

Jen McGowan Transcript

Jen McGowan: It's important that you determine what your tastes are, what your perspective is, what you like and what you don't like. Not trying to be something that already exists. The thing that already exists, we have it. We don't need it anymore. We don't need another version of that. What we need is the thing that only you can do or see or say.

[00:00:24] **Bryan Smith:** 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. Jen McGowan's on the show. Jen is a Los Angeles based director whose most recent feature film survivor thriller "Rust Creek" was released in theaters in January of 2019 and hailed as "the feminist horror Hollywood needs right now" by Harper's Bazaar.

[00:00:58] After its theatrical debut, "Rust Creek" gained even wider popularity on streaming services. And is now the number five movie out of more than 13,000 films on Netflix. I watched it before the interview with my daughters and it was great. It doesn't waste any time getting right to the story, pulling us into a world and characters that we haven't seen portrayed in this way before and define audience expectations about characters you think, you know something about just by looking at them. If you haven't seen "Rust Creek" yet, I promise there are no spoilers in this interview. So feel free to listen before you watch Jen's first feature, "Kelly and Cal", starring Juliette Lewis, Johnny Weston and Cybill Shepherd premiered at South by Southwest, where she won the "game changer" award.

[00:01:41] The film was released theatrically to rave reviews and is now available to rent on Amazon and Apple streaming. In this interview, Jen tells us about her journey that began at Tisch school of the arts in New York, where she trained as an actor at the Atlantic theater company with icons like David Mamet, William H. Macey and Sam Shepherd.

[00:01:59] After Tisch Jen attended USC film school, where she made connections that provided opportunities in television and film. In this chat, she also tells us about the importance of connections and relationships in the film industry. Why having a strong sense of what you like and don't like, and film can be helpful in your career; and describe some of the challenges of working on indie films versus bigger budgets, studio, films, and television directing. She explains what happens to a film after it's complete and how the film sales and distribution process works. And also tells us a few fun stories about casting "Rust Creek", the challenges of shooting on location in Kentucky and hurdles she faced involving music rights on her film, "Kelly and Cal". This was an especially fun interview for me, not only because I'm a huge admirer of Jen's work, but also because we're both from the same generation children of the seventies. And we have some shared experiences like growing up with a nurse for a mother who never let us stay home sick from school.

[00:02:57] It's these types of commonalities that surface organically during a conversation that can make an interview feel special and unique. So, without further ado, let's jump into my chat with Jen McGowan. I'll just start off by asking you how you're doing, because I know that the country is going through a lot of turmoil right now.

[00:03:17] And I follow you on social media. I am totally with you in terms of your sentiment that I'm, I'm gleaning anyway, from your posts, and as a creative, I guess what I'm wondering is. How is the current political situation, affecting you creatively?

[00:03:35] **Jen McGowan:** Well, that's interesting. I think there's a few ways. One is I've definitely noticed my short-term memory is not working as well as usual, which I find really frustrating. I have always worked freelance in some capacity and worked from home a lot so that hasn't, you know, that there's not really a change there for me and I have a very disciplined day. So, I've, I've kept up with that. Obviously the, the social aspect is gone. You're not accidentally meeting people. You're not bumping into people, in places creatively.

[00:04:11] You know, I haven't, I've been okay. I think like the two days of the Capitol riots, I was just, I was just transfixed, you know, I, those days I did not work the day, I think the day of, and the day after, but otherwise I I've been able to work. I don't, I don't know why, but I've been grateful that I have, and I know that's not the case for everybody, and I think it very much depends on you know, who you are. How you deal with stress, how, you know, if, if you have experience with trauma or not, and a whole host of different factors, and whether it's personally affecting you, you know, lots of people were having personal deaths in their families at early on and, and some are only just now, so it's kind of an evolving situation.

[00:04:59] **Bryan Smith:** In addition to the political situation, we have the pandemic and, and the physical health of our loved ones and our work situation. Everyone is affected restaurant industry, the film industry.

[00:05:12] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah.

[00:05:12] **Bryan Smith:** I find, I mean, speaking for myself creatively or otherwise, any type of productivity has been diminished because of the current situation that we're in. You would think that if you're home more often, you would have more time to do things like be productive, but yeah, it's a real struggle.

[00:05:32] **Jen McGowan:** I've found it really hard to read, to read. Like I have to read a lot of scripts and I've found that tricky because it requires, you know, focus on a singular thing, I'm very good with when I have lots of stuff to do, but focusing on a singular thing is, is challenging for me, unless it's like one more shooting that I have found to be difficult.

[00:05:51] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I think the deep work is what's really challenging for me. Like you're saying, you know, one task where you have to have a concentration for any prolonged period of time, because I've always struggled with social media, but when social media is your source of news and there's so much happening, that is like an existential threat to our existence. It's like, you're constantly rationalizing, going to social media just to see what's happening.

[00:06:17] **Jen McGowan:** You know, and there's a weird disconnect too. There's a, as you say, there's this existential crisis happening in our country, but right now at this moment, at least as far as I can perceive you and I are physically safe and fine.

[00:06:32] And those are, I think sometimes hard to have in your head at the same time. You know, it's, it's a lot to, to balance and figure out which one to focus on at which time. So that you're not overwhelmed, but also so that you don't check out. I think for me, at least I have always been very political, and I think it's reflected in my work. So, I guess it's a very fertile time in that regard.

[00:06:58] **Bryan Smith:** That's interesting that we are safe, yet we get into this fear rabbit hole of social media. And I think once you get into that fight or flight response, that's what I want to get out of. So, I can do the deeper work and read a book, or even a magazine article, like a new Yorker article or something like that, so that I can just feel normal again.

[00:07:21] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah. I really think it comes down to like, you know, mindfulness, meditation and things like focusing on okay. Right now. I am. Okay. I am safe. It doesn't mean I'm; I'm thriving. It doesn't mean I'm kicking ass, but I'm healthy, you know, and that, and by the way, that's not always the case for everybody. So that's actually quite a lot, I think, to be grateful for right now.

[00:07:44] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, that's true. I noticed that on your filmography that you have a "Twilight Zone" episode and a "Purge" episode, were those filmed at all in the pandemic?

[00:07:55] **Jen McGowan:** No, they, the "Purge" was filmed in, I want to say it was August of last year in New Orleans. And then "Twilight Zone" was filmed in Vancouver, in January. So, our post was affected, but only the very, very end I got through my edit and it was just an ADR session I couldn't attend because that was like the first week where there was a shutdown, and nobody knew what we were dealing with. What was going on.

[00:08:24] **Bryan Smith:** So, what's happening right now in television and film in terms of the shutdown, and I know some projects are going, because I follow filmmakers on social media and you know, you see like Tom Cruise is doing some pretty radical stuff to keep things moving. But what are you finding in, what is your personal experience with this?

[00:08:44] **Jen McGowan:** So, I have been finding throughout this lockdown that I have been taking it, lots of meetings, lots of, general meetings, lots of meetings on open director assignments. What I have found is depending on the week or the month, depending on what's going on in the world and, you know, in LA specifically, which is where I am, people are feeling more competent to say, okay, we can commit to doing something in a few months or less. And you know, the meetings kind of ebb and flow accordingly.

[00:09:11] I've been reading lots of scripts. In terms of features, the features I think has, has maintained a steadiness, not in terms of production, but in terms of the meetings for future productions, television was a little crazier for the first couple of months. Production, I believe started up in August or September, generally for the industry and various things have gotten closed down because of, well, not outbreaks, they're not having outbreaks. I think that's something our industry is doing really well, actually. We're not having community spread on set, at least not the sets that are following the protocols. And I'm very happy about that. I wish the rest of the country would follow suit, but it's certainly making things a lot more expensive, a lot slower.

[00:09:53] And I don't know how that's affecting indie film. I think that, it's probably quite a damaging.

[00:09:59] **Bryan Smith:** Are you seeing that the scripts that you're reading are trying to accommodate for the new challenges in a post COVID world?

[00:10:07] **Jen McGowan:** Not the content, not the stories like I'm not seeing stories, that take place during COVID I'm not seeing the story yet. I mean, I'm not seeing like people wearing masks in the film script. What I am seeing is production being more responsive to, "okay, this is something we can shoot now", versus "this is something we should save". For next year.

[00:10:29] **Bryan Smith:** Right. Yeah, that makes sense. I was thinking if I was a screenwriter, I certainly would not be writing any type of script that involved like a baseball stadium full of, you know, folks were going to shoot during a game or a concert or something like that, because I don't know logistically that that can be done in 2021 or maybe even 2022.

[00:10:49] Well,

[00:10:49] **Jen McGowan:** you know, the good thing about stuff like that, like those big crowd scenes, it does depend on and you know, sometimes those can be done because they're all, you know, VFX, I think what's really tricky is when you get into the more intimate crowd scenes or we get into combat or you get a fight or you get into, you know, intimate sex scenes and things like that. I think that's, what's really, the risk is right now, actually.

[00:11:12] **Bryan Smith:** So, how are you getting these scripts? Do you have an agent that sends you feature film scripts?

[00:11:18] **Jen McGowan:** I do. I have an agent and a manager, and that's where my work comes from now.

[00:11:24] **Bryan Smith:** And how many scripts do you get in a given month or week to review?

[00:11:29] **Jen McGowan:** It completely depends. I got for this week and I'm completely overwhelmed. So, I was like "Oh God." So, but you know, there's other times where I'll maybe get maybe one or two a month.

[00:11:42] **Bryan Smith:** You certainly have the chops and the reputation now with "Kelly and Cal" and "Rust Creek" as a powerful filmmaker and a storyteller when it comes to telling really vulnerable stories.

[00:11:55] I mean, with "Kelly and Cal", I watched that last night, by the way.

[00:11:58] **Jen McGowan:** Oh good, I hope you enjoyed it.

[00:12:00] **Bryan Smith:** Here's what I was surprised about with "Kelly and Cal". Yeah. I had not heard of the film until I researched you and looked at your filmography. And I was really kind of bummed out that I hadn't heard about it because it's so good.

[00:12:14] And it's like, why is it that a film that good and that touching and that unique too, you just don't see the combination of those two character archetypes coming together very often. Is it just there's too much content out there? I mean, this was 2014 when it came out.

[00:12:32] **Jen McGowan:** Still that's. Yeah, that's what I was going to say. I mean, look, it's variety of answers to that. One is the time, you know, when it came out, I kind of feel like we were a year too early before people were giving a shit about like, "Oh, women directors" you know? So I kinda missed that boat a little bit too early. Also, it's an indie film. I mean, we made that film from, you know, I think it was \$1.1 million, which means there's no PNA, there's no publicity and advertising none.

[00:13:01] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:13:02] **Jen McGowan:** So, you know, what we get is we get one shot at our premiere where we get to do some press and thank God for Juliette Lewis. Because I don't know if people know this, but, but on big studio, films, stars are contracted to do PNA, they must show up to do the marketing. Yeah. It's not the case on indie film, mostly because we can't afford to offer like, you know, someone money to say, Hey, in eight months from now, you have to come somewhere when you're probably shooting something else, so that, that doesn't happen so much within the film. So, you know, Juliet really made it a priority to come and promote the film. And she absolutely did not have to, and was certainly not contractually obligated to, and that is how we got the press that we did. Had she not been there? I don't think we would've got any press at all.

[00:13:49] So, you know, it has to do with what the press is interested in at that time, you know? Do you have an angle? You know, you kind of need an angle for them. It's the, it's the first whatever, or won the biggest, whatever, you know, they need a story. Right? Good film isn't enough.

[00:14:08] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, that's interesting. And probably really frustrating as a filmmaker, as a director and a producer of this type of work, where you do great, I mean, you put together a film that really hits all the marks yet. It doesn't make it into a bigger audience.

[00:14:25] **Jen McGowan:** It was, aside from not reaching the audience for my career, I was shocked that I had to, you know, I didn't get reps until after "Rust Creek". So, you know, I had to do another feature and another indie feature not had to like I'm suffering, but like, I was surprised that that first feature didn't yield the results I was hoping for. So that was a hard, that was a little hard to swallow. But look, the number one thing you need to succeed in this industry, I think even more so than talent is resiliency. You have to be able to bounce back. You know, you take the hits and you feel them and you, you know, take all day to mourn something and then you move on.

[00:15:04] **Bryan Smith:** Right. Now logistical question about "Kelly and Cal". I noticed you used some music in the film and, pull up my notes here to look at the exact song. Cyndi Lauper. Yeah, Cindy Lauper "All Through the Night" and Brian Adams, "Everything I Do". And the Cyndi Lauper a song the first time it appeared in the movie was at the diner, but it was

for like three seconds or something. And I was like, "Whoa, what song is that?" I had to listen to it a couple of times. And then I was thinking, well, is that because of the cost of licensing that, I mean, I was thinking about the logistics of that song, and then I heard it later and you had more playtime for that song, but you're telling a story that lends itself very well to indie film, to a smaller budget, but I was wondering, you know, how do you navigate that type of situation where you want to use a song, how do you get the rights for it? How do you negotiate the cost of that place?

[00:16:00] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah. So, it's the same with anything with any priority that you have in a movie? I think the most important thing is, soon as possible identifying what are the priorities you were not going to get all the things you want, what are the things you need? And I knew, for example, I needed the song in the gym. And not only did I need it, I needed it to be secured before we shot, because I wanted, you know, to choreograph a dance to it. So that was something that we made a priority.

[00:16:29] And in terms of the budget with the Cyndi Lauper song, I mean, again, that was an example of just generosity and, and we had Aimee Mann, like that was. So amazing. And, and that took, you know, letter writing and asking and, and showing them clips same with the Bryan Adams song. As a matter of fact, I don't know if I should tell the story, but I will, because I think it's really interesting.

[00:16:52] So there's one moment in the movie that I had to cut in order to be able to use that song in the gym. And every time I see it, it breaks my heart. So, when he recognizes that this was her, her song, you know, and she appreciates that, there's this beautiful moment that Juliet did where she laughed. And she says, "I hated this song."

[00:17:15] And it was, it was, it was ironic. You know, it was not saying it's a bad song. It's just saying it was everywhere, you know. And, and they had this beautiful little moment, but they were like, no, you gotta take that out.

[00:17:26] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:17:26] **Jen McGowan:** And I really, Oh, I struggled with it, but I, I did. I thought it was, it was worth it to have the song to lose it.

[00:17:33] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, otherwise, Brian wouldn't have given you permission to use it is that way. Yeah. Huh. And you're not,

[00:17:39] **Jen McGowan:** I don't know if it's him, by the way. That's the other thing with music, music is owned by a lot of different people. So you don't know who is having the objection.

[00:17:47] **Bryan Smith:** Right. Yeah. You know, I was wondering that because I had the same issue with Don McClain who wrote American pie. I wanted to use it in the intro of my podcast for that episode. And so I emailed Don McLean about it and he said, "yeah, that's fine. You can use it." And then I put it in the episode and then I got a call from, I got, I got an email from YouTube saying I was blocked in certain countries. And I looked at who blocked, who blocked it.

[00:18:15] It was a bunch of corporations, basically that own the music and own the rights. And I realized at that point, I'm revealing how ignorant and naive I am in this business. I realized at that point, this was just a couple of weeks ago that this is very complicated stuff. And even the artist doesn't know.

[00:18:33] **Jen McGowan:** It's very complicated. The thing is we're all naive until we do it. You know, you don't, you don't have, you don't know until you do it, unfortunately. And you know, some of those things drive me nuts. I'm like, "Oh, somebody else already learned this lesson. Why do I have to learn this lesson" it's so frustrating. It's a waste of human energy. But that, that is one of those things. Music is a pain in the ass and that, you know, that's why, if you're lucky you have a music supervisor to deal specifically with that.

[00:18:59] **Bryan Smith:** So now that you're repped, how is that a different experience than when you were doing indie films unrepped? Like, what, what are the, I guess the pros and the cons of being repped.

[00:19:10] **Jen McGowan:** Well, here's the thing. It's not about being repped in and of itself. It's about being wrapped with the right reps who get you and who believe that you can, that they can with you achieve the thing that you want to achieve being with the wrong rep or being at a point in your career where they have nothing to rap.

[00:19:28] I mean, this is the thing people really don't understand. Agents do not get you work. They monetize the work that you can get on your own. So, if you don't have anything for them to monetize, they don't have a job.

[00:19:41] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:19:42] **Jen McGowan:** And so, you know, that's like, I think it's very important to monthly or quarterly, have some news to give your reps to work with because you know, whatever you do, it only lasts so long, you know, there's like a very short half-life to news and accolades and achievements. So, fortunately the work that I have and the career that I want to build, make sense with the tastes and the relationships and perspective that my reps have. So, that's, that's very powerful. I mean, I know a lot of people that are wrapped in the, and are not getting, having the experience that I'm having.

[00:20:19] So, all those things kind of have to be aligned in order for it to be a successful relationship. That said, I am super happy with both my managers and my agents and what that means is, I mean, basic they understand what I'm trying to do. That means when I go into meetings, I'm meeting with people who I get, and they get me.

[00:20:39] And that's amazing. The good thing about being a director is usually nobody takes a meeting with you unless they know, and like your work to begin with. So, it's a friendly room. But it is different. I mean, I have definitely noticed the difference, the level of people that I'm getting to meet, the access that I'm getting there has greatly, it's just, I'm getting it on much bigger, much, getting it on much bigger rooms and meeting with much more experienced people than I ever had access to before.

[00:21:08] And by the way, that's not. And, you know, that's my reps work, but that's also, you know, when you first sign with someone, they don't know who you are. They don't know how you're going to do in rooms. You need to bring the goods; you need to be successful so that they can trust. "Okay she can handle if I put her in a room with so-and-so, that won't be a waste of my, my relationship capital." I can spend that on her.

[00:21:30] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. So, in terms of the skill set that you need to bring to the table, obviously needed the technical skills to be able to shoot on location and know about photography and lenses. And, you know, I guess at the indie film level, you probably need to be Jack or Jane of all trades.

[00:21:45] **Jen McGowan:** Yes. And that's, that's, I think that's a hard thing that indie filmmakers face when, if they're fortunate enough to be able to get the opportunity to make the transition into bigger work, right. Is that's challenging if you, if you don't have experience of that, of how to work with a much bigger crew of how to only do your job and let everybody else do their job.

[00:22:06] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. Delegate.

[00:22:07] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah. Yeah. That's, it's a different, it's a different world.

[00:22:11] **Bryan Smith:** I heard an interview with Patty Jenkins recently. And she talked about working as basically crew for 10 years.

[00:22:20] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah.

[00:22:21] **Bryan Smith:** I think she was a camera operator or something like that.

[00:22:23] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, she was, she was in the camera department. So do you think that that technical experience.

[00:22:29] **Bryan Smith:** Really is important when you get to this level of being wrapped and having this access and you're being sent scripts. And it sounds like you're having a lot of career options that you wouldn't have otherwise had, but do you think that technical knowledge is important to have as the foundational building block for being a director?

[00:22:47] **Jen McGowan:** I think it depends. I mean, I'm not a particularly techie person. I, you know, I don't, I don't actually care about cameras on like what, as long as it looks like what I want it to look like, DP can shoot on whatever they want. You know, and the producer can afford it. Cool. I don't care if it's an iPhone or an IMAX, whatever.

[00:23:06] However, I will say that, you know, her experience, the working in that department taught her, not just about tech. It's taught her about set etiquette. It taught her about, you know, she's hearing directors work with talent. She's absorbing all sorts of information in those 10 years of working. So, I don't think it's necessary that you have be, expert in tech.

[00:23:29] I do think it's, it's important that you get familiar with your industry and how shoots work and bigger shoots, you know, and I knew this was, not a flaw, but like a,

something I lacked when I got out of USC. The first thing I did was I interned on a big studio shoot, cause I was like, "I don't know how those go."

[00:23:47] I need to know that. And that, and it's coming from somebody who I worked on big commercial shoots for a long time. That's what I did as my day job while I was building my career as a director, I was a production supervisor. So, I knew the nuts and bolts, you know, I was the one responsible for all the money for all the hiring for all the, you know, everything, basically all the logistics.

[00:24:06] So that I knew, but what I didn't know was how that then kind of upgrades to a big film shoot. I knew how a big shoot worked on a three-day shoot. I didn't know how it worked over, you know, 30 days or 40 days or something.

[00:24:20] **Bryan Smith:** Right. It was at USC film school?

[00:24:22] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah.

[00:24:23] **Bryan Smith:** What did you do at Tisch then?

[00:24:25] **Jen McGowan:** I studied theater. I was at the Atlantic theater company. Yeah, that's how I started. I mean, I didn't really know anything about film when I was growing up. I'm not a film. They're like, I didn't have people, family in the industry. It wasn't on my radar as something that existed as a job or been industry either. But when I was working, I mean, not working, studying theater at NYU at Atlantic that's when I started kind of being exposed to all that.

[00:24:50] And I just preferred having more control really, than being an actor.

[00:24:55] As you may

[00:24:56] **Bryan Smith:** 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 dreampath.pod.com/newsletter to join.

[00:25:11] It's not fancy. Just an email about each week's episode, featured artists and resources to help you on your journey. Now back to the interview. So, what inspired you to go into theater at Tisch?

[00:25:24] **Jen McGowan:** It's kind of a funny thing. I think it was an accident, honestly. I think that I had it. I was good at something. I was good at performing.

[00:25:32] And fortunately there was a teacher who saw that. And she encouraged me, you know, she said, "I think you'd do really well in a conservatory environment." And I didn't, I was like, "cool." I mean, my grades kinda sucked and I didn't have, my parents didn't care what I did as long as I went to college, that was like the prerequisite.

[00:25:49] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:25:50] **Jen McGowan:** And so I thought "this will be something fun to study." I mean, I don't know. It sounds really easy. I just didn't realize; I don't think I realized what a big deal it

was. I thought it was just, you know, this is what I'm studying. I'm applying to college and this is what you do. You go to college. I got lucky.

[00:26:08] **Bryan Smith:** Just so happens here at the best fine arts school in the country. You know what I mean? One of the best anyway.

[00:26:14] **Jen McGowan:** No, it's okay. I got turned down from others, so, you know.

[00:26:16] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:26:17] **Jen McGowan:** No, I, I understand that now I got very, very lucky.

[00:26:20] **Bryan Smith:** And your parents are pretty supportive of that?

[00:26:22] **Jen McGowan:** Oh, my parents don't care what I do as long as I can feed myself. That's all. I mean, my parents, my, you know, my mom is a nurse. My dad, when I was growing up, worked for the government and they're, you know, I think they came from, you know, a position of kids are kind of meant to be seen and not heard that wasn't really the situation that I grew up in, but that's where they came from.

[00:26:44] So, you know, I knew from being a kid that once you graduate high school, you're out like their problem anymore. So, high school at 17, I was like, "Alright, see ya". And I know how weird that sounds to a lot of people, but to me, that was what was expected.

[00:27:03] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. Well, what year did you graduate from high school?

[00:27:05] **Jen McGowan:** Let's see.

[00:27:06] **Bryan Smith:** I was class of 90.

[00:27:08] **Jen McGowan:** I think it was '90 because I went to. Wait, was it 90 or 94? I can't. I always confused when I graduated high school and when I up, when I finished NYU, yeah, I think it was either 90 or 94.

[00:27:20] **Bryan Smith:** So you and I are from the same generation and I think our parents are probably cut from the same cloth, and I'll tell you, I've heard that saying before "children are to be seen and not heard", you know, it's like it's, we're, we're children of the seventies where it was.

[00:27:36] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, you go do your thing, like whatever, as long as you come home and you're conscious, it's fine.

[00:27:42] **Bryan Smith:** Right. Even if you come home a couple days later, I mean, it's not go stay the night at your friend's house for weeks at a time and yeah, it was, it was a nice existence.

[00:27:50] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, it was fun being wild. It was. And because my mom was a nurse, like she, you know, you did not ever miss a day of school. No, I don't think I've, I think maybe in my entire life, I've missed five days of school, unless you are bleeding out of your eyeballs. You're going to school.

[00:28:07] **Bryan Smith:** That's exact, my mom is an ICU nurse and that was my experience too. And whenever I would call and try to come home sick from school, forget it. She would either be working or, I would just have to stay in the office for hours and it wasn't even worth it. I'd learned pretty quickly.

[00:28:26] It's not even worth it to try to get home. I might as well just be sick in class. That's funny.

[00:28:33] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah.

[00:28:33] **Bryan Smith:** So you make your way from a BFA in, at Tisch, and then you go to USC and I imagine that your connections at USC allowed you to get that internship. Is that how it worked on the, the big studio film?

[00:28:47] **Jen McGowan:** Oh yes, actually, you're right. You're right. So, yeah, one of the, one of my fellow students that I went to school there with, hadn't been. PA or assisting Steven Soderbergh. And she did a movie called "The Good German". And I wouldn't say he got me the job, but I was able to say that I knew this person. And unfortunately, that's super important.

[00:29:14] You need to know people. There's just too much money at stake for people to take risks on strangers.

[00:29:21] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:29:21] **Jen McGowan:** It's unfortunate and it means really not great things for women and people color but being aware of that is something I think is, it's a, you know, it's an obstacle that exists.

[00:29:34] **Bryan Smith:** But in what I've gathered, talking to a lot of filmmakers and creatives in any industry is the physical presence is so important, like being there in Los Angeles or wherever the scene is happening, being there physically and putting yourself in situations where you're going to make these connections is critical.

[00:29:54] **Jen McGowan:** Well, yeah, and, I mean, I don't know, like there are certainly when it's happening, like there's, there's also areas like Seattle and Austin and Atlanta that are making a lot of things.

[00:30:08] There's two things that happens with that. There there's a limited number of opportunities. And how far you can go up is also limited.

[00:30:17] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:30:17] **Jen McGowan:** The thing about being in the place is many opportunities in a career comes from places you can't predict. And like you said, you need to be constantly putting yourself in those positions to be able to accept those opportunities.

[00:30:32] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:30:33] **Jen McGowan:** For you to be the one that people are thinking about and, you know, yes, you can certainly write not in LA or New York, and you can certainly, you know, work as crew in Atlanta, but building relationships takes a lot of in-person effort.

[00:30:48] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, that makes sense. So your current process right now? Well, let's actually go back to "Rust Creek" because that was when you were not repped yet.

[00:30:56] **Jen McGowan:** Right.

[00:30:57] **Bryan Smith:** What was the process for you to first of all, get the script. How did you get the script? And second, how did you cast that film? And third, I'm going to ask you about the location shoot, but I don't want to have to compound of a question.

[00:31:11] **Jen McGowan:** But I'm going to forget all of these because as we talked about my short term, memory's a bit screwed right now.

[00:31:16] So I might have to ask you to repeat, but the first thing is. The first thing about how I got the script. So, the producer Stu Pollard had been recommended to me as someone who was investing in films in indie films. And I was trying to set up a film that I, another project that I loved, and I was introduced to him, I sent him the project, and we scheduled a meeting. He didn't love the project, but we really hit it off. And he was like, "you know, I have this other project that I'm trying to find a director for. Would you like to take a look?" Now this goes back to your other thing earlier. What I didn't know at the time is I had also been recommended to him by two other people who knew me.

[00:31:57] So, that goes to what you're saying about you need to be in the place, you know, people, I couldn't have predicted that. I didn't ask for that, but that's what happened. So it was a favorable, you know, it meant that I was more inclined to get the job than somebody else. And I read the script and I loved it.

[00:32:14] And it was something that I really wanted to do. It was something that I thought I could do a good job at. It was something that I thought audiences would like, and those are kind of the things that are my criteria for working on a project. So basically, I said yes. And then we were shooting, I think, four months later.

[00:32:30] **Bryan Smith:** And so, the casting, how did that unfold?

[00:32:33] **Jen McGowan:** Casting we did very traditionally, casting agents or casting directors, excuse me, or Jeremy Gordon and Caroline Liam. They did a great job. We just had regular casting sessions. The exception to that was with Jay Paulson and he was my next-door neighbor at the time.

[00:32:48] And I thought he'd be perfect for it. So, I-

[00:32:50] **Bryan Smith:** He played Loel, right?

[00:32:51] **Jen McGowan:** And I, thank you. And I texted his wife and I was like, "Hey, maybe Jay wants to audition for this." And he did. And he was amazing. And that worked out great for both of us.

[00:33:04] **Bryan Smith:** You know, let me tell you how amazing Jay's performance was. When I was watching it, I was like, "did they get this guy? Is this like a local that they picked?" Because he was so authentic? I mean, so authentic. And then you look at his filmography and all of the television shows he's done and "Mad Men" and, and you're like, this guy really transformed himself for this role.

[00:33:28] **Jen McGowan:** He's great. I love actors like that. I love like jobbing actors. They have incredible skill and craft and that's something that I really respond to.

[00:33:37] **Bryan Smith:** So, the story itself, I noticed that it started off and I, and I love films like this, by the way that just get right to it. You have this efficiency of storytelling, especially in a time where our attention spans are.

[00:33:51] It's really challenging, you know, to keep the attention on a film for two hours. But you jumped right into it and you don't know a lot about Hermione's character to begin with, but was that intentional? And I know you're not the screenwriter for this project, but.

[00:34:06] **Jen McGowan:** No, that's a really good question actually, because it was not intentional from the script. So, the script was written by Julie Lipson and there was this whole opening bit, I mean, a sequence I'm trying to remember exactly what it was, but. We were we, Oh yes. We met her mom. We, you know, saw where she lived. We saw her interacting at the university. There's a whole two shoot that we ended up not using any of the footage from, because we cut it.

[00:34:34] And I was like, "we don't need this." We don't need this.

[00:34:38] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:34:38] **Jen McGowan:** And it's funny because at the time Julie disagreed with me and I was like, "Hmm, I'm cutting it anyway." I cut it. And now, and now she agrees with me.

[00:34:49] **Bryan Smith:** It's an interesting take because there's, I think this innate desire, human desire to know like some backstory, you know, so you're not doing too much work trying to fill in gaps, but at the same time, you appreciate the efficiency of it. And if it's not necessary, cut it.

[00:35:06] **Jen McGowan:** Well also I decided that we had what we needed. We knew she is athletic. You know, we knew she was a little independent, but, but not, you know, she's not like super a world aware.

[00:35:20] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:35:20] **Jen McGowan:** We knew what we needed to know. And the other thing was, yes, we would have got a little more information, but what we would have had to pay for to get it, which is pace wasn't worth it.

[00:35:32] **Bryan Smith:** So, what did you do? What steps did you take as a visual storyteller to make sure that these characters, the people that played the meth manufacturers and

dealers, that they didn't become cliches or, you know, like you're kind of making fun of them and looking down on them, that type of thing.

[00:35:52] **Jen McGowan:** That was super important to me from the start from when I read the script. And I think because it was also something that was important to writer, it was, it was inherent in the script and it comes down to every little detail it's from casting. That's obviously huge. I think the thing is treating characters with empathy and humanity, making sure all of the characters.

[00:36:16] Maybe you don't agree with them, but you can understand why they're doing what they're doing. I think things like that are really important and finding moments for everybody to be human. So, they're not just the thing that is being said.

[00:36:29] **Bryan Smith:** Right. Yeah, I think Jay really served a nice function there to provide that humanity.

[00:36:36] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah.

[00:36:36] **Bryan Smith:** Because obviously he's a more sympathetic meth dealer or meth manufacturer character in that film, but he does a really nice job of kind of surprising you with the expectations that you have going in and the juxtaposition of his actual humanity coming through.

[00:36:54] **Jen McGowan:** Well, and the way you do that as a filmmaker, you have to understand what are people expecting? You know, what, what do people expect when they see a certain thing? And how can I shift that? And, and the truth of the matter is you can only shift things so far. You know, it's just like in casting, you can't cast certain known actors in certain roles because the audience just won't accept it. It's just not believable because they know them too well as a certain other thing.

[00:37:19] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:37:19] **Jen McGowan:** So. It's just a sensibility. I mean, it's a sensibility that you hone and you say, okay, I know I can get them to see that, but if I go a step further, it's going to be funny or it's going to, you know, it's not going to work.

[00:37:30] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. You clearly know when Micha's and Daniel's character comes in, they are totally on brand with what your expectations would be.

[00:37:40] But then Jay provides that nice balance. But yeah, I really enjoyed the film. So, what were the challenges of shooting? I assume on location there, there was no studio work done there except maybe at the police station. I don't know.

[00:37:54] **Jen McGowan:** It was, I mean, I, it was the cold, the cold was just hard. It was, you know, we got down to seven degrees a couple of days. We had the actual weather in general was a problem. We had a tornado one day that we had to like, you know, shelter from while we were shooting. We had lots of rain and snow and it was a challenge.

[00:38:16] **Bryan Smith:** Where was it shot?

[00:38:17] **Jen McGowan:** Kentucky right outside of Louisville.

[00:38:19] **Bryan Smith:** Oh, okay. Oh, you went right to the source.

[00:38:22] **Jen McGowan:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:38:24] **Bryan Smith:** That's great.

[00:38:26] **Jen McGowan:** Look, that's something that you can really get a lot of bang for your buck for indie films is, you know, shooting on location.

[00:38:33] **Bryan Smith:** And is that because of tax incentives for shooting there? Or is it just because you don't have to rent studio space or what, or where do you get the savings?

[00:38:42] **Jen McGowan:** I mean you get the texture and the look that that is authentic because it's there, you know, a lot of times shooting on location is cheaper because you know, people aren't worn out and tired of shooting. They're excited and they want to actually support the project rather than milk it .

[00:38:59] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:38:59] **Jen McGowan:** So, all those things come into play.

[00:39:01] **Bryan Smith:** So, you have this premiere of "Rust Creek". And did you know at the premiere that it would be as successful as it has been to date?

[00:39:11] **Jen McGowan:** I mean, no, because I mean, I've, I've mentioned this on social media, you know, we didn't get into any of the big film festivals, two of which I have screened at before. So, that was some information that made me a little nervous.

[00:39:24] I knew that it was a good film because I tested it with people. And I felt confident about it. We did well when we opened, you know, we got good reviews. It rated really highly on, on Rotten Tomatoes, which was super exciting. So, that for me was like, okay, audiences, like it, critics are liking it. I feel very confident about what I've created.

[00:39:47] But again, this is the funny thing, you know, it came out last year and the beginning of last year. Oh, excuse me. I guess it was 20- I'm so confused. I don't know. It came out at the beginning of some year and then almost.

[00:39:59] **Bryan Smith:** I think it's a 2019.

[00:40:01] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, I think so. And then almost a year later, it came out on Netflix.

[00:40:05] And what happened was everybody was like, "congratulations, your movie is finally out!"

[00:40:12] **Bryan Smith:** It hits theaters a year ago.

[00:40:17] **Jen McGowan:** We had two theatricals, which is amazing because IFC is awesome. When COVID hit, they were the first one to put movies in drive-ins and ours was

one. I didn't even know about it until that you never hear about anything until somebody tells you on social media. So, that just goes to show you a few things. Number one, the theatrical and the streaming audiences are not always the same. Number two, if you can't reach the audience with marketing or advertising or something, it just disappears.

[00:40:48] **Bryan Smith:** And how big is it to have a film on Netflix these days? I mean, my understanding was theatrical release was everything. And then over time, the streaming services became more important. But my perception now is that it's like Netflix or bust or Hulu maybe, or bust, but is that really a huge goal for filmmakers now to get onto Netflix?

[00:41:13] **Jen McGowan:** I don't, I don't know, honestly, so I was very lucky in that this was distributed by IFC, so that was part of their distribution plan. Yeah. There's like a distribution chain, you know, you start with basically, you start with where you're going to make the most money per view, and then it goes to where you make the least money preview. So, paying for tickets and then into subscribers' situations basically.

[00:41:35] **Bryan Smith:** Got it.

[00:41:36] **Jen McGowan:** So, that was part of the plan. And I learned later that apparently, we weren't going to go to Netflix, but because we did so well on our previous platforms that we did go to Netflix. I don't know any of these machinations, cause I'm not a producer, but that's something I found out later.

[00:41:55] **Bryan Smith:** So, the process, just so my listeners understand what we're talking about or what you're talking about, when you say distribution and platforms and that type of thing.

[00:42:05] When you have an indie film like "Rust Creek", it sounds like there's an investor who was not a studio.

[00:42:11] **Jen McGowan:** Yes.

[00:42:12] **Bryan Smith:** And this is not connected to a studio. Who's interested in financing a film. And what was the budget for "Rust Creek"? If you don't mind me asking.

[00:42:20] **Jen McGowan:** It was just under 1 million. Yeah. Yeah. That's okay.

[00:42:23] **Bryan Smith:** Under 1 million. Wow. Yeah. Okay.

[00:42:25] **Jen McGowan:** I that's why I don't mind talking about it. I'm pretty proud of that.

[00:42:28] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. I mean, well you have the car crash. You know, come over the cliff and I mean, you've got some pretty impressive shots for under a million. So, you have this investor, the film gets made. And then at that point you're looking for distribution, right?

[00:42:45] **Jen McGowan:** We're looking for distribution. And there are different ways you can go about doing that. That's why festivals are so important. If you get buzzed at a festival,

then you know, you could get picked up there. That's how my first film got picked up by IFC. We won it South by with "Kelly and Cal".

[00:43:00] **Bryan Smith:** Yep.

[00:43:01] **Jen McGowan:** Or you could, you know, you can have relationships with distributors. You can also have a sales agent. My first film was sold by ICM and "Rust Creek" was sold by Gersh. And what that means is that person comes on and tries to sell your film to a distributor and distributors have different territories, which drives me bananas because you have to sell each territory individually, you know?

[00:43:23] So, like you sell to North America, which usually excludes Canada, or you sell the U.S and then you sell to Ukraine and then you sell to South Korea. And then, you know, like it's a real like grungy kind of thing. So that's what the sales agent does, the distributor them. And in that case, you're hoping for a worldwide pickup, right, you're hoping somebody like Sony buys it to release internationally, right, so you don't have to go and do be scrappy. And then, you know, they, they have whatever plan they have for you. It could be theatrical. A lot of times with independent, theatrical is a loss leader. People only go to theatrical because it increases your sales price internationally. It's not because you make any money at theatrical.

[00:44:07] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah.

[00:44:08] **Jen McGowan:** So, that's super unfortunate, but that's kind of the case, you know? And then, so to show time and you sell to iTunes and Amazon and all those places and best buy or Walmart or wherever.

[00:44:20] **Bryan Smith:** So, the process of, I guess, signing on to an independent film, because you were unrepped at the time, did you have to hire an attorney to look at the contracts to protect your interests?

[00:44:31] **Jen McGowan:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I have a wonderful lawyer that thankfully has been with me for a long time, even before I was making her any money. And, she's great. And I don't, yeah, I don't do anything without a contract. And really, I would advise that to your listeners, don't even do a short film on the weekend without some sort of written contract that doesn't mean you have to go bananas. You don't need a three-page document. What you do need is, you know, just something written down that clarifies everybody's expectations and commitments.

[00:45:03] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah, I know there's a lot of side projects going on where people are making short films and they're doing it probably just on a handshake and trying to get experience and exposure.

[00:45:13] **Jen McGowan:** But you know, those questions, that's fine, but still write it down. This is what I'm going to do. And for that, this is what I'm going to get. That's it basic, you know, like I'm going to get director credit, I'm going to get, you know, whatever, but this is who owns it. Or for example, you know, say your short film hits and you get qualified for the Oscar. My short film "Touch" did well. You only get to nominate three people. So, if there's four producers whose name goes on that.

[00:45:39] **Bryan Smith:** Right. You mentioned earlier that there was a turning point where women directors were sought after. So, what was that turning point? When did it happen and where are we now in that trajectory?

[00:45:54] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, it's interesting. So, I think, I mean, look, the fact of the matter is it happens in waves and it has happened in waves over the course of our industry's history. It hasn't really stuck unfortunately. We'll see if this one does or not. I think, you know, some interest became peaked with me too when that happened, you know what, three years ago, four years ago.

[00:46:15] And I think it's still on everyone's minds. It's more challenging now because you cannot get extra people on set. You have a lot more at risk now, so you don't want to work with new people, but there's also benefits to working with women that you'll get a slightly different perspective that's new. Or you know, people of color or you'll, you'll get authenticity in a story that you don't even have access to. You know, you don't even know that you don't have that reach. So, I don't know. We'll see what happens. I mean, the numbers are still horrible, but they're, they're better than they were, but I'm curious to see if it sticks.

[00:46:54] **Bryan Smith:** I would think that the same dynamic would apply in politics as it does to film that if you have more women and people of color and transgender folks in the game, you're going to have a better representation in politics and films.

[00:47:11] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, and it's just, it's just more dynamic. It's more interesting, it's more creative, it's lot less boring. And you know, those people need to be in positions of power too. They need to be in positions of, you know, executive roles and studio roles and producer roles. That's writers. Absolutely. It gets basically just to decrease the stranger danger factor. That's all, that's all it is.

[00:47:33] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. And I would think too, that. Men are more likely to create movies that aren't going to age as well, because they're not as sensitive to like a joke that is just like, "what decade are we in?" I'm still seeing that.

[00:47:49] **Jen McGowan:** Absolutely, absolutely. Still seeing that, but I really, really resist any sort of generalization about any particular gender or ethnicity or whatever, 'cause I just. You know, there are some guys who are really sensitive and really woke and you'll get interesting stuff. So, I, by no means, am I saying a particular group should not make films. I'm just saying we should have more people from all groups making films, you know, If, you know, Joe Schmo massage wants to make whatever woman hating film fine, but there better be women making other films so that, so that we can choose a different perspective.

[00:48:31] **Bryan Smith:** Right. That makes a lot of sense. So, what do you have going on right now that you're excited about? If you can talk about it.

[00:48:39] **Jen McGowan:** I'm excited about a lot. I, so, and I super apologize to your audience. I find it so annoying when people say, "Oh, I can't talk about it" but unfortunately, I can't, I'm shooting a TV episode in March that I am over the moon excited about. So, maybe after March, I'll, I'll be on social tweeting about it, whenever I'm allowed. And then, I

just got an offer for a movie, you know, like a smallish movie, like a \$5 million movie. That script is amazing. So, I'm hoping that works out. And then I've got, like I said, I've got four scripts to read this week and I pitched on a big, really cool action movie I've had my second movie or second meeting on. So, I'm very, very lucky things are going well.

[00:49:25] **Bryan Smith:** In terms of television, directing versus film. I know Lynn Shelton straddled those two worlds really well and created amazing work in both the universes. But do you consider them to be different creatively? In other words.

[00:49:40] **Jen McGowan:** I really do.

[00:49:42] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. Tell me what your thoughts are on that.

[00:49:44] **Jen McGowan:** Yeah, I think, I think they're very different. So, first of all, you have to, you have to specify, are we talking about episodic directing or are we talking about pilot directing or are we talking about, you know, miniseries kind of directing, you know?

[00:49:57] **Bryan Smith:** Right.

[00:49:58] **Jen McGowan:** Because those are totally different things. When you're an episodic director, you're a guest, you're a day player, your job is to come in and make somebody else's show. That's your job. That's very different from what you're doing in a feature film. In a feature film, you have to be the one that leads everyone. You cannot be wavering about "I don't know, I want to consult you what do you think?" Nobody cares. They want to know what you want and they want to execute that. That's what is needed on a feature film, not an episodic directing. That's not the case, you know, pilot and, and more creative directing roles. It gets bigger, but still the writer is, is more powerful in television. Which is fine, it's a different form.

[00:50:44] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. And I would imagine with like the "Twilight Zone" or "The Purge", you're coming into basically an ecosystem that has been operating without you for quite some time. And you just kind of have to find where your place is and just let the people do what they're going to do, and you do what you're going to do.

[00:51:02] **Jen McGowan:** That's right. And that's what gets back to what I was saying about in the film. If you don't know what your role is, singularly, that's a difficult transition to make. And, luckily with both "The Purge" and "Twilight Zone", they were not, they're not really serialized, you know, "The Purge" kind of was, but season one and season two were separate.

[00:51:22] And the "Twilight Zone", obviously every episode is totally on its own. There's the world of the Twilight zone that we understand the visual world and the tone. But there's not like the same actors that are in every single thing. So, I did get to have a lot more creative control than I would if I were hardcore episodic, like I'm going into something that's on, it's it, you know, maybe it's not like it's on its eighth season and the same actors from the beginning.

[00:51:45] That's real episodic directing you, you have to, that is a skill and a talent and, you know.

[00:51:53] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. Well, it sounds like you are hitting it out of the park in both worlds at this point. And you're directing television, you're getting scripts sent to you. You're attached to a \$5 million budget feature film, pretty exciting stuff.

[00:52:08] **Jen McGowan:** It's very exciting. I, you know, this is what I've been working for for the last 20 years. So it's, it's very exciting.

[00:52:14] **Bryan Smith:** Well, congratulations. I have one, one final question for you. And it's a question I often ask of my guests at the end of the interview. And it's this, what advice would you give to young people or even older folks who want to get into the industry of filmmaking television or even theater, because you did get your start in theater at Tisch.

[00:52:37] **Jen McGowan:** So, I heard something. I think it was on like a, what was it, a cooking show? It was this like Michelin star rated chef. He said, and he just sent us in an offhanded way, the expression, "mastering your own style, becoming an expert in your own style." I think that's something that's very important actually. It's important that you determine what your tastes are, what your perspective is. What you like and what you don't like, not trying to be something that already exists. You know, the thing that already exists, we have it, we don't need it anymore. We don't need another version of that. What we need is the thing that only you can do or see or say. So, I would encourage people to focus on that.

[00:53:24] **Bryan Smith:** Oh, that's powerful. One of the reasons I started this podcast in a way I felt like I did not know what my voice was or what my point of view was. And I feel like by talking to folks who have found their voice and have found their own unique perspective on the arts and where they fit into that world, that I can be inspired by that. So, I'm glad that you framed it that way.

[00:53:53] **Jen McGowan:** And by the way, it's not as scary as like, I feel things like, Oh, for your voice, your vision, you know, it's really just your taste. What do you like, what do you like, what do you not like? That's it just figure out what that is and listen to those impulses.

[00:54:07] **Bryan Smith:** Yeah. And to do that, it sounds like you need to jump in and try theater, if that doesn't light your fire, then try something else and get on set and do it, do the thing. Yeah.

[00:54:18] **Jen McGowan:** Make stuff, make stuff, and put yourself out there. Yeah.

[00:54:22] **Bryan Smith:** Jen McGowan has been a real pleasure to talk to you. Thanks for making time for me.

[00:54:26] **Jen McGowan:** Thanks for having me.

[00:54:29] **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

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