as producers and know how to- When to push and when to pull and when to- Never once though, never once did they ever say to me, "Hey kid, we've been doing this for 30 years. Why don't you take our note?"

Bryan Smith (00:38:51):
Right.

Andrew Cohn (00:38:51):
Not a single time did they ever hold that over my head, or try and use it as leverage to get a note in or to make it. They let me make mistakes and you realize why they're so revered, you know?

Bryan Smith (00:39:04):
Yeah, well I think that the lack of ego lends itself to really great collaboration. And how can you have a film, how can you pull off a project like this without great synergistic collaboration? As opposed to some Hollywood producers saying, "We have to completely change the ending, this isn't going to work. We tested it with audiences..." That type of approach, you know?

Andrew Cohn (00:39:32):
Yeah, no, we- Everybody was rowing in the same direction, all wanted to make the same movie, and that helps relieve a lot of tension right there. But...

Bryan Smith (00:39:42):
I wish I could have been a fly in the air, as you got that call from Alexander Payne on a hike, to see what your reaction was.

Andrew Cohn (00:39:50):

I remember calling my wife and just saying, "I just got a phone call from Alexander Payne." And she said, "What?!" I said, "Yeah, he read my script and I think he wants to direct it." And she said, "What?!" I said, "Yeah, I know, right?!" But I remember walking down the hill and thinking: I think this changes things.

Bryan Smith (00:40:17):
Yeah, definitely.

Andrew Cohn (00:40:18):
I mean, I think this definitely, maybe changes things. Because I think until that point I was sending the script out, and you'd be surprised that script, it got a lot of really positive feedback, very positive feedback. But it also had a few people that were like, "Is this Green Book? This black and white two hander... I don't know. It's really funny, but I don't know about the ending... And I don't know who's going to get- What's the audience for this?" Or whatever. But then when he read it and was like, "I love this." I was like, "Oh, it is good. Okay. I thought it might be..."

Bryan Smith (00:40:59):
Talk about validation.

Andrew Cohn (00:41:02):
Yeah. And now I feel so much more confident that I can read something and know. But that was a couple of years ago, and I was still trying to figure out, find my voice and find out if I was any good at this. Because I was- I used to always joke failed screenwriters make great documentary filmmakers, but I don't know. Maybe it's the opposite now.

Bryan Smith (00:41:27):
So, how did the talent get brought in: Jenkins, and McGhie, and Ed O'Neill, Allison Tolman?

Andrew Cohn (00:41:35):
Well, Richard was always our first choice. I just always, always revered him as an actor. I just- Even Six Feet Under, I remember just thinking, "God damn, I love all the scenes that he's in." And then I remember, at one point, I rewatched The Visitor and I thought, "Yeah, that's the guy. That's him." The Shape of Water had come out and I gotta give his agent credit, she- I sent it to her, Rhonda Price, and she read it that day. He read it that night. He got back to me the next day and said, "I want to do this movie." It was that fast. And we talked- And again, he's a guy from Illinois, and we started- We didn't talk about the movie, didn't talk about the script. We talked about ourselves and where we were from. And he's from a little place in Dekalb, Illinois, and just connected on a personal level.

Andrew Cohn (00:42:38):
And even the first few months, didn't talk about the character really, talked about other things. And he was, I told him this the other day when we were texting or calling, I can't remember... Emailing! I just told him just how lucky I felt to have him, to go through this experience with him. He was so kind, he was such a leader. He never degraded me, he never made me feel like this

was my first film. He totally trusted me, wanted to make the same film. He was just sort of like the steadfast... It's interesting, when you're making your first film sucks, because you can never- You can't point to a film and just say, "Trust me, guys, I've done this before. It's going to be okay." So nobody- Everyone's nervous, right? Because you're just an unknown, right? When you have your lead actor in lock step with you, everybody else relaxes.

Bryan Smith (00:43:43):
Right.

Andrew Cohn (00:43:43):
Like: Oh, Andrew and Richard seemed to be working, this is working out for them. Everyone else kind of felt good.

Bryan Smith (00:43:52):
Well, yeah. I mean, that had to give them confidence with Jenkins, these multiple Academy Award nominations and Payne, an Academy Award winner, just having the street cred of those folks around you to back you up had to be amazing.

Andrew Cohn (00:44:07):
Yeah. I mean, that's exactly what it's all about. I don't know if- You know, Ed O'Neill told me, "I'm only doing this movie because Richard's in it." And I'm pretty sure Richard said, Richard's agent, I remember at some point thinking: Albert and Ron are doing this, Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa, so you're going to be in good hands. It's not going to be- It'll be a smooth ship. Shane Paul McGhie, I tell ya, there... I don't think there was an actor in LA that didn't want that part, that was that age. And a lot of people came in and he won that role. He grabbed that role and... I was kind of in denial about how good he was.

Andrew Cohn (00:44:57):
I kept thinking- It was between him and a couple other larger, bigger name actors. And I kept thinking: Yeah, but this guy, and this guy... And then my producer just kept saying, "This kid's really good." And I was kind of fighting it, 'cause I wanted somebody that- Who I recognize their work and I can point to. Again, it's like pointing to something and saying, "Well, they've done this before." And then at one point they just said, "Just watch his tape again." And I watched it and, just with no pretense, and I just thought: This kid is... He's the best out of all the tapes, right? But does he just audition well? I don't know any of this. And it was totally the right call. I think he is going to be a superstar. He just has this charisma, and it was so funny directing him and then directing Richard, they couldn't be more different actors to direct.

Bryan Smith (00:45:57):
But both of them are very nuanced though.

Andrew Cohn (00:46:00):
Very nuanced, but just in the way they take direction, I guess.

Bryan Smith (00:46:03):

Yeah.

Andrew Cohn (00:46:05):

And then we got really lucky with some of the- Birgundi Baker was in Chicago, she's from Chicago and had done The Chi. She's just unbelievable actress. I watched literally 20 seconds of her audition tape and I was like, "Yeah, that's her." Da'Vine Joy Randolph, I loved her. And I met with her and I wanted her to do the movie so badly, and then she agreed to do the movie was like, Oh God, she was so fun on set. And she is an unbelievable, unbelievable actress. I mean, she's so good. And then Allison Tolman from Emergence came on really late. She's from Chicago, and it's kind of this Midwest thing kept happening, right? Ed O'Neill's from Youngstown, he was like, "Oh, I totally get this town." And Alison was from Chicago and was like, "Oh, well, I'll come back to Chicago for a week and shoot." And Richard was from Chicago and was like, "Oh, it's shooting Chicago in the summer." I don't know if we would've shot it in Toronto, I think half of our cast wouldn't abandoned the movie.

Bryan Smith (00:47:10):

Yeah. Well, it's interesting, 'cause my connection, or my frame of reference for Allison is Fargo, the television series, which is Midwestern obviously. And all of these characters just have that vibe about them. And they're all nuanced. And that's why, when I was looking at the fact that it was categorized as a comedy, where I was kind of like: Yeah, yeah, it is a comedy... But it's so subtle sometimes. And also so tragic too. So, you have this- You really can't define it. It doesn't fit neatly in the comedy box.

Andrew Cohn (00:47:48):

That's interesting. You said- I remember some writer was like: It's a tragic comedy, or a serial comedy. And I was like, I don't even know what that- What is that? Did I make something that I don't even know what it is? It's not a dark comedy and it's not- I don't know if it's a dramatic comedy, a serial com- Whatever. It's- I love Alexander's ability to control tone and to go from laugh out loud funny- I'm thinking of sideways when Paul Thomas Anderson drives his car into a tree, versus the next scene, he's dropping him off at his house. And it's kind of sad, you know? I mean, I love that range that he has in his movies where you can- I think people go to the movies 'cause they want to feel something. I've always felt that. And you always will- I will always push for deep path that was in my movie, where you go there and you feel something.

Bryan Smith (00:48:45):

Right.

Andrew Cohn (00:48:45):

You laugh. And I think that a lot of the dramatic comedies that I saw, that I didn't like, were... They're not dramatic and they're not comedic either. They're not funny, and they're also not very dramatic. And what I wanted to do was make sure it was funny, right? Like them playing shuffle board with the meat patties. It's like: What is this? And then also deep moments of sadness.

Alexander, yeah, he was a great, great- He led me in that whole thing of, he really mentored me on my path, like how to direct a setup.

Bryan Smith (00:49:25):

Yeah. I can totally see it now that I know Alexander Payne is involved, I can see it because the comedic moments that you see, in *The Descendants* and *About Schmidt*, with his films are- It's the same type of vibe. You have this, these moments of sadness, where for instance Schmidt, loses his wife and it's a really awful loss and you feel it, but then he's writing these letters to his... "Dear Ndugu..."

Andrew Cohn (00:49:56):

Right. And throwing all her stuff out. Yeah, you're right. Yeah, or the next thing I'm trying to think, when he loses his wife and he's spreading the cream on his face, crying about it. And you're like, is this funny or sad? Or like, what is this?

Bryan Smith (00:50:10):

So, that's a great- What a great mentor or inspiration to have someone like Alexander Payne, but also carving your own path with going from the documentary world into narrative. And what a fantastic first narrative film. The producers, did they help you with budget issues? Because I'm wondering, as a first time narrative filmmaker, how you were budgeting for time and the cost of the set, which- You transformed this, I understand this falafel restaurant into this chicken and fish shack. And how did you figure it all out? And who did you get help from?

Andrew Cohn (00:50:52):

Well, when you don't have much money, it's pretty easy, 'cause you don't have any money to budget. No, I'm joking. I mean, we actually had a decent budget on this movie. I shouldn't joke about it. I was lucky to have a decent sized budget. I think that one of the things that I really learned was that the budgets are really a reflection of your priorities. And so a lot of it was talking about and me expressing to them, and them understanding it being my first film. And every film has their own challenges. What was the biggest challenge for this film? The entire movie was shot in 20 days, which I remember saying that at Sundance and there was this gasp from the audience of like, "What?" And I guess one thing working for us is that I wrote it very contained for a reason.

Andrew Cohn (00:51:54):

I wanted to write something that I could make. My original idea was, I was going to make this movie for \$50,000 with my friends. And so I wanted to write something that wasn't a lot of locations and there's not car chases. And then it was really contained, and it was something that was manageable for me on my first time directing. And I think that that was really important, was putting some kind of limits on myself and some barriers of like: Okay, most of it takes place in one location. That was one thing that made the whole process much easier for me on my first film. And then I knew that the movie would live or die on the performances. And I knew that if I was rushed, if I didn't have time to get the comedy and the timing and the pacing and the performances I need, we really had no chance.

Andrew Cohn (00:52:48):

And I think that the thing I'm most proud of, of the film, is the performances by the actors. I feel so confident in being able- I love directing actors and I was so nervous to direct actors when I went into it, and realized I really love it. I know there's a lot of directors that kinda don't really love directing actors. And I talked to a director friend of mine, who will remain nameless, he was like, "I fucking hate actors. They're so annoying." I love actors. I really loved directing actors. And I know some directors, they love cameras and lenses and that's their thing. And that's- For me, I really love working with the performances. I wanted to make sure I had enough time with my actors. We never felt rushed. We never felt like: Oh, we can't do another take, 'cause we got to go, go, go. I think every- We came in under budget.

Andrew Cohn (00:53:49):

We didn't- I think we went into overtime one day, but I think it was really about the producers understanding what the challenges were going to be for me as a first time filmmaker. And then really putting me in a position where I wasn't swimming upstream. But I think a lot of that, the foundation of that was in the writing, which was like the script fundamentally worked. So I wasn't, there weren't any moments where I was on set and you have that feeling where you're just, it's not working and it's just broken. And I felt like the writing was really airtight and I knew what I wanted to accomplish, I'd spent a lot of time on that script. And so, when I got time to shoot it, I was prepared. So yeah, it was a lot of different factors.

Bryan Smith (00:54:43):

It's interesting that you wrote it with that in mind, to make it yourself, or at least if you weren't going to make it yourself, have it more likely to be considered because it's not a huge budget film. Because I was interviewing a screenwriter named Bob Sáenz, and he he's written a bunch of stuff, but his most recent film is out on Amazon. It's called Extracurricular Activities, and he's a working screenwriter. And he wrote a book called. That's Not the Way it Works, and that's what I was interviewing him about. But his main advice to new screenwriters is to limit the number of locations, limit the number of speaking characters. If you have a character in a scene, make sure they're not speaking unless it's absolutely necessary, because boom! Cha-ching! It adds to the cost of the budget. And now that I look back on your film it makes a lot of sense, it's all one location. Except for a few other scenes, I would imagine the car scene, which I won't give away, but there's a car scene that had to be fairly expensive in terms of stunt coordination, perhaps.

Andrew Cohn (00:55:51):

It really wasn't.

Bryan Smith (00:55:52):

It wasn't?

Andrew Cohn (00:55:52):

No, no. It really wasn't. It was two guys with a rope and a door held on by some wood. Yeah. We won't give it away, but no, that was not- I mean, the- We had a day where we had to do trailer work in the car when they're driving around, which was a learning experience.

Bryan Smith (00:56:15):

But I would imagine though, if you're directing this thing and you have all these experienced producers that, whatever problem solving needs to be done, you have the resources right there. Maybe not on set, but at least at your disposal.

Andrew Cohn (00:56:30):

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think that yeah, I think that those guys- Right. That's exactly right. One of the things that we got really- A couple of things we got really lucky on, one: We shot in- Decided to shoot the film in Chicago, because of the tax incentives. And the time that we shot, it was sort of at the end of summer where we had this- All the crew members were done working on television for the year, and so we had an incredible crew. I mean, the stuff- Almost all my crews shot the new season of Fargo, and here they are shooting this tiny, rinky dink indie film, right?

Bryan Smith (00:57:07):

Wow.

Andrew Cohn (00:57:08):

And the best crew I could ever ask for. And I will try and shoot all my movies in Chicago, because one, if you will notice the day players, the actors in the movie are fantastic. Whether it's the woman that comes with the cheeseburger or the guy that plays his brother, or the guy that buys- Sells the car to them. I mean, it's a really great acting town. There's just a lot of great actors in that town that we had to choose from, which made it very, very easy. And the local casting director there was unbelievable. She was wonderful. But the crew was such an experienced crew and they were really rowing in the right direction. And I think a lot of it- Things come together in a way that- I don't know if we shoot that film in Nashville, or circumstances are different, but I think that the producers just made a lot of smart decisions. They've done it enough to know- Just the decision to shoot in Chicago.

Andrew Cohn (00:58:19):

And I just think- Like I said, I don't even know if Richard does the movie from that shoot in Chicago. They just really have a good grip on things so things don't become a problem. There was very few times on set that we would be like: Oh God, this is totally fucked, and what are we going to do? We don't have anything to shoot today. It was a very enjoyable experience making the film, which is rare, I think. There are certainly days I was exhausted, and you're sitting in the rain and it's not totally working. But when I got back to LA and we started editing, there was a lot of good stuff to choose from. I mean...

Bryan Smith (00:59:02):

So, once you have that final cut and you're satisfied with the final product what is- I mean, and you don't have distribution yet, obviously, because this is an independent film, independently

financed it sounds like. But what is the process for determining what festivals to- Well, first of all, do you want to go with the festival route or not? Is that even an option for independent filmmakers, or do you have to go that route? And if you do, what festivals do you focus on and why?

Andrew Cohn (00:59:35):

Well, you've got to go out to the festival to sell your movie. It's just the way it's done, just because- Just the way it works in terms of leveraging. And you're only showing it once, and it's competitive, and that's the way you drive up market prices. A lot of this has to do with the calendar and when you finish your film. If you finish at a certain time of year, you're looking at Toronto or Telluride or something like that. And we finished, and it was- Sundance was right there. So, it was an easy choice. So yeah, I mean, I think that, yeah, you want to take it to a festival. But yeah, I think it would- The plan was always a submit to Sundance, and I'm grateful that they liked the movie and that's what we had it premiere.

Bryan Smith (01:00:27):

So, you finished late summer, you finished your editing by end of September, maybe?

Andrew Cohn (01:00:33):

Yeah, that's exactly right. September, maybe even into October. I think we got a late waiver. And at that point it's all temp music and it's not- Hasn't been color corrected or anything like that. But it's starting to take shape. And then it's the worst experience of, you send it and you're just waiting. You're just like: Does anybody love me? I don't know. Does anybody care? I don't care. It's not going to be a big deal if I don't get it.

Bryan Smith (01:01:02):

Maybe Alexander's validation is all you need.

Andrew Cohn (01:01:05):

Yeah. And you know what, if this movie thing doesn't work out, then I can always go back and teach English, you know?

Bryan Smith (01:01:10):

Yeah.

Andrew Cohn (01:01:10):

Or I'll move back to Michigan and teach driver's training. But yeah. I mean, that's the thing, when you're... As a filmmaker, you just have these highs and these lows, you know what I mean? I think you have these moments- I'm working on the script now, or the characters in that world where one minute you've watched the movie and a rough copy. Like, "This is it, I'm so happy with it." And then you wake up the next day and you're hung over and you watch it and you're like, "This is so embarrassing. No one's going to like this movie. I can't believe I have the audacity to even write movies." That feeling never goes away. I remember I was talking to a friend of mine, Carol Bodie, who works in the industry. I was talking about that, she said, "I used

to work for Tom Cruise's office. And Tom Cruise is the most insecure human being you've ever met. He always thinks that every role is his last. He always thinks he's terrible." But that's something that kind of keeps- It's like an illness that keeps you going, you know?

Bryan Smith (01:02:14):

Yeah. Well, you need that motivation somehow. Otherwise...

Andrew Cohn (01:02:17):

Even if it's just panic and fear.

Bryan Smith (01:02:19):

Right, you're going to get complacent if you don't. So, do you have any projects, other than your in-progress screenplays, that you're working on that are about to come out, that you're excited about that you want to tell listeners about?

Andrew Cohn (01:02:32):

Not that I can really talk about.. I have a documentary that I've been working on for a really long time. And I wrote my next film, just went out to an actor... But nothing I can really speak on concretely.

Bryan Smith (01:02:47):

I see that Andrew Cohn is your handle on Instagram.

Andrew Cohn (01:02:50):

Andrew P Cohn, yeah.

Bryan Smith (01:02:52):

Oh, Andrew P Cohn, excuse me. And your website is seven34films.com.

Andrew Cohn (01:02:58):

Yep. That's named after my old stomping grounds in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Bryan Smith (01:03:03):

Okay, great. Well, Andrew, it's been fantastic connecting with you and learning about your process. Thank you so much for making time for us.

New Speaker (01:03:12):

Thank you so much for having me, Bryan. I really appreciate it.

Bryan Smith (01:03:17):

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