

## Susan Wrubel Transcript

**Susan:** I think it might be argued that something directed by Zach Woods starring Will Ferrell might be weightier than other movies, but the film definitely has merit. And I can also say that there are other star-studded shorts that do not get accepted because they don't have the chops.

[00:00:19] **Bryan:** 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.

[00:00:28] My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now let's jump in. Susan Wrubel is on the show. Susan, the executive director of Aspen film, which organizes three film festivals every year, including Aspen short Fest. Aspen short Fest is just one of a few Oscar qualifying festivals for short films in the United States.

[00:00:53] And I was lucky to attend this year before I spoke to Susan. Susan's path into film is more circuitous than some of the filmmakers I've interviewed. She started at a small indie film studio called October Films as a print shipper. What's a print shipper you ask? Well, listen to our chat and you'll find out.

[00:01:12] After October Films, Susan worked her way up quickly in the entertainment industry, working with New York based Cinepointe Advisors, providing strategic guidance and support to producers, financier's, and production companies, becoming head of acquisitions and co-productions for Paramount Classics and running the theatrical division of New Yorker films, where she worked with world-class international filmmakers.

[00:01:35] She also co-executive produced the film *They* which premiered at the 2017 Cannes film festival. She was the executive producer of *Maggie's Plan*, starring Julianne Moore, Greta Gerwig, Ethan Hawke, Bill Hader, and Maya Rudolph. She co-produced the Netflix original documentary *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* about DJ Steve Aoki and was a production executive on the film, *Still Alice* starring, Alec Baldwin, and Julianne Moore who won an Oscar for best actress in that film.

[00:02:07] I've been a film festival geek since the mid two thousands ever since I attended Sundance for the first time, so it was a true pleasure talking to Susan about her work at Aspen film, as well as her career as a film producer. So without further ado, let's jump into my chat with Susan Wrubel. Susan Wrubel, welcome to dream path podcast.

[00:02:27] **Susan:** Thank you.

[00:02:28] **Bryan:** This is pretty exciting. I have never talked to the executive director of any film festival before, and I'm just getting to know the Aspen short fests and the vibe that festival has. I was really pleased with the slate of films that I had access to with my pass this year. And is this your third year as executive director now?

[00:02:52] **Susan:** This is my third year I'm into my fourth year. Yes. And I'm also the artistic director as well that said, I hire a programmer for ShortsFest who is very skilled at short film

curation. Whereas I'm more of a feature film person, myself. You know, we definitely collaborate on certain things and chat a lot about the program before everything gets locked in.

[00:03:19] But the strange part is that Jason Anderson, who is our ShortsFest director of programming, Jason comes from Toronto international film festival, another biggie, which is very well established and well-known, and well-respected, Jason programs, their shorts, short cuts program. Excuse me. And we brought Jason on last year in 2020, and the 11th hour actually had to switch to virtual.

[00:03:44] So, Jason has not actually experienced a real Aspen ShortsFest yet. He did a wonderful job last year, we chatted in a bit more detailed this year before the selection was finalized, and I would say across the board, the feedback that we got on the program in general was outstanding. People really, really loved it.

[00:04:04] He just has a great sensibility. And I think that having been here myself for three and a half years and really have an understanding of our community and our viewership, that really helps sort of inform the way he and his programming team look at short films.

[00:04:23] **Bryan:** I had been watching some interviews with you, and I think last year there was an interview from like March 12th. And I was like, oh my goodness. She doesn't know. Right. And he knows at this moment.

[00:04:35] **Susan:** That was the day that they, that we pulled the plug.

[00:04:37] **Bryan:** Yeah, and what a moment in time for everybody in the entertainment industry. And, I had just finished Sundance at that time, and I was covering Sundance. And, you know, after that, I think that was the last live film festival for the entire year. So, tell us about the selection process, because my understanding is there's 3000 submissions and only 80 accepted.

[00:05:03] **Susan:** Yeah, for ShortsFest. So, well, let me just back up for a second. Do you know that we do three festivals a year?

[00:05:09] **Bryan:** I saw that. Yeah. So, why don't we back up a little bit and you can tell my listeners about those three festivals and then we'll kind of narrow into the ShortsFest.

[00:05:19] **Susan:** So, Aspen film has been around, we're going into our 40 we're in our 42nd year. We had our 41st Film Fest in October, that was a hybrid. We were able to pull that off in the pandemic.

[00:05:32] Coming up in September will be our 42nd year and Aspen film launched with Film Fest back in 1979. And at that point it was feature independent feature films and shorts at the same time. In back in 1991, I guess it was because that was 30 years ago. ShortsFest became its own separate festival because our founder and executive director at the time, Ellen Hunt just felt that there was a whole world out there that needed to be explored. So, that's when ShortsFest was born 30 years ago.

[00:06:07] **Bryan:** Okay.

[00:06:07] **Susan:** Film Fest. Did you get to see our awards program?

[00:06:11] **Bryan:** I was not able to figure out how to watch it. I don't know why.

[00:06:15] **Susan:** Maybe we can get you the ceremony.

[00:06:17] **Bryan:** I did see who the winners were though. I was able to find those.

[00:06:21] **Susan:** Yeah. So, we give an award every year called the Ellen award. And when Ellen Hunt, our founder and longtime executive director retired, I think it was 2000 or 2001, a group of her friends who are stalwart group of locals. Who'd been around with her since the beginning and help launch the organization in 1979. They surprised her by awarding a film, a prize, this Ellen award, which really it was a film or a filmmaker that really embodied the spirit of Ellen and her programming style and something that was fun and playful yet meaningful and had a lot of heart to it.

[00:06:58] So, this year for our 30th anniversary, the jury foreman, whose name is Steve Aldrich. Who's a long time local. Steve announced the winner and they cut to one of the women who started the festival with Ellen back in 1879, a woman named Gail Holstein. Who actually talked a little bit about, you know, Aspen film and Film Fest and how everything got started so many years ago in really it was, you know, sort of around the time of Sundance when people just thought, "Hey, there are all these great indie movies out there that people need to see that aren't studio fair."?

[00:07:31] And that was really how Film Fest was born. I don't want to say in somebody's backyard, but it was Ellen and her group of friends picking up the phone, calling, you know, the likes of my old bosses at October films or somebody at Miramax back in the day, asking to show films. So, this festival really has a history and, and a longevity with independence.

[00:07:53] Our tagline is "Independent by Nature", and we really try to show things here that people may not see elsewhere. We are traditionally situated in the fall, sometimes in a really opportune spot, sometimes in a not opportune spot, because I feel like anything that is now launching at, the New York film festival is off limits to us until it's already screened there, which is a bummer, but I totally understand it.

[00:08:17] And it's great for New York because it's such a world-class festival. But we do have the luxury of screening films from the current year I would say, certain things that come from Sundance in January that have not yet launched until fall, that, you know, a lot of distributors are holding off for the award season. We definitely get a lot of great titles out of Cannes. And usually, I'm able to pull a couple of things from Venice, Telluride, Toronto, which is always a big coup as well. We have a huge audience for documentaries. So, I'm able to cherry pick some documentaries that have, that have been popping up at festivals, and we usually show only 20 films at Film Fest. So, it is by invitation only. So, being the, being the artistic director there for our Academy's reading series really has its advantages in the sense that I can kind of curate my wish list. We're not always getting my full wish list and it's always a negotiation. But as I said, in a pandemic year, we were able to execute a fully hybrid festival in October. We were able to do four in-person screenings, we opened with

*Nomadland*. We had *The Dissident* as the late night show that same evening. And then we closed with oh, *Truffle Hunters*.

[00:09:34] **Bryan:** Okay. Yeah.

[00:09:35] **Susan:** Have you seen *Truffle Hunters*?

[00:09:36] **Bryan:** I- know I saw it was at Sundance, I believe too.

[00:09:39] **Susan:** Yeah. I couldn't get a ticket at Sundance. We begged and begged. We, we brought it here. And *Ammonite* closed the festival in October, and we were able. To do a drive in, we were only one of five places in the country to show *David Burns: American Utopia* before it launched on HBO.

[00:09:56] So, that was great. We did it in the rodeo parking lot, out in Snowmass, which a huge coup for the 40 foot blow-up screen, which was incredible looking. And then we had a bunch of great virtual offerings, including. *Sound of Metal*, *One Night in Miami*.

[00:10:14] **Bryan:** Nice. I just saw *Sound of Metal* this weekend. Incredible.

[00:10:17] **Susan:** He's amazing.

[00:10:18] **Bryan:** Oh my gosh.

[00:10:19] **Susan:** He looked quite dashing last night, I have to say, Riz Ahmed.

[00:10:24] **Bryan:** Yeah. He's he is quite a handsome devil. Yeah. I have to say.

[00:10:28] **Susan:** He's just a super talent that flew under the radar in this country for so long.

[00:10:33] **Bryan:** I think the first time I saw him was that HBO series.

[00:10:35] Yes. Where he was a

[00:10:37] **Susan:** taxi driver.

[00:10:38] **Bryan:** Right? So, tell us about the Short Fest and the importance of short films as it relates to feature films in terms of cultivating and nurturing young filmmakers, or maybe not young filmmakers, but just, you know, people are coming into the industry maybe late in their career.

[00:10:56] **Susan:** So ShortsFest, as I said, you know, in 1991, the, the founders of Aspen film and Film Fest realized that shorts really was a thing unto itself and decided to dedicate a full festival to shorts. Throughout the years, we became Oscar qualifying in five categories, those being animation, comedy, documentary drama, and short short, which are films under 10 minutes in length. And that's really a big deal because yes, there are Oscar qualifying film festivals in the U.S and around and around the world.

[00:11:31] But, if you are short filmmaker and you want to be considered for an Oscar, you know, you see at the Oscars, there are three shorts categories: live action, animation and

documentary short, we qualify for all three categories with our animation, the documentary, and then our comedy or comedy drama or comedy and drama both fall under live action, or can't maybe not because this year, I think three of our Oscar qualifiers were all animation pieces, but they were all Oscar qualified, so they can go on for contention. And a lot of filmmakers use shorts as calling cards." This is what I'm doing. This is who I am. This is my voice." Oftentimes you'll find that short filmmakers who've had success with their films or, you know, just a great concept that they want to explore a little bit further. We'll kind of bang out the, the story in a short, and then they'll go back, and they will expand it into a feature and develop it and get, you know, production company on board or find financing for it.

[00:12:33] Jason Reitman is a director who was a ShortsFest alum, who then went on to do amazing things, like *Thank You for Smoking*, and now I'm blanking on the George Clooney. One that everybody knows about. It'll come to me. But that's what Jason's career really took off. Also, Sarah Polly was another director.

[00:12:51] **Bryan:** Oh, was it *Up in the Air*?

[00:12:54] **Susan:** *Up in the Air*! Thank you.

[00:12:57] **Bryan:** Okay. Right.

[00:12:57] **Susan:** The other Director who did the feature about the drummer? So, a lot of these notable filmmakers have actually launched resort films. And for example, you'll also find a lot of. Actors who are making the crossover from acting to directing, and this year we had a wonderful animated sort. Did you see a film called *Roborovski*?

[00:13:20] **Bryan:** No, I didn't.

[00:13:21] **Susan:** It was a great animated piece that was directed by Dev Patel. Co-directed I should say.

[00:13:26] **Bryan:** Yeah, and I also saw Zach Woods in there too with *David*.

[00:13:30] **Susan:** Yep. And also, the young woman who plays the daughter in *Ray Donovan*, but she also had her directorial debut. Kerris Dorsey is her name. She had a short called *Silvertone*. So, that was her directorial debut. So again, it's, it's really a calling card for a lot of filmmakers who are finding their way. It's a succinct and efficient way to get your brand out there. It's always interesting to see what the jury goes for and what the audience award ends up being. Sometimes they are aligned and other times not. And we do bring in real industry stalwarts as our official competition jury because they are selecting the films that will go on for Oscar contention. So, they select the five categories that I mentioned. They also award a student short, a prize our student short prize is not an Oscar qualifier, but that is a category within the academy awards that does qualify. And in terms of being a dedicated Shorts Fest that is an Oscar qualifier, we're one of about four in the country that is strictly dedicated to shorts where you can become Oscar qualified. You know, you have other big festivals Sundance in Palm Springs and, South by Southwest that are all Oscar qualifiers as well, but they also have feature films in there.

[00:14:45] So, I think one of the things that filmmakers really enjoy about coming to Aspen is that it's really all about them. And it's a small mountain community and you're in, traditionally a spectacular locale, the historic Wheeler opera house, down right in downtown Aspen. So, one of the historical beautiful buildings here, that's been refurbished.

[00:15:04] It's, you know, a real Jewel box with 500 seats. So, if you're a first-time filmmaker, even if you're a second-time filmmaker coming here from another country and just being on that stage and looking up and you're thinking, oh my God, there are 500 people here and there's a balcony and people love my movie. It's a pretty heady experience.

[00:15:22] **Bryan:** Yeah, I have two friends who had a film show at the ShortFest this year. Rayka Zehtabchi and Sam Davis with, *Are You Still There?* And I interviewed both of them recently, just I think last fall, after they had that branded content up for KitchenAid, it was a documentary on female restaurant industry workers.

[00:15:41] **Susan:** Oh, wow, I haven't seen that still. I've heard. It's fantastic though.

[00:15:44] **Bryan:** It's great. It's really good. And then of course, Rayka Zehtabchi was my second guest on the podcast, kind of a flagship guest right after she won the academy award for *Period. End of Sentence*. So, it's cool to see that they got their film into your festival and that it's an Oscar qualifying festival.

[00:16:02] **Susan:** That's awesome. Yeah, it's a great film. Very surprising. And so well done.

[00:16:07] **Bryan:** What's surprising about these is I come in with an extreme bias against short films, and I think it's because I just don't really understand how people can cram so much story into such a short space. And screen time and it's like, okay, how do you do that?

[00:16:26] Well, what we're seeing in these festivals and especially the Aspen ShortFest, is that the production value of these films is incredible. First of all, very, very talented filmmakers. And, you know, with Rayka and Sam, I mean the academy award winning filmmakers are coming in and just knocking it out of the park in 15 minutes.

[00:16:46] **Susan:** Yeah.

[00:16:46] **Bryan:** I mean, a fully formed, some of them, some of the stories are fully formed. Some of them feel a little more like maybe you're kind of swooping in and you're getting maybe a cross section of a, of a broader story, but I think that's just a stylistic choice that they make. And that's great. But for me, I'm really starting to evolve in terms of my, my appreciation for short films.

[00:17:09] **Susan:** Absolutely. I feel the exact same way. And when I said to you, we bring in a director of ShortFest programming, who's really an expert in short films. That was not my bailiwick. You know, I could always watch a short film and appreciated or think, "oh, this cinematography is amazing." Or "this director really knows how to work with actors and, you know, tell a story."

[00:17:28] But that was never really my bailiwick I, you know, kind of grew up in the business and features. And that was really what I understood. So, this being my fourth ShortFest, I

would say that I had less of a hand in our first two. And when we brought in a new director of programming in 2019, Jason and I had to work very closely to the other because I had an understanding of the audience and I brought him in to do a specific job.

[00:17:53] So, we really had to be in sync, so I started watching a lot more films. And there are certain things. And it's funny because there are certain films that, you know, were big shorts on the festival circuit that I will take a look at and say, "I just don't really understand that." It's not, it's not me. It's not to say it's a bad film. It just didn't speak to me. It didn't resonate in a certain way.

[00:18:11] **Bryan:** Right.

[00:18:12] **Susan:** And there are other films that certain programmers feel like, oh, it's too mainstream. We don't want that. And I have this conversation with filmmakers who, you know, there was a comedy that we showed that I thought was just so lovely. And so succinct in its storytelling and it was perfect.

[00:18:28] It just, it did what it was supposed to do in 10 minutes. And it was humorous and there was a known, you know, a notable actor in there, a mature actress. I should call her, which I love. And I love when filmmakers are able to use actors in that way and really give them a special role in, in a short film sometimes these ancillary characters from TV or other films really bring a lot of gravitas to a short film, because you know that they actually have the chops to do it. So, we were chatting and she said to me, you know, we had a little sidebar in, in another, interactive building that we did. And it was just the two of us in our own little table.

[00:19:06] She said, "you know, I started to get worried. I hadn't really been accepted to many festivals and I'm just so thrilled that my film is an Aspen and, you know, blah, blah, blah, what's it about." And I said, you know, you have to realize that every festival has a very different personality. And I think that certain festivals that are Oscar qualifiers feel that the bar has to be set in a certain place for a certain genre of film and comedy can be difficult. Like, there's some highbrow comedy, there's some lowbrow comedy. And I also feel, especially when you're dealing with international comedy, it doesn't always translate.

[00:19:40] **Bryan:** Right.

[00:19:41] **Susan:** And there are very different sensibilities, for festivals for countries.

[00:19:46] You know, I think a lot of the international dramas translate beautifully because they are just that. And they tell a specific story, I mean, we had a film here in 2018, that ended up winning the dramatic award, which Oscar qualified it. It also won the Ellen jury prize and we brought the filmmaker. Her name is Mariam Zubair, she was one of our jurors this year. Her film was called *Brotherhood* and it was just visually stunning. The characters were incredible. I think she did some casting with non-actors, and it was just a universal story that. That really spoke to a lot of people across a wide swath of viewership. Whereas I find particularly U.S comedy doesn't always do that.

[00:20:30] **Bryan:** You know, one thing I missed out on, I really regret not watching *We Have One Heart*, which one best documentary, and it's an animated film, but for some reason I- you know, I watched all of Program Two, I believe, which had *David* in it, the Zach Woods one, but. And for some reason, I was just like, "you know, I just can't, I can't." The animation stopped me and I need to get past that because I think animation and I just talked to two animators last week who worked on a bunch of Pixar films. And so, I mean, I can connect with animation. I don't know why in this context, it was like a roadblock for me, but I need to really push past that because I missed out. Everybody loved this film.

[00:21:08] **Susan:** And as I said, what's so interesting is that out of six jury awards, four of them were animated. And we only have one animation prize.

[00:21:17] **Bryan:** Yeah, that's incredible.

[00:21:18] **Susan:** So, documentary, short short, animation and comedy were all animated. That's so cool.

[00:21:27] **Bryan:** It is really cool. You know, I'm going to go back to the Zach Woods, short *David* with Will Ferrell, and William Jackson Harper. And that was the very first film I watched in this festival, probably because I saw Will Ferrell's face, I was like, oh, there's a familiar face. Yeah. What I'm wondering is. Is there controversy in the short film world because Zach Woods may be considered to be kind of a shoe in like, oh, it's Zach Woods and oh, and there's Will Ferrell and you know, you've got of course William Jackson, Harper, and I mean, big, big names, a lot of street cred coming in, but do they have an unfair advantage, number one, getting into the festival, number two, you know, for award consideration, is that a controversy?

[00:22:10] **Susan:** Look, I would say, I don't think it's a controversy. I think it might be argued that something directed by Zach Woods starring Will Ferrell and William might be weightier than other movies, but the film definitely has merit.

[00:22:27] And I can also say that there are other star-studded shorts that do not get accepted because they don't have the chops. And, you know, it's definitely something that we talk about and we will, we will give certain consideration, you know, there might be more of a conversation around a film that has, you know, star bait or something, but ultimately at the end of the day, at least with this festival, if the film does not have what it takes to be selected, because as you said out of almost 3000 submissions, only 80 films were chosen, it's not going to make it through. And, you know, interestingly as fascinating and wonderful and amusing and uncomfortable is the film *David* is directed by Zach Woods. It was not something, you know, that the jury selected as a jury prize.

[00:23:16] **Bryan:** That's true.

[00:23:16] **Susan:** But it was also something that the audience award didn't go to either. So, more than the jury prize, I think the fact that it, that the audience didn't select, it speaks even louder than a jury selecting it.

[00:23:29] **Bryan:** Well, that's a good point. And let me be very clear, especially to Zach Woods, fantastic film. So, I'm not trying to diminish the greatness of this film because it is a fully formed story and it's just incredible how you can start in this office, and I don't want to spoil it if it ever makes it into some type of a streaming platform. But yeah, it starts in this psychologist's office played by Will Ferrell and have no idea what's going to happen next. And it has a very satisfying ending as well. So, really, really nice job by Zach Woods. But it also set a nice tone for going into the rest of the films that I watched to where you kind of see this really broad spectrum of submissions. You have foreign films. I watched *Summer Shade*.

[00:24:19] **Susan:** Oh yeah.

[00:24:20] **Bryan:** Yeah. There's so much diversity in this slate of films that was chosen out of the 3000, in terms of just the tone, the look, the, feel, the message, the setting, the geography. It was lovely and I'm going to attend every year from now on. I've been going to Sundance for a long time. And I just, I cannot believe I have not tried out Aspen.

[00:24:40] **Susan:** Thank you, well, we, you know, there's a reason we are an Oscar qualifier and, you know, I, I think that we do a great job at what we do. And yes, that is something that we really strive for is balance, you know, from all aspects of, of the world. Our program this year represented 33 countries, and I think we had submissions from like 77 or 80 countries.

[00:25:04] **Bryan:** How many people are reviewing those 3000 films, by the way?

[00:25:08] **Susan:** Not as many as you would think. We have an amazing volunteer screener committee, which are approximately 20 people who kind of do a first pass through things and recommend that things get moved on to programmers.

[00:25:20] Our programming team is Jason, who's our ShortsFest, director of programming and a team of three. So, they really do a good job. Now granted, Jason is a senior programmer at an international festival. So, some of the things he's seen in advance, but I, I marvel at the number of premiers that we had.

[00:25:38] I mean, the film that won our audience award close ties to home country. That was a world premiere.

[00:25:43] **Bryan:** Oh, that's incredible.

[00:25:44] **Susan:** Yeah.

[00:25:45] **Bryan:** 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](http://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. Now, back to the interview, tell us about yourself. I understand you came from you, started in Manhattan, and then moved to Los Angeles and then wound up in Aspen. But tell us what was going on in Manhattan and Los Angeles.

[00:26:21] **Susan:** So, I left college, moved to New York. I started working in the PR department of an advertising agency and I started in August, and I think at the end of January, that following calendar year, the agency I was working with had lost their biggest account and my boss and I were the PR department. So, I lost my job and I was in a panic and somebody that I had gone to school with that, Hey, do you remember? So-and-so. He's leaving to go back to business school, and the company he's working for is hiring at some kind of cool startup indie film company. And I was like, yeah, that sounds kind of cool. I studied film in college.

[00:26:58] That sounds awesome. I didn't know one could actually have a career in film distribution. So, I went into interview at October films. Which was launched right around the same time that Miramax was launched, by four guys, Bingham Ray, Jeff Lipski, John Schmidt and Amir Malin. Sadly, we lost Bingham several years ago, and he was a true mentor and a Maverick. Back in the day, he was one of the kookiest creatives, like close friends with Mike Lee and Pedro Almodóvar and, you know, just seminal directors like that, that really formed my basis and love of cinema. So, I started out there, I was moving print copies around the country.

[00:27:38] That was, that was my job. I was the print shipper. And they also said, "oh, you're going to have to handle deliverables." So when, when we're accepting a film from a producer, you need to go through all the legal lists and figure out what film elements we need, what marketing materials we need. It was the worst thing in the entire world, but it was also the best education one could get in film, understanding what it takes to deliver a movie. Like if you're a producer, what distributors are going to need. So, I was there for a little while, went to- so I left October, right? Is they were about to blow up after a little movie called *The Last Seduction*. And right before they did *Breaking the Waves*, the Lars Von Trier film, with Emily Watson and Stellan Skarsgard, which is still my all-time favorites.

[00:28:26] I went to another small New York based art house company, distributed a movie called starring Liv Tyler, that was James Mangolds directorial debut back in the day, and then ended up leaving there to go relaunch the theatrical division of a company called New Yorker films, which had been around basically since the sixties.

[00:28:47] And I worked for an incredible man named Dan Talbot who passed away, I want to say December of 2018, Dan was truly my mentor. He was unbelievable. He owned a theater in Manhattan called The New Yorker theater and ended up with Lincoln Plaza Cinemas was the multiplex, on Broadway, on the upper west side that he had for years, that theater sadly closed recently. And it was really the end of an era. Dan was an incredible man who was responsible for bringing Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean Luc Godard to the United States. He was friendly with both filmmakers. I met Verner Herzog sitting in his office. You know, he was that guy. He launched. Fassbender. He launched Guzman.

[00:29:29] He launched, Hector Babenco all in the United States. I mean, these were established filmmakers in their own countries, but I was with them for five years. And I really looked at that experience as my grad school education and cinema studies. I was a member of. Dan and his wife, Toby's family. They took me to Cannes for the first time, you know,

there used to be late night, sessions sitting on the edge of their bed, discussing, you know, what movies we were seeing the next morning.

[00:29:56] It was all quite civilized. And that was really how I got started, and the bug really bit me. And I think. I think Dan, who was probably in his seventies at the time, early seventies thought it was hilarious that, "oh, here's this, you know, go get her young woman who's chomping at the bit to go try to get deals done" so, he would send me in to talk to all the European producers where, you know, we would make deals for no money. And I would offer them, you know, a 50/50 split with expenses off the top. But you know, this was how I really forged my way in the foreign film business. I met everybody through him. And after being there for five years, I was running their theatrical division.

[00:30:38] So I was putting films on screen around the country and, you know, negotiating all the advertising and doing all that. But acquisitions was really what I wanted to do. So going to Cannes with Dan and then he started sending me to Berlin on my own was, was really, you know, kind of what set a trajectory for me.

[00:30:56] I got a little bit off course for a little while working for a digital cinema company called Madstone Films that was a little bit ahead of its time when September 11 happened that kind of rattled, the whole digital cinema era, and I started consulting for a little while and then ended up finding my way to LA working for Paramount.

[00:31:17] **Bryan:** Ah, nice.

[00:31:18] **Susan:** I was brought in as head of acquisitions.

[00:31:20] **Bryan:** What is head of acquisitions? What do they do?

[00:31:23] **Susan:** Oh, so we would acquire, completed features or projects that script stage. So, I was meeting with producers, you know, throughout the US but also UK, Australia, certain foreign producers who were looking for co-production partners, and Paramount Classics didn't actually, co-produce a whole lot. But here and there, we would get involved in a movie, and put some money up and help the help the producers get the movie finished. And we would take usually right to the US the UK, Australia, and South Africa, which were known as the English speaking territories, but working for a global, you know, studio like that really gave me much more experience understanding the international marketplace. And I think I really fell in love with cinema from around the globe, basically because that's where my roots were, but also really dealing with sales agents who were people that sell the rights to films internationally.

[00:32:22] So, if somebody is making a movie, the US is considered one territory in the UK is another territory in Australia is another and France and Italy in the middle east. And you know, it, it, all the things were sold sort of that way around the world. Like sometimes. Films will sell worldwide, which is the best thing in the world.

[00:32:41] But you'll see in certain countries, somebody like a focus features, maybe distributing a film in the US and all the English speaking countries in Latin America. But in France, there's a French distributor that has it, in Israel, there's an Israeli distributor. So, this

to me was always fascinating. I got to see the world, or a lot of the world anyway, and really learn that business from the ground up.

[00:33:03] And, in 2005, my division at Paramount was shut down. They created another division called Paramount Vantage, which, which was a lot larger. I was not asked to be a part of Paramount Vantage, which was kind of okay at the time, I had gotten my studio experience. I wasn't sure if it was necessarily for me.

[00:33:21] And, I got a work visa and decided I was moving to London. So, why don't we try and move to London? ' Cause I hadn't done my official semester abroad. I did consult for a small sales company there, which was called The Salt Company. And I became their US scout. So, I was looking for US projects for them.

[00:33:41] They would get involved in at script stage and we would help put financing together. They also had a sister company that was a production company based out of Puerto Rico. And at that point I was also consulting for the Miami International Film Festival. So having a Puerto Rican based production client, working in Miami with a coach, the production market and trying to help Latin American films get made at all.

[00:34:04] You know, it was the perfect tempest in the teapot. So, I really started spending a lot more time in Latin America, never found a full-time job in London, but sort of parlayed all these consulting gigs into a little bit of a... I guess what led me to become an executive producing business. I ended up moving back to New York from LA in 2010, to be closer to my family and was working for a New York based non-profit that gave support to films and filmmakers called the Independent Feature Project, the IFP, their counterpart in LA is called find film independent. So, if anybody's familiar with those. They're organizations where filmmakers can go and look for support, whether it is, you know, sort of advisory services, helping to find grants or underwriting. So, I oversaw a 35 project co-production market with films from all over the world, so I was involved in the selection of those films and also was sort of the liaison between the filmmakers and the industry within the U S and it would sort of get on the phone with certain distribution companies or certain studios trying to court them to comics. We had all these great projects that they should be hearing about. And then that led me to work with an independent financier for a while who's based out of LA. And I think we made five or six movies together over like a two to three-year period. Company's called Hyperion media group.

[00:35:36] **Bryan:** Was that with *They* and *Maggie's Plan* or was that a different period?

[00:35:39] **Susan:** *Maggie's Plan* was with Hyperion; *They* was something that I did outside of Hyperion. Which was a really wonderful film that I think is so important today. I think the film launched two years before its time, we did a screening in Aspen with the film. There's a group here called Aspen Out, and with Aspen Out, Aspen film, put on something called the Alliance film series, which was done in conjunction with, several area, Gay-Straight alliances here in our valley.

[00:36:10] And *They* was the last film that we showed, and we were able to do a zoom Q&A with the lead, from the film, and some of the kids who came up for the program, which was

pretty incredible. Unfortunately, we were not able to get the actor here, but the fact that these kids were able to have a dialogue with this person at such a critical point was really fascinating, and as I said, it's, it's interesting. Just two years later, we've come so much farther.

[00:36:39] **Bryan:** The conversation that you guys started with that film is so important and so relevant right now, still relevant.

[00:36:45] **Susan:** So, that director was an Iranian woman whose first short won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival. And as a result of that when she was encouraged to make a feature. So, we, we did premiere the film in Cannes out of competition, which was pretty great. And that was a really great experience. Hyperion was slightly more mainstream Indie, I would say. We did a few documentaries. We did a great documentary on, superstar, DJ, Steve Aoki, which is a great one.

[00:37:16] **Bryan:** That's a good one. I saw that.

[00:37:18] **Susan:** That was a good one. *Maggie's Plan* was phenomenal. We did a wonderful genre film directed by Corrin Hardy who has gone on to have an incredible career in studio system. And we also did a great Palestinian Israeli film about a Palestinian Israeli rapper. It was very controversial because it was made by a very lefty Israeli.

[00:37:43] **Bryan:** Yeah. That's interesting about a Palestinian?

[00:37:45] **Susan:** Yes, and I've been involved in some other films aside of that. And in 2017, after I was back in New York, the chairman of the Aspen film board approached me to see if I'd be interested in coming out here to head up Aspen film, because the organization was in transition, and they were looking for a new executive director.

[00:38:05] So, I kind of thought I was retiring to the mountains. And it's been a lot of heavy lifting. It's been amazing, but three festivals a year is a lot and we were really small team. But it's this great community that loves the arts. It's something I do really love, but it's, it's been an experience.

[00:38:24] **Bryan:** So, let's go back to executive producing. I don't think many people know, at least I don't. What does an executive producer do? I have some filmmaker friends, and what I know is that very broadly producers have a lot of say-so because they're the money people.

[00:38:41] **Susan:** Right.

[00:38:41] **Bryan:** And they're going to know what's too expensive, you know, you got to stay on budget, but what more specifically did you do as an executive producer and what do you miss, if anything about that job?

[00:38:53] **Susan:** So, well, I didn't think there was anything harder than indie film producing until I got into the nonprofit world trying to pull off three film festivals a year with a staff of two and a half. However, executive producing is really bringing money to the table. So, I always sort of pitched myself as a consultant, as putting projects and people and financing

together. So, as I said, I worked for a financier. Part of what we would do and bringing the money in is, you know, we would, we would end up with credits and we would also not oversee things because that was really the producers job. The producer would usually find the music and put the whole crew together.

[00:39:35] But, as somebody who's coming in with financing, you wanted to make sure that you felt comfortable with all the choices that were being made because you were kind of wagering. You're wagering your investment on the team that the production team is putting everything together. Even more than the director, you're kind of wagering that the producer can execute.

[00:39:58] **Bryan:** Right.

[00:39:59] **Susan:** So, you're not dealing with the same things that the producers dealing with, but you need to have an understanding of, well, how is the film getting sold? What is the festivals strategy? Where's the film going to launch? Who were going to be the first people to see the film, you know, oh, your music budget is over what you expected?

[00:40:17] We would like to see that you find a different version of that song that's done by not the original group. So, you're not spending an extra \$50,000 on one track. If that makes sense. Yeah. So usually if somebody has an executive producer credit, it means that they brought some sort of financing to the table.

[00:40:34] **Bryan:** That makes a lot of sense. So, when I'm looking at the credits, I see executive producer on film and that means money, and then producer is more logistics. What would you say boots on the ground is making sure the directors staying on track and the actors not doing crazy things? That's going to shut down the film, and.

[00:40:54] **Susan:** Making sure the budget stays on track that you're not going over. That if you had an overage somewhere that you're going to reallocate finances, I worked on an amazing film with Julie, another Julianne Moore film, which was called *Still Alice*.

[00:41:08] **Bryan:** Oh, that's another good one.

[00:41:10] **Susan:** Yeah. It's the one that Julianne Moore won the Oscar for.

[00:41:12] **Bryan:** Right.

[00:41:13] **Susan:** And I was brought on by the French finance years, guys I'd known throughout my whole career. They had gotten involved to finance the movie and they wanted somebody on the ground in New York because they were Paris-based, and they weren't going to be there for the whole shoot that they trusted who was going to be their production executive in making sure that all of the production stuff stayed on track.

[00:41:36] So, I would sit with the producers regularly and go through budget stuff and make sure that all the numbers were fine. And I thought, oh my God. This is a lot, but it was making sure that not only was the producer doing their job, but I think even the harder job is the line producer.

[00:41:50] **Bryan:** So, going back to your formal education, I think it was communications and advertising at U Penn, right?

[00:41:57] **Susan:** Yeah. Communications and marketing. I graduated from the Annenberg school there.

[00:42:01] **Bryan:** So, do you think that that degree and that education prepared you for what you ended up doing in the film industry? Or was it a completely new trial by fire education that you received after college when you were working.

[00:42:13] **Susan:** I think that the foundation that I got was a great toolkit for me. I really learned to understand and appreciate cinema. And I think that's what led me to my first couple of jobs with these smaller art house indie companies, where I guess my tastes had sort of been cultivated. And as I said, working at new Yorker films for five years, really felt like the grad school education and cinema studies and really.

[00:42:41] You know, sort of honed my tastes and helped me appreciate cinema from around the globe, which was something that I always gravitated to more than studio fair. For the most part. There's just something about the storytelling, I think, and also working a lot with Iranian cinema when it was really big and making its way into the, into the US.

[00:43:01] In the nineties, just really understanding the simplicity of the storytelling and, and realizing that when you do put parameters on people and sort of forced them to tell beautiful stories within the confines. Of a system, if you will, they're still really beautiful things that can come out of it. And there's something about, it's a yoga term about like using constraint to find freedom, if you will, that I always really loved. In terms of the business stuff, you know, I took a couple of business classes and had an understanding of the business side. But the film business is really an animal unto itself and you get to learn it by seeing deal flow. Really, there are certain deals that look very similar, and then there are things that are just very different from anything else.

[00:43:51] There are certain things that you always want, but you need to have somebody who's seasoned in these deals to make sure that everything that you, all the assurances that you would want are in place as you go, because you know, you, we, we would come across filmmakers who claim that they're producing and come in with a, you know, oh, it's a \$20 million budget, and you're kind of, when you can't make that film at that budget with those actors, you're never going to make your money back. "Well, of course you can." Well, no, I actually understand the way foreign sales work and nobody's going to take that deal. So, there is a lot of it that just comes with experience.

[00:44:23] **Bryan:** Yeah. What you've described here, I'm just sort of an awe of how complicated it all sounds behind the scenes, but it does make me think about this red carpet interview that I did at Sundance when Sundance was live in 2020. And I was interviewing the producers of this movie called *Nine Days*. And I was about to meet a producer by the name of Pierro Frescobaldi from unit nine out of London. And so, I asked one of the producers on the red carpet. I was like, "I'm about to meet Pierro one of the producers on your films." He's like Pierro who's Pierro. I said, unit nine, they're producing *Nine Days*. I mean, they're

one of the producers of this film. He's like unit nine. Like, I don't even know what you're talking about. So, that interview didn't go very well on the red carpet because he had no idea, but it made me realize that there are so many people that are involved behind the scenes that even the people on the front lines, so to speak, really have no idea what's going on and maybe that's for the best, because they're focusing on the creative part. Like we just need to get this thing shot, get it in the can edited and sent out to festivals.

[00:45:30] **Susan:** Yeah. They're, you know, it's, it's definitely, a good example of it takes a village. Yeah, but you also have kooky villagers, and you know, there's some, there's some productions that, you know, people would just say, "oh my God, it was toxic, there was one person on set who was just the bad apple who really ruined it, or who was really complicated." And you start to find, you know, the indie film world is pretty small. You know, people will cut their teeth somewhere and end up somewhere else. And it's all very relationship-based, and if you have a good experience, you pass somebody along and, you know, sort of the world that I come from, it's not that it's an infinite pool.

[00:46:08] A lot of us have done business around the world and worked in Latin America or worked in France or you'll have co-production partners from elsewhere. But there are people that if one, one person from this group has a bad experience, you know, that word will travel and you tend to find that some of the bad people only do business with the bad people, because some of the good people don't want to work with them anymore.

[00:46:31] **Bryan:** Yeah.

[00:46:31] **Susan:** So, it sort of works itself out in a strange way. In a lot of times films end up falling apart for that reason, unfortunately.

[00:46:39] **Bryan:** So, do you see in-person film festivals coming back in 2022?

[00:46:44] **Susan:** Oh, for sure.

[00:46:45] **Bryan:** Yeah.

[00:46:45] **Susan:** For sure. I'm not exactly sure what they will look like, or if they're going to have to be, you know, six feet of distance between patrons or if they'll stagger screening times, but definitely, I mean, will, Cannes actually happen in July in France? Hmm. Not really sure?

[00:47:03] **Bryan:** Yeah.

[00:47:04] **Susan:** They're talking about it. The things that I've read in their lineups sound spectacular. I'm dying to see the new Lajos Carat movie with Adam driver and, Marianne Cotillard, but don't know.

[00:47:16] **Bryan:** Yeah, I guess nobody knows. And it's probably not that useful to speculate too much, but I was wondering if you had any insight information about what might be happening this year?

[00:47:24] **Susan:** No, I don't have any insight in, I mean, I know what everybody else knows. I'm assuming that. You know, the thing that I worry about most is like, most of us who want to be vaccinated have been vaccinated here, so, there's a little bit more of a known quantity in the US my understanding in Europe is, is that, you know, my peers can't get vaccinated.

[00:47:43] So, you know, Venice managed to pull off Venice last summer and they did it safely. So, that was a great one, but Francis on lockdown right now, so I don't know how they're going to do that Toronto in September, maybe, but Toronto is having a massive outbreak right now. My, my colleagues can't get vaccinated. So, I don't know. I think the summer is going to determine a lot.

[00:48:05] **Bryan:** A lot of uncertainty.

[00:48:07] **Susan:** Yeah.

[00:48:07] **Bryan:** But we do know that the technology is there to do this online and pull it off in a really beautiful way. I mean, you did really well with this ShortFest that I participated in, so thank you.

[00:48:18] **Susan:** Thank you. Well, we're thrilled to hear that. I know that a lot of people had virtual fatigue and a lot of our patrons were like, we can't watch anything else online. So, it is a shame because I know that a lot of our people really crave the movie theater experience and just want to sit and eat their milk duds in the dark.

[00:48:34] **Bryan:** Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I, when I was at Sundance in 2020, I was there for the full two weeks and you know, I was seeing three movies a day, it was exhausting.

[00:48:44] **Susan:** Gosh.

[00:48:45] **Bryan:** Yeah. Well, that's all I could really stand. It was because I was doing interviews too throughout the week, but yeah, it was, but yeah, I, I was exhausted, and I was. I think I would have gladly taken on a couple of online, just streaming a few of them from my hotel or something. So, maybe this is going to be a new offering, even with in-person film festivals. You know, you just have a broader audience that's willing to participate online. And then the folks that want to be there in person can be there in person.

[00:49:15] **Susan:** Absolutely. I think you're going to see a hybrid model, definitely rearing its head. And, you know, I think the success of Sundance 2021, I think they had something like 200,000 participants this year seeing movies.

[00:49:28] I mean, it was unprecedented, you know, it was not ideal, and it was hard with everybody doing introductions from their living rooms and trying to do the live stream Q&A's, but it worked.

[00:49:38] **Bryan:** Yeah, it did work. I participated in Sundance 2021. And the great thing is, is that you get to bring family in. And normally my kids don't get to see any of the films that I see at Sundance because I'm not going to pay for tickets for them.

[00:49:51] But, you know, I'm there in my living room and it's just a lot more accessible that way. I'm glad it worked out for Sundance.

[00:49:56] **Susan:** Yeah, it was, it was great. You know, I worked just as hard people are like, why are you so busy? I'm like, because Sundance is going on and I am seeing five movies a day in my house.

[00:50:08] **Bryan:** Yeah. So, a couple more questions. Yes. Where can folks see the shorts? Is there going to be a more permanent stable platform for seeing short films? Like the ones that we're premiering at Aspen ShortFest?

[00:50:24] **Susan:** Not through us, everything. And, and it's, it's interesting. We've had this conversation a lot, everyone. "Why can't you just leave the movies up there? Why can't you just show them for three months?" It all comes down to rights and to go to a festival, especially in Oscar-qualifying festival producers and sales companies are thrilled to give you the opportunity to screen their movie so that buzz can get out there.

[00:50:45] And so that's something as an opportunity to be an Oscar qualifier. Beyond that, they're looking to monetize the film for the filmmakers. So one of our industry guests who was here, works for a Canadian distribution company called Ouat media they're spelled O U A T media. So, they do a great job in getting shorts online on television making deals.

[00:51:08] **Bryan:** Right.

[00:51:09] **Susan:** The marketplace used to be much smaller for short film, but I think it's growing because people are consuming so much more content on mobile devices, at their homes, there are shorts channels that you can subscribe to. There's an organization called, or a company called Shorts International. So, I don't know if you've seen that all the Oscar-nominated shorts were being packaged and bundled. We actually had them on our website through yesterday where you could, you could buy the animation package, the live action package, the documentary package. So, that was put together by Shorts International. So, you'll see a lot more like that, and I think on other platforms like Hulu, and I think certain distributors are buying more shorts now, but you are seeing more and more of these it's, it's becoming more of a business. And, you know, as I said, it's really become a calling card. The film that kept escaping me that I wanted to call crash is actually *Whiplash*.

[00:52:04] **Bryan:** Oh, okay. Yeah.

[00:52:05] **Susan:** If you remember that one.

[00:52:06] **Bryan:** Oh my gosh. That's what, I have it in my queue to watch again. I've watched it three times already, but it's.

[00:52:11] **Susan:** Yeah, so Damien Chazelle had a short film here, you know, years ago, before *whiplash* came out. And then if you remember *Short Term 12*.

[00:52:21] **Bryan:** Another great one.

[00:52:23] **Susan:** Well, the short premiered here won an award and then the director.

[00:52:27] **Bryan:** Yeah, so that's directed by desk desk.

[00:52:30] **Susan:** Destin Daniel Cretton, thank you. I just, I needed a prompt. Destin came back here. We did a filmmaker conversation with him 2018, where he talked about the whole process of coming here with *Short Term 12*, you know, using the same cast. I mean, it was Brie Larson. It was, I mean, it was really an all-star cast when you think about it, Lakeith Stanfield starred in *Short Term 12*. And he, it took him a couple of years, but he managed to finally get the film executed as a feature. Yeah. It was a Brie Larson; Rami Malik was the other one. That's right, Lakeith Stanfield. So, he told us about his process and what it took going to Hollywood and how, you know, he had to make something slightly more commercial before people really realized, oh yes. Now you can go back and make this. And then he had *Just Mercy* two years ago and now he's directed *Shang Chi* for Marvel.

[00:53:24] **Bryan:** Yeah, that's incredible.

[00:53:26] **Susan:** So, he was here, right. And we also had, Renaldo Markus Green, who his first feature film won a grand jury prize at Sundance 2018, called *Monsters and Men*.

[00:53:38] He just made a film called *Joe Bell*, which the, for some reason, the release on that film keeps getting pushed. But he's also coming out with *King Richard* this fall, which is the story of Venus and Serena Williams, dad, and coach. And he just announced a Bob Marley feature film.

[00:53:54] **Bryan:** Oh, that's cool.

[00:53:55] **Susan:** That he's doing for Paramount.

[00:53:56] **Bryan:** Yeah. I interviewed a filmmaker named Keith Thomas and he directed a really cool horror movie; indie horror movie called *The Vigil*. And so, I interviewed him about that, but I found out through my research and my interview with him. That his calling card was a short, that is on YouTube. And you can watch it.

[00:54:16] There's like 350 views on this short called *Arkane*, A R K A N E. And it's a whole, it's a horror film, like six minutes long or something like that. So, it's a short, short. But he is now attached to direct Stephen King's, *Firestarter*, the remake of *Firestarter* with Blumhouse and I mean, a big studio film. And I, the reason I bring that up is not for your benefit because you already know what short films can do, but for my listeners benefit, short films that you can put on YouTube can really get your name out there and establish street cred and get you into the conversation at film studios for who to look at and consider for projects. So, that's awesome that you are creating this platform for filmmakers in that way.

[00:55:01] **Susan:** Absolutely, and that's sort of not sort of how, but, you know, when we select our jury, we had, we had a lit agent from one of the top, talent agencies, United talent agency who represents a lot of writers and directors, or writer, directors. And I thought that that was a great person to have as a juror because he really understands the international marketplace. We had a filmmaker, and we also had somebody from festivals who programs a lot of this stuff. So, you know, really is about getting your name out there and people seeing your work and understanding.

[00:55:33] You know, your capability and sensibility. So, it's one thing to have a film that's made that gets into a festival, but it's also great to have another treatment or another something in your hip pocket that when somebody says, "what are you doing next?" You actually have something to pitch to them. And there are so many amazing filmmakers who have gotten their start this way, and as I said, I'm also seeing actors now backing into the filmmaking process by making shorts.

[00:55:57] **Bryan:** Yeah. Well, Susan, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you. Thanks for sharing your story with us.

[00:56:01] **Susan:** Thanks so much for having me. It was really great and congrats on the podcast. You've got some amazing guests and I look forward to diving in further.

[00:56:09] **Bryan:** 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, and as always go find your dream path.