

Michele Ohayon

Michele Ohayon: I went into this project, wanting to show a way to release and heal pain through central dance. And I had no idea how much pain there was, which all came to the surface as I was filming.

[00:00:16] **Bryan Smith:** Bryan Smith here and welcome to the dream path podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world.

[00:00:25] My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now let's jump in. Michele Ohayon is on the show, born in Casa, Blanca, Morocco, and raised in Israel, Michele is an Academy award nominated filmmaker. Michele made her first film at age 19 and immigrated to Los Angeles where she has directed and produced numerous acclaimed documentary features.

[00:00:52] Michele has also written screenplays developed by studios, such as MGM, Focus Films, and Stars. She is also a guest lecturer at UCLA, AFI, USC, Georgetown, Wesleyan, Stanford, and Chapman. Given her extensive experience in film, this won't come as a surprise, but Michele is also a member of the Academy of motion picture arts and sciences. Michele's documentaries include "It Was a Wonderful Life" narrated by Jodie Foster about homeless women in America Academy award nominated "Colors: Straight Up", "Steal a Pencil for Me", "Cowboy Del Amor", "SOS: State of Security" and "Christina" about Michele's close friend who had cancer at age 37 and only five months to live, which is still streaming on Netflix.

[00:01:40] Michele's most recent film is the Netflix cinema verité documentary "Stripped Down, Rise Up", which follows the journey of a diverse group of women who heal trauma and body image issues through central movement and the art of pole dance. Michele made the film to inspire healing of all women through movement.

[00:02:00] In this interview, we talk about Michele's journey from Israel to Los Angeles and the logistics of funding producing and directing documentaries. We also talk about Michele's career in screenwriting and producing for major studios. What compelled her to shoot a documentary on the therapeutic power of pole dancing and the challenges of this particular shoot.

[00:02:21] I love it when interviews go beyond the guest's biography and touch on subjects that are challenging to navigate, and this is one of those interviews. And one of those challenging subjects was the male gaze and how the male gaze can objectify and even traumatize women.

[00:02:37] In this chat, we discuss how part of the journey for some of the women in "Stripped Down, Rise Up" involves moving through, and even nullifying the male case by taking ownership of their own sensuality.

[00:02:49] As a man who has never been on the receiving end of that type of objectification, it was enlightening to see that issue unfold in the film, and also hear Michele's perspective

on this theme that runs throughout the documentary. So, without further ado, let's jump into my chat with Michele Ohayon.

[00:03:07] Michele Ohayon, welcome to dream path podcast.

[00:03:10] **Michele Ohayon:** Thank you so much.

[00:03:12] **Bryan Smith:** We're here to talk about your new film on Netflix, "Stripped Down, Rise Up". I watched it very moving experience. I was not expecting that. I really didn't know what to expect actually, when I first turned it on, but it brought me to tears several times, especially during the scenes where there is basically just emotional breakdown that was happening almost like a therapy session in these dance classes. What was your intention going into this project in terms of the narrative that you wanted to capture and the story you wanted to tell?

[00:03:47] I went into this project wanting to show a way to release and heal pain through sensual dance. And I had no idea how much pain the way which all came to the surface as I was filming, I mean, as a documentarian, the style that I film, cinema vérité, which is basically you're a fly on the wall and you're observing, and the scenes unfold in front of your lens. And you feel so lucky to catch them. And so, as we started filming and women started sharing why they wanted to be in this room and why they wanted to move their bodies, there was a great sense of community that was created right there and then between the women, which allow them to be able to share deeper and deeper into their issues, which no one knew was going to happen. And once they felt that they were not alone and other women had other issues they were dealing with, they were feeling safe, both with the surroundings and with us, the cameras, we were a fly on the wall and, we created a very strong trust.

[00:04:54] We were all women in the room. My crew was all women and it just evolved. And it was really amazing to see how much women have suffered and still suffering in this century, the numbers have not gone down in whether it's a real sexual abuse case or just an offense that we had in our childhood, somebody says a remark and you start feeling shame about your body, about showing your body. About your breasts about whatever it is, you know, too fat or skinny it's stuck in the body. And I didn't know that I didn't know that about them. I didn't know that about myself. And it was an amazing learning experience and rewarding to see how much healing happened throughout the film and because of the film.

[00:05:42] It sounds like a pretty organic experience in terms of how this unfolded and how you found this project, as opposed to you're a director and a producer and you get pitched an idea "Hey, how about this?" It sounds like you kind of found this organically. Can you tell us more about that?

[00:06:00] **Michele Ohayon:** Sure. Yeah. So usually, I don't look for projects somehow, I know it's going to come to me from life. I was actually asked by my daughter to join her pole class because the pole class, you know, it's fitness and we're both very athletic. So, we were like, "yeah, let's try". And so we went to a very shady studio. Yeah. And it was like, we were doing the whole time, but it was a good workout, and we decided, "well, let's explore some

more". And we went from studio to studio, not always together, but until I came to S-Factor, which was founded by Sheila Kelly. And that was when the circle happened, none of the studios had a circle. You know, you come in, you warm up, you climb the pole and whatever it is you do, which was fun but different. And the circle is where the light bulb moment happened because women were sharing, "I'm here to do this" and "I'm here to get rid of shame" and "I'm here to love my body" and I'm here to love what I see in the mirror. And I realized that. Whole and central Dennis was much more than just a workout.

[00:07:06] It is really a healing tool. And so, I took that idea. I researched some more. I went to Netflix, I pitched the idea, they loved it. They said, "go do some more research, come back with the actual characters in the subjects that you want to follow." And I did that for six months and I came back and got a green light, pretty much. It was. One of the smoothest path in my 35-year career that ever happened.

[00:07:34] **Bryan Smith:** In terms of the cinematography and the lighting and the balance that you undoubtedly had to strike between trying not to exploit these women for the sensational aspect of the title of the film. And the realism you want that realism, but you also want to be respectful of their body image.

[00:07:56] What were you thinking about in terms of the cinematography, the folks that you were hiring, the subjects of the film, the conversations that you were having with them so that they were feeling safe to be filmed.

[00:08:07] **Michele Ohayon:** Well, let me start by saying that every film has the same issue as your, it's not an issue, but it is a matter of trust as a documentarian. It, you, you have to have integrity about your subject. I was never interested in sensational, none of my films. So that wasn't even an issue when I approached Sheila Kelly, she was worried about that because she has been approached before. And when she allowed filming, that's what happened. They were like, "Oh, a take off some more clothes, do this."

[00:08:37] And so she's like, I don't want any filming. It took me six months to convince her that this is a different story. This is an in-depth documentary. This is a character driven piece. And, one thing that was in my way in that particular studio is they had no lights only little red lights and no mirrors, and everybody was dancing for themselves in the dark, and I can't film in the dark. So what we did to solve that particular problem is to start a class of beginners, knowing that they're coming to a class, knowing that they were going to be filmed, that there will be some light. I didn't want to bright lights because I wanted them to feel comfortable and safe, but enough that I can capture it on film.

[00:09:15] And so they knew coming in that they were going to be filmed. And, again, this is really, you can manipulate anything you want in the editing room, but that, wasn't the idea. And even the title that you mentioned "Stripped Down" is not stripped down clothes, it's actually stripped down of any emotions and issues that are holding you back and "Rise Up" not only on the pole, but rise up to be the best person you can be. And that is what the title means. So, there's really not much sensation, although I can understand why people might think so.

[00:09:48] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I think that there's probably a very quick learning curve for people that click on the title and very quickly realized what the film is about, and it is a metaphor, that title, and it is a beautiful metaphor because I think what you see literally happening before your eyes is this therapeutic, as you say, shedding of stigma and shame and self-esteem, issues, and trauma that all of these women carried with them. And it's remarkable I mean, one of my. Well, my day job, I'm a trial lawyer and I represent survivors of sexual abuse throughout the country. And so, for me, it really hit differently because I know the statistics, I know how many people are sexually abused, men and women, but unfortunately women share the brunt of that.

[00:10:40] I think they're targeted more for domestic violence. They're sexually abused more as children, as a result, they carry with them this lifetime of trauma and it manifests in all kinds of ways. And in this film, you really see it. Being shedded and Sheila is the facilitator in these classes.

[00:10:59] **Michele Ohayon:** Right.

[00:11:00] **Bryan Smith:** And you know, it doesn't always land, obviously one of the class participants left during, during the filming.

[00:11:07] **Michele Ohayon:** Yes, it's not for everyone, for sure. I think she expected, just to pull class and she wanted to move around and dance and that's right. Completely great. And that's why I'm showing the other side of ball, which is the competitive side in other studios in San Francisco. One is led by a former sex worker, turned lawyer, and now a whole competitor and studio owners. So you, you have that side of polo. I want it to show as much as possible, into this world and break that stigma that it's only strip club now. Side note, strippers did come up and invented the essential pole movement, the sensual pole tricks, but they have not taken it to the level of competition unless they switched to being competitors, it was done for the male gaze. And my film is exactly about not dancing for the male gaze, but dancing for yourself for healing and for shedding or getting rid of shame. And that, that was very important.

[00:12:07] **Bryan Smith:** I love that term, Michele. Sorry to interrupt you. But yeah, I've heard that throughout the film, a couple of times, the male gaze, and I think one of the sentences was the problem is the male gaze and that's where it starts because that's what defines them is that objectification through the lens of the man and what he is wanting out of that connection.

[00:12:31] What I love about this film is the women take charge of their own image and their own sensuality. And it makes the male gaze sort of irrelevant at that point.

[00:12:42] **Michele Ohayon:** Exactly. Exactly. Once you remove that from the equation, then women and that feels safe. And that is why I had a, mostly all female crew when I could, they're not a lot of documentary DPS or women, unfortunately.

[00:12:57] And so I, most of the time, even my sound was at woman, assistant camera was a woman production coordinator was a woman. I wanted them to feel safe so that there is no

male gaze, even though my crew would not be interested, it's still a male presence. But to be honest, a few weeks into it, the women didn't even see us anymore.

[00:13:18] It wouldn't even matter if it was a guy or whatever. They just, they were so much into their own journeys that. Then we, and we were there every three weeks. We would drop into a class and spend a whole day and see their transformation. We, and that went on for six months. So that, that was very, I mean, you brought up the sexual abuse, Megan, who was sexually abused by Larry Nassar. The famous though NASA was put away. She was abused at the age of 15. And when she came to class, she was 27 and it took her that long to, and she pushed everything away for all these years. She tried to deal with it, of course, with therapy and other things. But the fact that she had to be a witness in the trial, brought all the trauma back and that's why she joined the class.

[00:14:05] And I had no idea how much she was going to share or not share.

[00:14:08] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:14:08] **Michele Ohayon:** And she felt very safe.

[00:14:10] **Bryan Smith:** I remember seeing her in the sentencing hearing. I mean, she, yeah, she was a big part of that case.

[00:14:16] **Michele Ohayon:** Yeah, she was one of the 300.

[00:14:17] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. The damage that that guy did too. I mean, a generation of athletes, it's just insane.

[00:14:24] **Michele Ohayon:** Yeah, totally. And that, that was her dream, and their dream was shattered when she was injured. And the other thing was what the film was able to do is to bring her and her mother together because she says that her mother was in the room and she had no idea. And to me as a mother, or just thinking about it, it just was shattering. And, when her mother came to town, I said, Megan, can I please interview your mother? And she said, "no way, she's not going to want to be interviewed" and plus she may not know everything because part of Megan's journey was not, she didn't even tell her parents what was going on until she actually had to testify, she made that choice to testify, and that meant also to confront and share everything with her parents and cause them pain. She was trying to protect them as well. So this all came to the surface during the film and when her mother came to town, I said, you know, " let's have a sit down let's see what comes out."

[00:15:19] And her mother agreed, which was great, and that brought some peace to them. And that's the beauty of documentaries. That's why I continue doing it. Even though it's really hard. It's the, those moments that are beyond the film, the moments that are, yes, it's captured on film, but it has a life. A long life after the film. Those women, Megan and her mother, Jen, the teacher and her parents managed to heal their relationship because there was a camera in the room that gave them a window of opportunity to bring it to the surface, because it's hard to just sit down in front of each other and say, "Hey, let's talk about that day." it's hard. But when you have a reason, and the reason is to inspire other women, to show other women that they're not alone. And when you have that mission in your head,

then it's not no longer about just you and your mother. It's about all the mothers and all the daughters. And I've seen that those cathartic moments happen over and over again.

[00:16:16] When you fulfilled with, with a mission to, to heal others. And that's the beauty of, of this film that happened in other films. And every time I see it, I'm like that will never happen in a feature film. When you have an actor, when you have actors in scripted material, that will never happen. So that's why I'm still doing it.

[00:16:37] **Bryan Smith:** What were your thoughts when Sheila brought in the men to the studio to serve as symbols of safe masculinity, and what were your thoughts shooting that scene?

[00:16:47] **Michele Ohayon:** Nicely put Sheila warned me that it was going to be heavy because, she asked the women to use the male figure to release anything that they had, whether it was joy or pain, by the way, doesn't have to be pain, and so we knew that there was going to be something they needed to resolve. So for example, Lee said, one of the women said I never came out when my father was around and I'm doing it now. This is facilitating that. It was hard. Some, some of us in the room had to leave because it was. Very moving any touched upon our own lives. "And so we, you know, sometimes we would excuse a crew member to go outside, then recover and come back and we'll take, it was very hard to watch and definitely hard to fill out.

[00:17:37] **Bryan Smith:** And was your choice of a male editor intentional too, to kind of have a male perspective in terms of cutting the film?

[00:17:45] **Michele Ohayon:** Definitely. Definitely. It was a very conscious decision since I have, I was surrounded by women. I was like, "okay, let's get a man in here and let's see what they think." And when Edward Osei-Gyimah was, first of all, I chosen not because he's male and he goes, he has a great cinematic eye. And I've worked with him before, and I know how good it is. So, when I brought him in, I showed him the footage and he was blown away. He said, "I'm an evolved man and I will never look at my wife the same way after watching this. I understand so many things that she had told me in the past when I wasn't hearing it." Yeah. And so that was great to hear. That was the first male who saw the footage and then we work together and sometimes we were clashing because I was like, "no, I, this is a, this is a female perspective." you know, the bottom line, it is my vision. And what was very important to me was that the women are not victims, or if they are, they will take a journey into becoming victors. That transition was very important and it's true in all my movies. I present a problem that causes us to be victims, and then you turn it into more of a journey to overcome, and that victory is extremely important.

[00:19:02] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I think it's important for men to watch this film. I really do. I mean, I think it's great for all genders, all sexual identities. I mean, it's a across the board quality documentary filmmaking, but it's so important in terms of the message to men, especially this male gaze message. Because even if women have not suffered trauma, some acute trauma in their childhood or in their teens or young adulthood, Or anytime they're all subject to that.

[00:19:35] **Michele Ohayon:** Correct.

[00:19:36] **Bryan Smith:** The male gaze, which I think in a way is a microtrauma. You know, it's, it's a, it's a microaggression and it's something that they obviously carry with them because you see it on the screen, and you hear it in their voices.

[00:19:51] **Michele Ohayon:** There is also a lot of when you deal with sensuality and eroticism, there's always these big taboos that come up, whether it's from religion or societal or cultural.

[00:20:02] And so, but it, it mostly plays out for women. And they are those first encounters, when let's say your daughter is seven years old and she goes to the beach and she's not wearing a top. Okay. Or she's seven years old, people are going to ask to cover up. And that creates shame right there. There's nothing to cover up, what is the, so you, this, this, you know, it's, it's a one-sided vision and we don't look at men. I mean, we look at them also as a sexual object, we don't look at them in a, in a condescending way, in an ownership kind of way, we don't want to own your body. I mean, we want to utilize it for our pleasure, and we want to utilize our bodies for pleasure, but that doesn't mean you own it, and that is where the boundaries are. I want to show what I, what God gave me doesn't mean you want to, you have to touch it. And again, those are the boundaries that were erased in all these years in generation, in so many cultures still there. Yeah. You know that we, we know, we know those cultures.

[00:21:06] **Bryan Smith:** As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes. And for many of them, we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place. Our newsletter, you can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists and resources to help you on your journey.

[00:21:29] Now back to the interview. What were your challenges in terms of the character studies here? Because you're talking to Sheila and Sheila obviously has this studio and she's, she has a certain amount of accessibility, but then you have the classmates, the students, and they have their lives. They're living, I mean, Evelyn's working at, you know, candy store and she's got her busy schedule, but you have to have access to these people, and you have to tell their story. How did you approach that as a filmmaker?

[00:21:58] **Michele Ohayon:** So because we started the film, the class, the beginner's cost for the film and just a side note that another reason was that I wanted to show their transformation as it happens so that the audience can witness together with me as they progress because other students have gone already through the transformation, I couldn't show it, I would just hear about it, which is not enough. So they knew that they were going to be filmed. I had, the women who started sharing in the circle, came to the forefront and I understood that those are the women that are willing to tell their stories and tell it in a truthful way and not just, you know, sound bites for the camera.

[00:22:38] And so I started to follow them around, like every week, you know, exchanged phone numbers. She knew I would interview them after class so we had already a rapport

and I would tell them "if something happens in your life, please give me a call and I'll be there with my camera." If there's something. You know, for example, Alison in San Francisco, this is not the factor.

[00:23:00] She's one of the competitors, the one who said, you know, my husband doesn't want me to have an Instagram. And so, she called me, I was in LA and she said, Michele, "I something's going to blow up in my marriage because my husband found out my Instagram account, get your crew over here." And I couldn't get there fast enough because, you know, it's, it's, it's a production, but she alerted me that that was going to happen.

[00:23:23] And so when I came there, we, we had, we talked about and we exposed to it. Then we went deeper into it. I had no idea that was going to happen. She didn't know he was gonna find her Instagram so.

[00:23:34] **Bryan Smith:** It's unfortunate, but at the same time, from a filmmaker's standpoint, what a nugget that you were given there, a golden nugget of a cinematic.

[00:23:43] **Michele Ohayon:** Narrative.

[00:23:44] **Bryan Smith:** Cinematic moment where, you know, the husband and we were wanting that to happen we're rooting for her. We're like "get rid of this guy" and it actually happens, and he leaves, and it's a, it's a great moment in the film. But as a filmmaker, you have to just be elated when things like that happen that really help tell the story in a compelling way.

[00:24:04] **Michele Ohayon:** Yes. I, you know, you're kind of betting on some stories that you think intuitively are going to pan out. You don't know anything.

[00:24:14] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:24:14] **Michele Ohayon:** But everything, you know, 35 years' experience, you kind of start sensing who is going to be open to have change in the lives during this year that I was filming. And Alison was definitely one of them. Evelyn was another, I didn't know that she was going to find her dead husband's phone and, on the phone,, she would find pictures of another woman. Naked.

[00:24:36] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, that's another one. Another moment. I'm like,

[00:24:39] **Michele Ohayon:** I can't make this up in a script and that's where you have to be there. To be there, be there, be there, film and film and film and wait until something like this happens. And when it happens, of course you feel bad. And one hand, because it's not a great revelation, but on the other hand, it's another step into the freedom if you will, to another step into their healing. For, for Everly, it was like, okay, you know, I, maybe I should, I will warn him a little less because he wasn't as faithful. I mean, I'm just making it up, but you know what I mean? It's a, it's a release from guilt and that's what it isn't. And by the way, Allison's husband is still there.

[00:25:19] She was sure that once he sees the movie, it's going to be over, but she told him, "take it, take it or leave it. I'm still dancing. And I'm not, I'm going to post on Instagram and I'm going to compete" and he's still there. So.

[00:25:32] **Bryan Smith:** Well, maybe he's starting to wake up a little bit. Maybe your film has something to do with that.

[00:25:37] **Michele Ohayon:** I hope so. I hope so. I mean, it's in every film, those, those moments are. So precious. And like I said, they carry beyond the screen time. They carry into life. I'm mostly in touch with most of the people. I feel like my second film in LA, some central color, straight up, I'm still in touch with the kids that I filmed in Watts.

[00:26:00] There were anywhere between 13 and 20 at the time. Now they are in their forties and we're still in touch with Facebook. You know, we're Facebook friends. It's just, the film has affected the likes as much as mine. And that's the beauty of it.

[00:26:14] **Bryan Smith:** So as a documentary filmmaker, I would think that it is an all consuming 24/7 process. You know, in a television series, you have a certain number of days per week that you work, there's a schedule, but as a documentary filmmaker, it has to be exhausting to be on the clock all the time and constantly be looking for those nuggets and those truths and the story that have to be revealed and come to the surface.

[00:26:40] **Michele Ohayon:** Yeah, you have, you have no life. This film took three years between research and filming for a year and then anything for a year and a half during COVID as well, we had to edit, which was tough. So, you really have no life and you live the lives of the characters that you're filming. But for example, again, the same film called "Straight up in South Central". I just gave, I had a very young child and I told the kids, if you got again, "don't get in trouble. If you get in trouble, make sure to give me a call because I'm going to be there."

[00:27:11] And one of the kids call me from jail. I was in the middle of the night. Oscar called me and he said, "I'm in jail, can you, you know, come with a camera and check it out." And I didn't know what to do. I had to. I hadn't. I shoved my young daughter in the car seat. I took her with me to freaking downtown LA scary prison to where he was detained too, to see what was going on. So it's you live with your subject in that there's no separation, until after you finished the film.

[00:27:41] **Bryan Smith:** So that's really a lifestyle that you're choosing as a documentary filmmaker. How do you fund that lifestyle? And you went to film school and Televiv right. You moved to LA I understand and started. I think your first film was age 19, but how did you figure out the logistics of surviving, putting food on the table and paying the rent while you're waiting for these stories to unfold and capture them on camera?

[00:28:06] **Michele Ohayon:** So, you know, if you have a reasonable budget, you put aside a small amount for yourself, which is never enough, you know, you think it's going to take two years and then it takes three years, but the salary carries over. You don't add money cause I put as much as possible to the screen, and it's always more than you think.

[00:28:24] But you know, I also produce for other people, I consult on productions for other people. I love producing for directors who are very talented. It gives me a lot of pleasure to guide them, to mentor them. I also produce international productions that come here. I don't have to direct every single thing.

[00:28:41] If I am going to direct a film, then it is indeed everything I've got. And, you know, my, my kids know it and my partners know it and it's just how it is. And you know, it's, it is very, it's very tiring and that's why it takes time between movies. I don't do movies back to back. I mean, listen, there are other documentaries where for them, it's not exactly a lifestyle because they don't do cinema vérité.

[00:29:07] They do a lot of interviews and archival. You know, you don't need to be in the field that much, the interview's a very control. They have a script; they have a thing. It's only when you choose to do what I do, which is the purest form in a way of documentaries, let the scenes unfold. That is very, time-consuming both filming and editing. But it's not, you know, it's not necessarily, I, you know, I have movies that are a lot more contained, and they cited a movie with Rich Clark called "'SOS: State of Security". He's the guy who wrote "Against All Enemies". And he told me, he talked about the failures of 9/11 when he was in government. That was a lot more contained for example, but the surprises come in those, in the vérité that.

[00:29:50] **Bryan Smith:** So, the vérité style of filming you've described it pretty well for my listeners, but it sounds like cinema vérité is a hell of a lot more work. But a hell of a lot more rewarding too, in terms of the substance in the truths that are revealed in that process.

[00:30:06] I see a lot of documentaries these days on Netflix that are basically crime drama, very sensational, and they're interesting and compelling, but you're right. Those documentary filmmakers, talented people, but they go in after something has already happened. So, they're really not capturing anything that's unfolding in real time.

[00:30:28] Right. Completely different category. So, cinema vérité is something that you have to commit to for a prolonged period of time. I know you pitched this to Netflix. So, going back to the logistics is the deal with Netflix that they're going to give you a budget and then it's up to you to number one, pay all of the crew, pay yourself and make it last and tell the story is in the can.

[00:30:54] **Michele Ohayon:** Well, it depends what kind of deal you have. Mine was like exactly what you described because I've worked with Netflix literally, since day two. I've worked with them for 13 years. So, they're very filmmaker oriented and friendly. So they knew I was a responsible filmmaker and they don't have to sit on my head every, every moment.

[00:31:15] So, they basically gave me a budget. But we work as a team. I obviously I need approval on selection of crew, and I need approval on the budget that I'm creating. If something's glaring, they have of course something to say, but that, you know, when you're, when you do this, as long as I have. We, you know, you're very aligned, you know, exactly what things are gonna cost and what they're unforeseen can be.

[00:31:39] So that, that, that is how it works. In other instances, Netflix can come in and fund as you go with a global number of course of budget that you have want to hit. But mine, that was the number and that was it. But, you know, you're right about there's, look, I'm hoping that my films are evergreen, you know, and they are still playing from movies from 20, 25 years ago.

[00:32:05] I have two movies on Netflix that are from many years ago, from 2007, and they're still playing. So, I think Netflix is, wants to have the whole range and, uh, you know, my, my outer film that's playing "Steal a Pencil for Me" is about two Holocaust survivors who find love in the camps. And there was not much I could show also because the love story happened in the past. So, and there were old, there barely move. When, what did they, they go and have a cup of coffee and come back and sit-down new film? So, I decided to take them back to the camp in Holland and activate their memories and that triggered, you know, going back to the past. So, every film has its own challenges, but basically the thing, the challenge in documentary is that you are filming the presence, which is already the past. The moment you've filmed it.

[00:33:00] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:33:00] **Michele Ohayon:** And you're looking at the future moment and hoping to capture that. And then it becomes the present you're dealing with with, with those time issues. And it's fascinating.

[00:33:12] **Bryan Smith:** So, what called you to documentary filmmaking at such a young age, as opposed to narrative filmmaking? And I know you've worked at developing scripts for major studios on narrative films before, but your directing experience seems to be really leaning into documentary. Was there a point in your life that pointed you in that direction? Or how did that unfold?

[00:33:33] **Michele Ohayon:** Well, first of all, thank you for doing your homework. I can't tell you how refreshing that is and knowing a little bit about my background. So, I started as completely wanted to do narrative films. I wasn't even thinking documentaries. I was fascinated by production, production value equipment, and my very first film was a narrative film in Israel. But when you have a reality at that time, it was Israel that needs to be told it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was brewing at the time.

[00:34:01] And I felt like I can just make a movie about, you know, something that's irrelevant. There were burning issues under my feet that I needed to explore. And so I did my first documentary about an Arab actor trying to make it in Israel. And so when I came to Los Angeles was like, okay, that's it. I'm going to go into the Hollywood system and I'm going to make a feature film and.

[00:34:24] And so the first thing I noticed when I came to LA was the homeless people and I was shocked, I was like, "how is it possible in the land of opportunities where I'm coming to fulfill my dreams, I see women on the street, how is that possible in my country, that would never happen?" And so I started to explore that, and then I made my first film, "It Was a Wonderful Life", about women who fell through the cracks and lived out of the cars, but

we're hiding the fact that they were homeless because they were ashamed. And so that, you know, it was narrated by Jodie Foster and we decided to redo the music. That was my very first film here in America, and that led to another documentary and you know how that goes. You become a documentarian, I'm a storyteller, bottom line. I'm a storyteller, whether it's documentary or a feature or television or podcast. It is not really important, but I do like to play with the medium of film because I have a lot more possibilities and toys and music and effects.

[00:35:26] And I love that. And so, I'm always trying to go back to feature, but then there is a subject in documentary that kind of drags me back in.

[00:35:34] **Bryan Smith:** It seems like over the last decade, that documentary filmmaking has really made a resurgence or become something, having much more sizzle than it used to have. I mean, if you look at the film festival lineups, I don't know, the documentaries are just getting a lot more attention.

[00:35:52] You look at the Netflix availability, all of the streaming platforms. Tons of documentaries out there, high quality really well-made Ron, Howard's producing them. These huge filmmakers are getting into documentaries. Tom, wondering for young filmmakers who are listening to this podcast are people that are aspiring to get into film.

[00:36:12] Is the documentary filmmaking, a more accessible form of filmmaking that would allow them to get their foot in the door. Learn about the industry, learn about cameras and lenses and storytelling.

[00:36:25] **Michele Ohayon:** I think it depends, you know, some filmmakers really don't care about documentaries, no matter what, they just don't have that sense, they want to tell a story that's scripted, they want to work with actors. It's a whole different world, but those who can shuttle between the two worlds, worlds, yes, it is accessible because you can literally like Sugarman, you can take your iPhone with you. Great camera and start filming. And that's what I always encouraged to do.

[00:36:49] There's always excuses, why not to make a movie when what? Not to film? Oh, I don't have enough money for a camera, I need a crew, I don't have actors. Those are just excuses. You can totally take your camera. If you don't have access to, you know, more professional camera and start filming and experience your craft. You know, I haven't stopped filming since I was 19. I raised two children, you know, I was, you know, a wife and a daughter and a mother and everything. You can do it. You just have to make the time for it and focus on it. I'd rather than find a way not to do it. And it's all about what story do you want to tell, do you want me to tell a story of a real person who's going through something? Or do you want to tell a story that you're creating that is as your own beginning, middle and end? You can do without means. Gosh, there's so many actors that are not working here in this country, definitely in Los Angeles that you can mobilize and say, Hey, come and do my short film.

[00:37:43] Let's rehearse. Let's work. Even doing COVID you can do it. So, I encourage everybody to just film and film and film and write and do and do get experience, so when

you get the chance to be in the room in the big studio, that if you want that, then you will know what you're talking about. You understand the language of film.

[00:38:04] Documentaries and fiction. They have different language, but both have their own terms. It's not running around with the camera and capturing something. It's like, "Ooh, I'm making a documentary." No, it's a craft. You have to know when to put the camera when to move the camera. What kind of angle is what kind of lighting?

[00:38:21] We do it all in documentaries, even though we deal with real time. And so it's harder because you have one take and if you didn't catch it, you missed it. It's not like, "Hey, well, let's do that again. Can you make it a little better this time?" We're never happy or whatever, but it doesn't happen. So, in a way, documentaries are harder, but they are becoming much more popular thanks to the Netflixes of the world because they brought us into the, into the commercial world and people started watching it and streaming them because then they're not going to go to theater to see documentary, that doesn't happen. Unfortunately, even from the biggest, biggest film, like the Earl Morris, it's hard to get into, to the theater for a documentary. So, this is a perfect platform.

[00:39:05] **Bryan Smith:** You immigrated to LA very early in your career. How important is it right now to be in LA now that we have zoom and we have Atlanta and, you know, New York city, there's all kinds of filmmaking opportunities throughout the country, but how important is Los Angeles right now?

[00:39:22] **Michele Ohayon:** Right now, it's not necessary to be here at all. You can be anywhere in the world. You can create your content anywhere in the world. People are not afraid anymore of subtitles. I mean, look at the show "Money Heist" from Spain, it's huge and it's all subtitled and it's all creating in Spain. So, you don't really need to do as borders have melted, thankfully, in the last, only few years, but they have melted. Then you can see also the international films are making it to the mainstream. I'm on the executive committee of the Academy of motion, pictures for international films. And I've seen evolving from, you know, how many people, even in our Oscar Academy, how many people have been watching foreign films, and it's much more now than it used to be because there are great films coming out of the world. And now this year I've watched 44 films and most of them are better than the American films I've seen. So the openness to 7,000 languages and shows, you really do not have to be here. It can be anywhere to create your content.

[00:40:24] **Bryan Smith:** It's interesting that you bring up the popularity of foreign films. My 19-year-old daughter just watched a movie with me at Sundance, the online version of Sundance this year. And it was a two-and-a-half-hour movie from Thailand. And I forget the name. I think it was called "On the Road" or something like that, but fantastic film for adults who are willing to go through the subtitle, you know, kind of move through that. I was shocked that my daughter loved it and wanted to watch it again recently. And of course, it's not picked up yet, so we can't see it, but I'm seeing. That foreign films are making it into the mainstream, and I think that younger people are starting to be open to that. And we're seeing on Netflix, this "Lupin" series from France, and I'm really glad to see as you put it the melting of the borders so that we're experiencing other cultures. We are getting rid of those

boundaries that keep them as the other, right. We're not different from each other. We have way more in common, you know.

[00:41:29] Way more, it's a universal language.

[00:41:30] **Michele Ohayon:** I mean, look at music. They have melted those borders a long time ago from the beginning who doesn't listen to Brazilian music who doesn't listen to, you know, South American music you never think about, you know, "Oh, it's foreign I'm not going to listen to it." So, we are behind and we're catching up fast. Look at the film, the one last year, it was from Korea, one, you know, best picture. That was a huge victory, huge victory. Not only that this year, but we also have. So, the way the international films work for the Oscars, each country chooses a film to submit. And then if it follows the, with all the regulations and, you know, they got to go release, et cetera, it goes into our hands for us to vote on. This year, we had a huge number of documentaries that were chosen by their countries to represent the country, not a feature film, for example, a film from Chile, which I highly recommend it's called the "More Aging" that is a documentary film.

[00:42:30] "The Painter and the Thief", that is a documentary film, and they were chosen by the countries to represent. And that is huge for us documentarians. We don't want to be the step-kids of the feature film. We want to be, you know, we want to be on and we want to have a place. Some people say we have to have our own Academy awards, because think about it.

[00:42:48] There were 240 feature docs submitted this year to the Academy. Eligible for voting because there were no theatrical release requirement because that was impossible because of COVID. And one only makes it so we didn't have 240 feature films submitted. I wish we did. So, you understand the proportions are not right.

[00:43:08] **Bryan Smith:** Right. I interviewed Rayka Zehtabchi, a couple of times on this podcast and she won for best documentary short for the documentary. It was on Netflix. It might still be it's called "Period. End of sentence" and that was the first portal for me into documentary shorts and also feature-length documentaries where I started to really take them seriously. And that's also when I realized, like you're saying there are so many high quality films out there and just a few are being recognized because there's just one category at the Academy awards and a few other awards ceremonies that give them honorable mention, not on camera usually.

[00:43:49] **Michele Ohayon:** Right? I think the Golden Globes don't even have us. There's no documentary category in the Golden Globes.

[00:43:54] **Bryan Smith:** Right. It would be nice to see a separate honoring of that category.

[00:43:58] **Michele Ohayon:** I agree. I agree.

[00:44:00] **Bryan Smith:** So, what's next for you, Michele?

[00:44:01] **Michele Ohayon:** I tell everyone that I'm in recovery mode three years of hard work, 24/7, I need to kind of step back, but there's always, you know, there's some docu-

series brewing that I'm considering and, there's two projects. One is actually about the pole community, because I feel like there's a lot more to tell. And I also want to focus on children again, I feel that children needs to be something great, and I want to find the right project to do that. So, stay tuned. I mean, you can always check on my Instagram or my website strippeddownriseup.com, we update everything. And so if you want to know more, you can follow me on social.

[00:44:45] That's great. And for my listeners, that's strippeddownriseup.com. And if you want to follow Michele on social media, she's at Michele Ohayon for Instagram and Twitter, and that's M I C H E L E O H A Y O N. And she's a great follow. So, check her out on social media, Michele.

[00:45:04] **Bryan Smith:** it was really nice talking to you.

[00:45:06] **Michele Ohayon:** Thank you so much. Thank you for the interesting question. Really enjoyed it very much.

[00:45:11] **Bryan Smith:** Hey, thank you for listening and I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so, I have a favor to ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle [@dreampathpod](https://www.instagram.com/dreampathpod), and as always go find your dream path.