

Jonathan Wood on THE BIG SHORT

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Randy Mack: Hello and welcome to Essential NOLA Cinema, a conversation between cinephiles about the past and future of New Orleans movies. My name is Randy Mack and I'm pleased as punch to have Mr. Jonathan Wood here. Jon is a veteran independent producer and Jon has produced a... boy, yes, the coffee has not kicked in. [Laughter] Jon has produced a significant and impressive number of independent local features and shorts as well as being a veteran "Hollywood South" AD Department crew member. He comes to us today with *The Big Short*, Adam McKay's 2015 Oscar winning... is it a comedy? The genre of *The Big Short* is a really interesting bugaboo to pick at. It's a comedy take on one of the most serious events to happen in modern American history, and it's also Oscar bait, and it's also super entertaining and breezy, full of movie stars and quips and a super cheeky camera style. It's certainly one of my favorite films of that year. Jon actually worked on it. You are the Key Background PA - is that the title?

Jonathan Wood: On set, there'll be a handful of PAs. If you've ever seen the credits, the turkeys you see that say "Production Assistants" are usually a mixture of office people or set people. The only key is there's a Key Set PA. On this one, I was just the Background PA. It was the first staff job I ever had.

RM: Oh cool. So you were working for the 2nd 2nd, arranging and coordinating background actors, getting them to sets, getting them off the sets and that kind of thing, presenting them for approval?

JW: So, basically, there's a 2nd 2nd and they're in charge of placing, actions, shit like that. The 1st AD kind of has the final say. The director obviously does, but usually the background list, the heavy background scene, just gets left to the 1st. So my job is to show up way too goddamn early in the morning with the second AD, sign in shitloads of people, get them dressed, get them taken care of and then yes, get them to set wherever that might be for the day. Once you're on set, then you help set them, help tell them what to do, get everything lined up and then once that's all lined up and you've done a take, get them all the hell out of there, go hide in holding and sit around for another hour until they're ready to take the next take and replace everything and do all the continuity parts, keep track of all that shit. So whenever you see all the people in the background of a movie, it's usually two or three people that are actually doing that along with costumers and makeup people that kind of crap but all the background action is usually a handful of people, not tons of people, right? Director, the director has nothing to do with that shit.

RM: You're the first guest on this show that has ever directly worked for the film they've chosen, so that's exciting new territory for me. *The Big Short* is interesting. In the

context of the show, we've done eight episodes in the can at the point of this recording and this is only one of two where New Orleans does not play itself on screen. I think in terms of hiding its actual location of its shoot, it's probably the best job I've seen. I can recognize New Orleans pretty quickly in a Hollywood South production, no matter where it's set or when it's set, but this was a film where if there hadn't been a half dozen friends and colleagues of mine actually working on the film, I would never have guessed it was shot here. [laughter] So the reason I mentioned all that is because I'm curious as to how you got the gig coming in as your first time in that capacity, and do you remember where the extras were staged and then where the locations were that you had to bring them to?

JW: I remember far too well. There is nothing you can ask that I will not remember. That show has lodged itself in my brain. It's funny, what you had just said before that the main reason I wanted to touch on this movie out of the list that we saw was because it's one of the few that I've worked on that if I ever bring up, people didn't realize was shot here. They all assumed it was New York because there was - they did do four days in New York for the stuff that you can't - like the Central Park shot or the one where he's walking through Times Square on the phone, those they had to shoot up there. There's a scene that's supposed to be in Caesars Palace where the exteriors are obviously Caesars Palace but it was at Chateau Country Club and they just redressed it as Caesars Palace. So there's shit like that where it really did hide itself.

To me, it's one of the more influential movies that have come out of here because it was the first non... Technically it was a period piece, it was 2008 but it was the first non-historical thing, like 12 Years A Slave obviously won [the Academy Award] right before it. But The Big Short was a completely New York movie. It was about Wall Street so it was kind of more modern day. It actually hit on a lot of topics that was really interesting and shows that New Orleans doesn't have to be some old timey shit. It doesn't have to be Green Book where it's in Hammond to make it 1960s. It doesn't have to be something from the 1800s. It doesn't have to be Interview With The Vampire or JFK or anything. It can be modern. It can be wherever the hell you want it to be. So that, actually, I think is a huge part of the actual New Orleans movie-making process is the ability to use it as multiple different places.

The Big Short also isn't just in New York, it's Miami at one point in time. It's Las Vegas for a while and it actually matches all those spots. Also, because it was the first staff job I did, it still remains the, by far, most difficult shoot I have ever done by far. That is only because of one person who I will not name on here. Everyone on that show for the most part was a total peach but it was an absolute nightmare 90% of the time. Well, so answering your question about how I got it. I don't know if anybody knows this but you

don't get a job in this industry because of any qualifications. You get a text message and that's how you get a job. Actors have to audition, that kind of shit. I had to interview but the way I got it was I had worked with a good friend of mine. Her name is Cali Pomes. Cali is now a second AD on Young Sheldon out in LA. She was the 2nd 2nd on the show and I went to UNO, I had no clue how to do anything as far as getting a job.

This one though was the first staff gig I did. Terminator, I did 39 of 42 days but was not staff. This one I did and it was usually staff wise on production assistants, you'll have the key set PA who's kind of the 2nd 2nd. He's an underling, he's in charge of the PAs. Usually, it is someone in the DGA. There are a couple of key sets that are not. There's usually a base camp PA who deals with everyone back at base with the actors, getting them ready, all that shit. There's usually a walkie PA. [dogs bark] Sorry for the dogs. [Laughter]

RM: It's okay. I got two dogs of my own here but they're old and small and sleeping right now.

JW: This guy is older but he is not small [laughter] and he's just afraid of the lightning and thunder. So there's also a walkie PA who is in charge of the walkies for the production. That's their whole job. Obviously, you have them do other things but... And then in most shows, the fourth one would be background. I don't even know if that position going forward will ever exist [laughter] at least in the foreseeable future because background's not going to be a thing more than likely.

RM: Yes. It's weird to think that background and extras are going to be a line item in post-production in the future.

JW: So our job is to just handle background.

RM: Of all the speculating and prognosticating I've heard about the future of the film business, the one thing everyone seems to agree on is that the days of extras are over, at least in the short term.

JW: Yes, I think for the next year or so. I know whenever we go back to work on the show that I'm on now, we had seven days left and it's a vampire movie and there's a scene in a mansion with vampires. I am curious to see the rewrites of it [laughter] to see how a scene with 20 vampires will probably be two and they might not even be people. So it's definitely going to change things but I do think once it gets back to normal and things are more cohesive and people understand what they're doing. I do like one of the ideas of just using crew members as background because that's actually an Adam McKay thing that he did a lot with. There's a lot of crew members in that movie and just watching it again, I actually noticed how many there were.

RM: That's funny. Yes, because that's a low budget go-to move. I think almost literally every single crew member of **Laundry Day** is in Laundry Day at some point, some of them multiple times.

JW: It's funny because it is a low budget thing and there's a lot of things that are happening now that it seems like indie folks are much more prepared for it than the people who haven't done an indie show in a long time. So I mean, we're supposed to get back in the next month. I am very curious as to the differences in how they're doing it. Not just the precautions but just the way that things are handled because I mean, it's only supposed to be a handful of crew members and shit. I mean, weird. It's going to be weird but not to be that guy. You don't need 200 people to make a fucking movie in all honesty. [Laughter]

RM: Yes. That list of PA positions, it made me wonder about, do you know off hand what the budget of The Big Short was?

JW: I know what the budget originally was which was \$50 million. I know what the final budget was which was \$28 million. That goes back to that person that made that show very unpleasant. To get way back to the first question you asked about how I got the job. Literally, I got a text from Cali asking if I wanted to do it. I said I've never done staff, I've never done background because she had said that's what she was thinking of. Then we interviewed with the 1st and 2nd, I had a hat tan so I walked in looking like a complete lunatic because I had gotten sunburned and just played it off and they apparently found that quite amusing. [00:10:00]

RM: Do you have a photograph of yourself with that hat tan we can post on social media?

JW: I haven't. One day in the sun on a show and I immediately get a hat tan and I just have to keep wearing it to cover it and it just becomes a whole catch-22 of, do I walk outside today looking like an idiot or do I just keep the hat on. They actually liked the fact that I brought it up, "Hey, sorry. I look like an idiot right now because of that." So the 1st AD was a guy named Matt Rebenkoff. The second AD was a woman named Amy Lauritsen. Amy is royalty in the DGA at this point. She's won I think four straight DGA awards on different shows.

RM: That's awesome.

JW: Yes, she's a beast. She's absolutely fantastic. Matt is a very good dude.

RM: Does being a 2nd 2nd, I mean a background PA, count towards membership in the DGA?

JW: Yes. Yes.

RM: Cool.

JW: So the way the DGA works, just in case anybody doesn't know, it's not like other unions where you get 30 days. I know a lot of IATSE members, I think it's 30 to 60 now. Some are maybe 100. The DGA has requirements. You either have to have 200 days as 1st AD.

200 1st AD days to get in via the AD route. There is another route where you have DGA trainees where you can kind of go be a trainee if someone puts you up for it and you can then train and they'll take you that way and you start out as a 2nd AD. Then the other option which is what we do is 600 days as a PA. So every day, even if you're an additional counts towards your days and you just have to have 600 and then you submit a gigantic box full of binders of your call sheets and PRs and check stubs and all. If they accept it, then you can get in as the 2nd AD but 2nd 2nd yada, yada, yada.

RM: Right. Interesting. Just considering the nomenclature of the AD department, I'm surprised they didn't call your job title the 2nd 2nd 2nd. [Laughter]

JW: That would be against union rules. [laughter] There's a massive jump in pay scale. There's a massive prestige thing attached to being an AD because they know you're putting your time.

RM: I see. The delineation line is between 2nd 2nd and the positions under it?

JW: In Europe, there's a 3rd AD, there's a 4th AD. In America, there's the 1st, 2nd, 2nd 2nd, and then you'll get an additional 2nd. So a lot of times, if it's bigger background days or bigger days with cast, you'll have an additional 2nd AD who will usually either be one of the PA's bumping up or another friend of ours coming in for a day or two. On The Purge one day, I think we had five additional 2nds because there was 500 background or something. The line is ADs and then PAs. Then it's like, never the twain shall meet until you get your days or you do an indie show. As a PA, you do an indie show as a fucking AD because most people don't know what ADs do. So it's always handy.

RM: No, exactly. That's one of the job titles that is the least descriptive [laughter] because there's a director's assistant but there's also assistant directors that are totally different.

JW: Yes.

RM: So that budget, it started at \$50 million and went down to \$28 million. So \$28 million seems a lot more reasonable to me just given that it's a lot of people in glass offices yelling at each other. Although you do have a huge above the line because of the quantity and quality of those movie stars. Steve Carell, Ryan Gosling, et cetera, et cetera. Even the supporting cast, there's a lot of... Going back to it, I was like, "A lot of these people have really popped in the last few years, especially Rafe Spall who I keep hearing about, and Jeremy Strong. Is that Mark Strong's brother?"

JW: I have no clue but wouldn't be surprised. He's much, much, much shorter if he is. [Laughter] So yes, all the cats in Steve Carell's little posse, like Hamish... He is one of the leads in Legion and he's fucking amazing. Yes. Rafe blew up, Jeremy blew up. Karen Gillan is a random throwaway character in that and she's massive now. Fuck. John Magaro and Finn Wittrock. Finn actually started to get up there a little bit and

John's done some stuff. So all of the actors who were smaller roles in there actually wound up blowing up shit, even Ryan's assistants.

RM: I didn't realize you were on a first name basis with the Gosling. [Laughter]

JW: There's lots of stories and yes, he was a good dude, man. A lot of those guys were good dudes.

RM: Nice.

JW: I mean, fuck, Melissa Leo plays, what, 30 seconds on screen or whatever. [Laughter]

RM: I know. I know. That's so funny. I sort of had a double take moment with that.

JW: Yes. That was also one of the weird things about that show. That was the first one where it was just overloaded on celebrities because I mean, Angelina would show up a day and then you'd have Will Ferrell showed up randomly. So as a newbie who had not really been surrounded by that, it was very bizarre just how many people were showing up just to do a little day playing roles and all. I mean, it was actually great because we just - we did Jay and Silent Bob Reboot last year and that was another one where [laughter] we didn't really have any local actors with maybe the exception of five. Everything else was A-listers and it was just really bizarre. But The Big Short was kind of like that because every day would just be somebody new. It was an interesting experience for a first staff gig. I mean, the main reason I took it actually was because someone I was dating at the time was a huge Christian Bale fan. Whenever I looked, I was like, "What the hell is this Big Short movie?" Saw who the actors were, I was like, holy shit. It's Christian Bale. I guess I'll take this. [Laughter]

RM: I remember hearing about the production coming to town through one of the actors in it who was also in my film, **Laundry Day**. When he told me like, "Yes, there's this new movie. It's really banging." He rattled off the list of movie stars. He said, "They're casting locally. I got this small role," and so on. I thought, "This is maybe the worst title I've ever heard." [Laughter] "The Big Short" sounds almost like a sequel to Get Shorty or something. I'm just picturing Danny DeVito wandering around, bossing people around and falling over furniture or something. [Laughter] Because it's Adam McKay and he's bringing in Steve Carell, you're sort of like, "What is this movie? It's very random." Of course, they were using so many different locations and pretending to be in so many different places. Then when somebody says, "It's about the financial collapse," you just see everyone's eyes instantly glaze over. [Laughter] So it was really hard to get a beat on what this film was. There was nobody who could really bring a strong take about it while it was being made. Every [film] kind of has a clear-cut persona as to the type of production it is and The Big Short was a real enigma.

JW: So it's weird because obviously it's that title because of the Michael Lewis book. I had no clue what it was. I mean, literally whenever she texted The Big Short, I thought it

literally was a big budget short. I had no clue. [Laughter] Then just again, looking it up, what the hell? Is this a thing? It had the cast. I was like, "Holy shit, this is a thing." Then realized what the book was. That was the main thing was just background wise, we'd have a lot of people that would come in that were just interested to do it because they had read the book or they used to be bankers, that whole thing. That was actually a very good show as far as casting, even with the background cast, it was [Caballero] who's fucking amazing. Those cats would say "Yes, I read the book." It was just like for fuck's sake, another person that read the book. So they think they know what's going on. They would start talking. I was like, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm too stupid but I'm glad you like the book. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm an idiot."

RM: It's an incredibly formidable piece of material. [Laughter] I've seen this movie. I saw it in the theater twice. I own it on Blu-ray. I've watched that Blu-ray at least a half a dozen times and again last night. Then I went after talking to you and read the screenplay that I got during the Oscar season of that year which is the May 11th, 2015 'Buff Revised' draft. It's 171 pages long; because of the revisions it actually only adds up to about 128 pages of script. Reading it made the film less comprehensible to me somehow. Sitting on the page, all of those dense monologues and stuff about - reading about the trenches on the page as opposed to hearing them and being shown the Jenga puzzle and all that stuff, I was able to have an extremely high regard for its degree of difficulty in - with what it pulled off and how well it pulled it off is really astounding to me. I thought it deserved a lot more than the Best Screenplay Oscar but now that I've actually sat and read the screenplay, it's very easy to imagine the confusion on set regarding what exactly the film is about and what the tone of it is. [Laughter]

JW: So that's interesting because I actually understood more on the page than I did with the final product because the final product is cut to shit, has random music videos thrown in. It's something different. It's Natural Born Killers for the financial market.

RM: Exactly, same editor.

JW: It's legitimate because that's who cut it was the guy who cut Natural Born Killers. He was not supposed to do it originally. It was supposed to be Adam's guy who did Step Brothers and Anchorman. I will tell you the first time I saw it, I literally was like, "What the fuck did they do?" Because the original script, we actually shot all this too, has a whole introduction to them. We shot a scene at Landry's one day. It was actually a really cool scene where he's basically at a party and he's awkward as shit. It says that he doesn't say anything. He just sits there drinking and everyone else is talking about financial shit or whatever and he's just rolling his eyes. It leads into why he actually looks in the beginning for the mortgage thing because he kind of overhears all this stuff

at a party. That obviously got cut. He finds out that his son has Asperger's and he has a conversation with his doctor friend of his on a roof and realizes that the reason he is the way he is is because he doesn't look at the fact that people are saying, "No, this can't happen. No, this can't happen." It just doesn't register to him and that's why he actually decides to lock out the funds so that nobody can get their money back. There's a lot of scenes like that, that actually make much more - just story and structural continuity makes a lot more sense. [00:20:00]

RM: Yes. No, I caught that too when I was reading the script. I was realizing there's a whole arc to his character that's kind of just gone from the movie.

JW: Yes.

RM: He makes all these bold choices and then starts to doubt himself as he's taking all the stress home and he's hemorrhaging employees and money and so forth. He has this realization through his son, when his son starts getting reports back from school that he's behaving weirdly. Then they finally diagnosed him with Asperger's and then he starts reading up and there's a whole almost parallel montage to him reading the mortgages, where he's reading the diagnostics on Asperger's and so forth and sees that it's carried through the father's genes. He realizes that, "This explains why I'm so different and why everyone's reacting so weird to me my whole life." Empowered by that or sort of at peace with himself, it removes some of his doubt around the short he took out. Then therefore he goes and kind of lays down the law with his clients. In the movie, that scene with him just laying down the law is treated as mostly a result of a moment of high stress where instead of feeling okay, he's in control of the ship again in the movie, it feels like oh my God, he's now stuck his neck out yet another... He's gone even further out on the branch. It may snap off and drop them.

JW: Yes.

RM: It's really different.

JW: That was the main thing they cut. There's some other stuff that was cut out obviously for time but also just because of the way they did it. Then also for actors because the Margot Robbie in a bath scene, I'm not sure if it's in your version, but originally...

RM: Scarlett Johansson.

JW: Yes. Wonderful, yes. Jay-Z and Beyonce, instead of the clown fucking professor and Selena Gomez. Fucking awful day that was but that was originally Jay-Z and Beyonce, and then Michael Lewis let that slip on a fucking interview, and so they backed out. So there's a bunch of things that got changed because of just actor availability because a lot of people did it at rate.

RM: Yes, scale.

JW: All of those guys did it based upon backend deals and royalties and shit. So again, \$28 million compared to \$50 million. That again was also because they just - we had three vans bringing people around and couldn't get a fucking van to bring them. It was a mess but that's another story.

RM: Was that in Harrah's?

JW: Yes, yes. There's a couple of scenes in Harrah's which was a beast to pull off. I am shocked a lot of times going back that we did that. It was still functioning. There were people 10 feet away gambling. [Laughter] There were people in the machines that you'd had to ask, "Hey, can you step away for five minutes while we get this shot in?" It's Brad, Finn, and John Magaro walking and it's this long little oner.

RM: Yes, the Vegas thing. Yes.

JW: Yes. There were people who wouldn't get off the machines understandably. [Laughter] So we'd just be like, "Can you sign?" That's one of my jobs is to get...

RM: Clearances, right? Release.

JW: Yes, and go run up to them and be like, "Do you mind signing this then?" [Laughter] So you're trying to get somebody who's got a hot streak to sign off their likeness rights or whatever and not even paying attention. It was weird because it was one of those things. Then it's also trying to keep those people calm because they're just not paying attention but then they want to know why Brad Pitt's walking through the middle of their aisle. It was just really bizarre.

RM: I'm just picturing an old lady screaming, "Brad Pitt is bad luck. Keep him away from my machine." [Laughter]

JW: A lot of people were pretty good about it. There's another one that Nobu was actually the old Aspera that we turned into a sushi restaurant and that was another one.

RM: I don't know what Nobu is. I've never heard of Nobu. I'd never heard of it at the time of this movie and I still have never heard of it outside of this movie's context. The movie seems to treat it like a running joke but it just completely thuds every time it comes up and they even throw it in the closing paragraphs on the screen about what happens to these guys. I'm just like, "Adam McKay must assume everyone on earth knows what Nobu is." I've still never heard of it and it's been five years.

JW: Yes.

RM: [Laughter] Maybe it's just a rich guy thing. I don't know.

JW: Yes, I think I am just too poor for it because I have no clue what it is either. We shot it there and Steve Carell walks out and that was another one where it just seemed like the busiest day in the history of Harrah's ever and we had background to fill in but it was just people walking and you have to try to lock them up and keep people from

walking in but they see a bunch of other people walking and so they're wondering why they - it was just a total fucking nightmare but hey, it pulled off.

RM: Reading the script, it was really interesting to me for a lot of reasons. This was the screenplay that the studio put on their website with an official cover page for the Oscar campaign. It's got a typo on the first sentence of the first page [laughter] that is one of the real dumb elemental typos. The wrong 'too', in a sense, kind of thing where without a spellcheck it would just pass over. On page seven, they spell America wrong. [Laughter] I was like, "All right, nobody even spellchecked this." As you read through it, there's a fascinating sloppiness to the way it's presented that as a writer just sort of irked me a little bit even as I was impressed with what they were pulling off. Then when you get to the Selena Gomez scene, the voiceover that introduces it has this terrible construction that says, "Here is Richard Thaler, the father of behavioral economics and pop star Selena Gomez," making him sound like it's Selena Gomez' dad. So I caught that in the theater thinking, "Okay, wait. Selena Gomez' dad is a behavioral economics professor? Wait a minute. Is that...?" I mean, it's not impossible. That'd be really cool if it was true but then I thought they'd make a bit about it or that she would call him dad at some point or there'd be like a thing. Then when I finally got to see it on the page, I was like, "No, this is just really poorly constructed." [Laughter] It's just ambiguous. Why call him the Father of Behavioral Economics? Why not call him a PhD or the author of whatever or put her name first. That's all.

JW: That's probably all they got Gosling to record and he just couldn't rerecord it or something. A lot of that stuff was in post because they didn't know who was going to be in. So yes, we recorded that in the New Orleans airport, all of his voiceover shit.

RM: In the airport?

JW: Yes.

RM: Why in the airport? [Laughter]

JW: Running out of time. Just literally running out of days where he could record it and we had some time. So he just went into an office in the airport and recorded pages and pages of voiceover and just in someone's random office.

RM: As he was flying out of town basically?

JW: He was the one that was there to the bitter end. The last day is the scenes of Lewis Ranieri and the 70s. That was the last day we shot.

RM: That's right, the prologue.

JW: Yes.

RM: Yes. You have a cameo in there. That was pretty funny.

JW: Yes. That was the whole thing was that I'm actually sitting across from him the whole time and we were doing some just background shit, just picking off shots and doing this whole - another thing that was cut out was there's this whole - dang, I won't get into it but it's filthy. [Laughter] It's right behind me. The whole deal is that we would react to it. Apparently, he thought it was hysterical because I was chain smoking. I didn't have my glasses on. I had these big fake 70s glasses and apparently, he was trying to talk to me and tell me like, "Dude, you're killing it." I couldn't see him even though he was two feet from me and I was just completely ignoring him. He actually asked later. He was like, "Hey, is Jon mad or something? Did I do something?" I was just like, "I had no clue you were talking to me, dude. I'm sorry. I've fucking gone blind. I apologize."

RM: You're like the lady at Standard and Poor's later.

JW: Yes. Yes. [Laughter] Oh totally. I couldn't see shit. That was also a weird day though because it should have only been six hours and we had lightning delays, whatever.

RM: Casey Groves was in that scene too.

JW: Correct.

RM: It was great seeing so many local actors. We call all the friends of Laundry Day who were not in the film but have helped us since the film was shot and released and everything, "Friends Of Laundry Day" or FOLD for short. So they're in the fold, so to speak. So we had a number of FOLDS in there including Kelly Lind and Wayne Péré from King of Herrings which is our third episode of this podcast. Of course, there's Billy Slaughter and Dave Davis who are the stars of Laundry Day, also in the film doing their best to steal scenes and so forth. Dave plays one of Michael Burry's assistants. I have a feeling because of... As the movie progresses, he's the last assistant standing and then he's gone. Hunter Burke. Shout out to Hunter Burke who plays the hiree at the beginning. But Dave's character is the same character he plays in Logan a few years later when he's working in a convenience store. Same character but now he's out of a job. So he's working at the Thrift-o-mat or whatever. [Laughter] That's my shared universe theory on The Big Short and Logan. [Laughter]

JW: Never realized that. That's actually a good suggestion. [Laughter]

RM: I think it's the same haircut, that's what. I'm going to have to have Dave on the show and he can explain because I actually... Now that I think about it, Logan takes place 50 years in the future, doesn't it? [Laughter]

JW: Yes. Probably he doesn't age, he's a mutant or something.

RM: There you go. There you go. He's one of those mutants in hiding. Going through the script, the other thing I thought was really... I mean, talk about your degree of difficulty as a screenwriting endeavor. You're adapting this really dense book about incredibly dry economic Wall Street stuff full of jargon. Shifting jargon and jargon

that's almost the same thing but not and it just makes your eyes glaze over but all the character names begin with B which I thought was incredibly weird and they didn't change any of them, which I thought was very cool because I guess when you have movie stars, it doesn't matter that you're dealing with Burry, Baum, Brownfield, and Ben as your four main characters. [Laughter] That's one of those screenwriting no-nos. So let's step back a second and talk about how you, as a New Orleans filmmaker, you've produced A Quiet Storm with director Jason Affolder which got a new name on its release. It's called 9th Ward. [Laughter] Is that right? Or something like that.

JW: There's actually two names. There's one which is the full version still of Quiet Storm which is called The Reward. Then there is the version that you can find on every streaming platform called 9th Ward Justice which we had no input in to whatsoever. They're like, "This is the name." So yes. Yes.

RM: It sounds like they edited it. They cut it down?

JW: They did. They cut 10 minutes off. Most of it is transitions. The main character playing piano, they cut all the piano playing out to a bizarre degree because now there's - you'd start hearing a piano playing in the middle of a scene and they would just cut to the next thing. It's sloppily cut.

RM: Yes. The people who edit movies after the fact without the filmmaker's permission tend not to be very good at it.

JW: [Laughter] We've been fighting over it for a while but we knew that... We didn't know. I shouldn't say that. We had some offers where we wouldn't have had to, but they didn't take them. It's part of having a sales agent is you don't have autonomy over who you select. So they went with a different one than we would have. Yes, they changed the name, they cut it down. Yada, yada, yada. So unfortunate but...

RM: I love that film and it's on my list of New Orleans movies for guests. It's a really genuinely great movie. I was so impressed. Not only just solid storytelling but it uses the limited scope so effectively that it doesn't feel small or homemade at all. It's just good storytelling and it's the kind of story that you hardly ever see any... I mean, that kind of material, it tends to be the purview of documentaries for the most part. Nice to see solid writing, directing, and all that stuff. So congratulations on A Quiet Storm. You've also produced a number of short films. You've worked with Timecode:NOLA. You were instrumental in their film festival. It seems to me that the role of Hollywood South in terms of its effect on indigenous production has been changing over the years. How long have you been living in New Orleans? I guess we could start there.

JW: I'm native here. So yes.

RM: So you were here for Katrina and the post Katrina and everything?

JW: Yes.

RM: So when you saw the hype about Hollywood South building up and as it sort of went into the heyday of 2010, '11, '12, '13, '14, what was your feeling about it and how has it changed since peak Hollywood South?

JW: I rolled my eyes at it. So after Katrina, a lot of stuff went to Shreveport and worked out of there because down here was impossible to... This is where I'm going to start pissing people off. So NOVAC offered the thing where they would train you whatever. They offered it for, I don't know, a couple of months and then they started tweaking it so it wouldn't be like PA training or grip training or anything. It would be you can take a class and then we'll use that to try to help you get stuff. So I went in for something that's supposed to be editing, an editing workshop that actually wound up being editing on iMovie instead of fucking final cut. Then that was supposed to get me some work and it just didn't.

So the only reason I knew how to do anything was because I went to UNO and even then I learned a lot. I learned enough in UNO to kind of help indie wise but going from indie to major motion pictures is night and day different. That's the thing is I rolled my eyes at the whole Hollywood South movement because we didn't have enough qualified people here. It was as simple as that. Very few of the people who were working were locals. I mean, very, very few. They would bring in a lot of people. We actually got a really shitty reputation because we had such incompetent boobs working. So it was actually really hard to get work. It has changed now. Unfortunately, that little dip in the markets whenever they screwed with the [tax] credits, that actually caused a lot of people to leave.

So what we ran into was, around Terminator [Genisys] and Big Short times like this, it was just packed full of people who are competent, who are great ADs, who are great crew members and they all flee to Georgia or to New Mexico, to other places. Then whenever everything started trying to come back, there was nowhere near enough people employee-wise. So then it became the same thing where then you have a shitty reputation because there's not enough qualified people here. So, I mean, we have PAs now who are complete bozos. Just fucking bozos that think that they're brilliant because there were... It's just one of those... The pool has been kind of...

RM: Drained?

JW: Yes. It's like the gene pool kind of. You start out with strong people, training people and so you have the generational connection. So I mentioned Cali Pomes training me and training a bunch of others and a bunch of other ADs now that were great trainers and then I'm training people and so on and so on. Three or four generations down the line, those people have never worked with the original people who were so fucking

solid it wasn't funny. They hadn't even worked with me half the time or the generation below me. They're working with new people. So we get these kids who come in who think they know everything and I'm like, "Dude, I wouldn't hire you if somebody paid me to hire you." It's sad. This whole movement has been very bizarre because it does seem to go in waves. Right now, the days of Terminator and so on are over because it's all mostly the \$10 million–\$20 million movies and that's fine but it does cut down on rates. It does cut down on a lot of things.

So when that whole movement was happening, I just kind of rolled my eyes because I didn't recognize a single person anywhere. It was almost impossible to get a job. Then once Katrina happened, and people started going to Shreveport, it became even harder but we just had such a shitty reputation that it still is just kind of up in the air. It's funny because a lot of 1^{sts}... like a person I absolutely adore, his name's Paul Uddo. Paul is a fucking phenomenal human being. He's a 1st AD locally. He's one of the cats who is born and raised here and he was the 2nd AD on Green Book also but he has kept it going as far as higher quality people. So it's just kind of great because some people still try to make it to what it was because they were here during The Big Short kind of time. Then other people just kind of fly in, do their gig and get the hell out of here. The people who were involved in those a lot of times just aren't learning nearly enough so the quality has been kind of draining lately and it sucks because I mean given what's going on right now, fuck only knows what this is going to do to it and same one, same one.

RM: Yes. When you don't have good crew, you get fewer productions coming to town, there's fewer opportunity to train people. Less easy for people to get experience and therefore it becomes a self-fulfilling downward slide as opposed to self-fulfilling upward slide which it could be if people were serious about it and we are getting lots of productions coming through.

JW: Yes.

RM: Hollywood South has always been a bit of a conundrum for me. Laundry Day was my third feature. My first one was made out of LA but we shot in West Virginia. My second one was shot in New York City. So I've worked on both coasts and now here in the south. The one thing that I never really appreciated that you could take for granted in LA and New York is the depth of that legacy of apprenticeship that creates people who are really serious about what they do and if not seasoned at it, very serious about learning the craft and so on. That direct apprenticeship mentorship structure is the lifeblood of both of those film communities. So when I came here, it took me a while to kind of put my finger on it but then I realized Hollywood South is basically coming through entirely

just for production. There's no pre-pro or development here and there's very little post and so forth.

JW: Oh absolutely.

RM: So you're really only talking one piece of the larger puzzle. Because the keys, the above the liners and department heads are not staying here, they're not teaching back. They're basically throwing people into sets and then hoping they can figure it out or at the very least, they're giving some exposure to the apparatus of the Hollywood productions without giving them the big picture like why does it work this way, et cetera, et cetera. So this podcast is actually based on a blog and I stopped the blog in early 2016 after writing what is essentially an open letter to Baton Rouge and to the New Orleans Film Commission which is saying basically that we need to - as a condition of shooting in New Orleans, what if we put in a requirement that every production gives one hour of teaching back just to speak at a podium and take questions for 45 minutes to an hour and give people a sense of pre-pro development, post-production, the whole life cycle of a film so that people can feel engaged and that there can be an educational component too [00:40:00] to sort of bring the above the line half of the equation kind of up to par with the, at the time, was a hugely robust crew department. In putting together Laundry Day, of course, I've said this on a number of occasions, that we had our pick of the litter in terms of crew as long as they could work for super low budget rates. But in terms of producers and above the line and department heads, it was incredibly hard to find anyone with any significant background or experience at all. Every dimension that the film suffers is through the fact that ultimately when you don't have proper locations and proper first AD or whatever, all of those jobs fell back onto me. So I ended up wearing about a dozen hats at any given moment which basically, man, I was giving 1/12th the attention at any one of those jobs needed because it was impossible to delegate.

Over time, as the production went on, we lost a lot of dead weight in terms of just incompetent crew members and the smaller we got, actually the more effective we got because people started to carry the load more proportionally instead of coming... A lot of the crew members we hired on that film had had experience on big sets like The Big Short or whatever but because those major Hollywood productions are so hierarchical, they expected independent sets to be equally hierarchical and machine like and they don't really work that way. They're much more organic. So half the crew, I'm dealing with just total inexperience. Literally they don't even know what the words mean on a set and then the other half are so used to just being told what to do and being part of a mechanized set of people that they don't have the initiative to identify a problem

and go fix it themselves, [that] kind of thing, which is kind of what you need people to do on an independent set.

Over time, the people who had that, who could figure out the mindset and realize, “Okay. It’s my job to anticipate problems. No one else is going to bring this to me. If I don’t want to hit a pothole, I’m going to have to look down the road myself, see the pothole and avoid it or fill it in or whatever.” In this tortured metaphor, [laughter] people with that kind of intellectual flexibility were the ones who really rose to the top and survived the whole of the production. It was a really interesting experience to see how both the absence of film set experience and then too much of the wrong kind both can be a detriment to the kind of independent films that I tend to make. It was fascinating. As I hear stories from you and other veteran crew guys, it’s really interesting to see that some of those above the line problems I experienced are actually happening below the line as well, especially in terms of the brain drain that you mentioned. The loss of leadership that happens when the economic tide shifts away from the city. Sorry, that was a lot to unpack, I’m sure. [Laughter]

JW: I could go on for years about this. This is what I will say about...

RM: Let me tack a question at the end of that because I just monologued at you.

JW: Sure. Sure, sure, sure.

RM: So given that I was wearing a producer hat as well for Laundry Day, you’re a producer. You’re always out putting projects together. When you put on that producer hat to go make independent indigenous feature films, how do you solve that catch-22? Or I guess what’s your practice as an independent producer?

JW: So what I’ll say about this, the situation you’re talking about with people knowing too much, I understand and I’ve dealt with it before. However, most of the people that are doing shows that I do know me from other shows. The Big Short, for example, is where I met the woman who did our costuming on Quiet Storm. Her name is Megan Coates or Bijou Coates. Bijou’s blowing up right now. She’s fantastic. She’s absolutely wonderful.

RM: I’ve heard the name.

JW: I can’t remember her exact title on The Big Short but she was basically in the office. I would see her occasionally on set. She sent a resume out to Craigslist posting or something at Quiet Storm because at that point in time, we didn’t know nearly what we were doing as today. Jason kind of mentioned that this girl had sent it in and I was just like, “Holy shit. I think I know her.” So we talked about it and I used her for that. I used her for “Plaquemines” [short film] but because she knew who I was, because we directly worked with each other, we had a much better working relationship than, say, someone you get recommended to that’s a production designer or something that

you've never worked with because then they'll pull that whole, "This isn't how it's done." That kind of bullshit.

The second thing is, you run into a lot with people who are gung-ho union who don't really like non-union shows. They just kind of look down upon everything. This is not how it's done, yada yada, yada. I completely understand where they're coming from working on shows, but I think there's a little bit lost as to where, to where a lot of those people came from, in that Kevin Smith started with fucking Clerks which was a handful of people just in a convenience store. Then you go to Jay and Silent Bob Reboot and there's hundreds of people and he's stoned and still treating it like it's a fucking handful of his friends doing it.

RM: [Laughter] Right. Was that refreshing or maddening?

JW: We call that one either the hardest easy film we've ever done or the easiest hard film we've ever done because that movie [laughter] was exclusively difficult for just time really. It wasn't hard. It was just Kevin would be four hours late because he was stoned and rewrote the script. [Laughter] It was just that kind of thing. It was great. It was just also frustrating because you would, you would sit around for hours doing nothing and it's one of those things where you just you're taught you have to look busy and shit. It's like, "I can't look busy right now." [Laughter] What do you want me to do? There's no fucking background. There's no actors. They're all back at base. I may as well just have a cigarette in the middle of this fucking house right now [laughter] because there's nothing to do. I remember our 1st on that show was always losing his mind because he would look outside and the key group would be smoking a pipe outside and the AC would have his feet up at the pool. It was just one of those things where it's like we can't do anything about it. We'd have days that we were supposed to have six...

RM: Pipe like Mark Twain? Corn cob?

JW: Yes, just smoking a pipe. [Laughter] Yes, because why the hell not? There's nothing else to do.

RM: I love it. If you think vaping is for hipsters, then meet the pipe crowd. [Laughter]

JW: It's fascinating though. That was a whole other learning experience on just it was just new. He had cameras following him around and you literally lose him in between takes just we do a take and cut and then he would go outside and interview Shannon Elizabeth about her fucking elephants or whatever. We'd be like, "All right. Let's roll." We'd be like, "Kevin's not here." Where is he at? He's fucking shooting an interview.

RM: Oh my God. [Laughter] This is what happens when you have a director who's also an influencer on social media.

JW: Correct. Again, all love to that dude. Absolutely wonderful human being. Not smack talking or anything like that. It was just bizarre because it was like the exact opposite

to where you're going to. It was actually kind of weird because it had the same indie issues you're talking about where even people on that show were like, "This isn't how it's done. What is this? This is trying..." Because you're so used to it being done a certain way that when someone brings that whole indie spirit back to something, no matter who it is, they'll still complain about it.

RM: Did you notice any of that on The Big Short? Because McKay is famous for calling audibles, alt lines, to shouting shit from behind the camera midtake, doing lots of setups, that kind of thing.

JW: [Laughter] Yes. That's one of the things is that you'll have - [laughter] There's a scene where they're all yelling at Gosling about how he fucked him or whatever and the end is Jeremy going, "You're a fuck boy or whatever. You butt fuck." I remember whenever he said that, I was next to the sound guy and he just started crying and then Adam would laugh and be like, "Hey Larry, let's try it with this." Yes, him and his crew, especially, would just yell stuff. Gosling was great at improvising too but McKay had a lot of fun on that. A lot of people had fun on that. That show again, it was difficult for one reason and one reason only. I'll give you a perfect example. I think this ties into what we're talking about with above the line, shit like that. If you don't know what you're doing above the line or even below the line, you fuck up entire productions no matter what your responsibility is. If you are a base camp PA and you fuck up actors getting somewhere, then you're causing delays and yada, yada. Even a PA can fuck up an entire show if they don't know what they're doing.

RM: Right. The domino effect.

JW: Yes. When an above the line person or just a department head is botching something, it's a whole other story. So one certain person, we had three vans that entire show and you were asking kind of earlier before this if I remember where background holding was. I remember. Yes, it is now a Starbucks. [Laughter] It was right next to the Hotel InterContinental. We used that one. I'm trying to remember if it was 601 or 901 Poydras. We used that a lot.

RM: 901 is the Le Pavillon Hotel.

JW: So this might've been 601 then.

RM: Yes. I know exactly what you're talking about. It's where there's an IberiaBank and it's across from One Shell Plaza. [00:50:00]

JW: Yes. So before that became a Starbucks and restaurant and all, it was just an empty fucking spot. So that was where we had catering a lot. We'd have the food truck parked right there and then we'd have sets a couple of miles away. We had moves almost every day and we'd have not easy moves. It'd be from one part of the CBD to another part at 5:00 PM or some shit. There was a day where we had three - no, two moves and the

costume designer and costumes wanted to do background changing at the office which is 400 Poydras. So I'm the only person - I don't have any additional. I get there. I had, I think, eight people. 10 people for the first scene. We check them in, bring them to the office. We walk that way because we don't have enough vans. There's only three taking people from background parking and crew parking to the set. It's all over the fucking place.

So we walked down to the office. We go up, we change them. I get a van that you have to wait for because there's only so many you can get. Finally get a van, they take them down to the end of Poydras. So I'm getting calls. My boss is wondering where people are. It gets down there. I don't go with them because I have to go back to Poydras, the other place, to pick up the next group of background and then walk them back to the office to get them changed and then sit with them, waiting for the first scene to be done for them to move. Then at one point in time, I was calling background on their phone because they were at background holding and telling them to walk down a couple of blocks to go to the office on the fourth floor and get checked in right there and they'll change you and then I'll meet them. I had to do it over the phone because we didn't have enough fucking vans. We didn't have enough people because it was just too cheap.

The thing is, if you are withholding the cost of an additional PA which is \$150.00 - no, our rate was \$140.14 so we never hit overtime. So we were fucking \$10.00 an hour employees. [Laughter] So I don't know if I should actually say that to tell you the truth what the actual rate was. [Laughter] You're refusing to pay \$140.00 for me to get someone to literally watch your background so they're not walking through the fucking New Orleans streets and getting lost. You only have enough vans that if you have to go do a hotel pickup or something, you're down to two vans, you're all over creation. There's a parking lot on, I think it's Cleveland and Claiborne. That was our base camp most of the time. So you have a van over there that you need to bring actors somewhere. So there's no way to get background anywhere. So you're just waiting and... They never waited on me, I will say that. So you don't have the tools you need.

Now, here's the thing with that. You take that as an example of where an indie show can go fucking wrong because those people are learning from people who are teaching them the absolute wrong way and all those people around is on set. They're not around in fucking pre-pro, whenever things get planned out. You don't have any of that kind of know-how and you're translating it and you think that's how it's supposed to be running an indie show. So here you are with a fucking \$100,000.00 feature and you think that it's okay to cut corners and that's fine, I get it but you're cutting corners in the wrong places. You're taking the lowest paid fucking people on set, you're taking those people

and saying, “No, we’re not going to give you any more people to help you out. We’re going to make your job substantially more difficult.” It’s one of those things where it’s like well, you’re teaching people that you should fail because if you fail, then maybe you’ll give me an extra fucking person to help me. It’s the wrong mentality to instill in people. So it’s a perfect example of the trickle-down effect of if you’re learning from that, you have no idea what to do right now.

RM: I call it an education gap. A film education gap, in a way, where you - because there’s a lack of leadership and there’s no emphasis on apprenticeship and teaching down to the local communities by these Hollywood South productions, you end up with a sort of blind-leading-the-blind effect on indigenous productions.

JW: Absolutely. That is from a movie who won an Oscar for Best Screenplay and was nominated for Best Picture and it’s done cockamamie. The last two nominees for Best Picture in this city were The Big Short and Green Book. I was on both of those as staff and Green Book was one of the few that was cohesive but our AD department from the lowest PA to the 1st AD are all DGA-eligible people.

RM: Nice. Are those people all local, or mostly?

JW: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

RM: Cool.

JW: You go, though, to a lot of shows and you have people who it’s their first time because there’s just not enough - and I say not enough, I mean, you’ll get people that will show up for one or two days and you’re just like, “Don’t ever hire this person again because they don’t know what the fuck they’re doing.” It’s because they’re going on shows where you have people who have, like you say, that education gap, teaching them and so they don’t know what the fuck they’re supposed to be doing because they’re not taught correctly. It’s a natural occurrence whenever you don’t have that successive education from generation to generation that there’s going to be a massive gap. On Green Book again, all of the people that were in that department all came up. I worked with two of the people that were staff on The Big Short but we were - they were additional on that. Whereas everyone else had been around since one of the dudes was the base camp PA on 12 Years A Slave. Then he was the key set on Green Book and then bumped to 2nd 2nd. Everybody was fucking stacked on that show.

RM: Interesting. I came up with an expression. I call it “Square Negative One” because bad training can be worse than no training.

JW: Absolutely.

RM: This is something I’ve seen on every production that if you’ve got someone who comes in with a preconceived notion and can’t get off it, that intellectual flexibility I was mentioning before, they’re just stuck in their ways or they’re stuck with a certain

dogma or whatever, whether it's because they're too experienced or not experienced enough or just were trained badly, you have to then not only teach them how to do it right but you have to untrain them as well. So it's actually extra work. It's actually sometimes, often maybe, even easier to just take somebody who is completely green and just train them correctly the first time.

JW: Actually, on the group of shows that I'm on right now, we wound up doing that and just getting someone who she had just switched over from news and it was better to take her than get someone, because she was a fresh slate to work with compared to someone who had been completely trained incorrectly that was just in the way and fucking things up. There's a very small pool and as more of those people bump up to ADs, then you get an even smaller pool or I'll go back to Big Short as an example with it. My department wasn't as bad but I will say this though, a lot of the department heads on that show hated the local employees. Fucking hated us and thought we were all morons.

RM: Did they talk openly about that, or was it a vibe?

JW: Oh fuck yeah. Fuck yeah. It wasn't just department heads. There's a couple of cats. I won't name names, that openly mocked us, openly hated us and it was just this uneasy feeling. Now I'm not talking about anybody again in - no above the line people, I'm not talking about Adam or fucking any of the [cast], all those people were wonderful. Absolute wonderful people above the line. These were just department heads or their underlings that they brought in that just thought their department were just full of fucking idiots and would fire people and just act like if you're from New Orleans, you were just a bumbling buffoon. It was a lot of not us versus them but we all kind of - it was one of those things where you would just kind of huddle together and just be like, "Well, I guess we're not welcome with these people."

It was very awkward. It used to be a lot more like that. I also go back to the good old days [laughter] where as a fucking PA, you didn't know if you're going to get to eat or not daily because if they ran out of food, you just didn't get to eat. It's fascinating now to see how a lot of people work on shows and I'm just like, "Man, you wouldn't have been able to hack it back in the day." That's a good thing. I'm not trying to say I miss those days but I literally remember some shows just being like, "Okay. Well, I guess they ran out of food. We're not going to get to eat today."

RM: Holy crap. No, that's shocking to hear. I mean, you're talking big Hollywood productions that ran out of food? Jesus. [Laughter]

JW: Fuck yes. Absolutely. As a PA the whole thing is you let everyone eat and then you get the end of the line and you're non-union so if they don't have shit, then tough shit. You don't matter. Also, production you used to springboard into other ones. There's a girl

who's working as a graphic designer right now who just started as a PA. There's a girl that I got to start on Green Book who did Green Book as an additional PA and in that time made friends with the camera department. Now she's an AC because the next show that she did, she was a camera PA. A lot of times you bring people in and you put up with it because it will lead to the next thing. Again, we're also talking about years ago compared to now.

RM: That's cool. It sounds like it was a bit more of an apprentice system but also at the same time, a bit more of trial by fire simultaneously.

JW: It's funny because Big Short was 2015. It was in March that we shot it and it just - it's like a different world from that to now because there's a lot of shit then that I don't know that you could do anymore. I think a lot of people would just complain a lot more. I mean, fucking hell. I mean, that's the same thing. I don't want to talk too much because I don't want to...

RM: No worries. No worries. [Laughter] I don't want to get you on the spot or so to speak. So you mentioned in passing that Green Book had... was a smoother production. I was wondering if that has anything to do with the fact that Big Short was Adam McKay's fourth film but Peter Farrelly's fifteenth. Is there something to that or was it just about the people? [01:00:00]

JW: Not at all. I will say this and I'm sure a lot of people will throw their fucking hands up. This actually goes back to what you'd asked before that I never really answered as far as like local stuff, as far as seeing people above the line. Here's the deal. Above the line people ruin everything or make things acceptable. Directors have the utmost minimal input into fucking anything when it comes to the way sets are run. They're focused on the actors and that shit and the way it looks and that kind of crap and then the DP do their thing. As far as production goes, I think that locally there are so many incompetent above the line people that, like you said before, need to be retrained to a degree.

I say this not trying to be negative but I don't know how many people locally have actually delivered anything as far as the delivery that you have to send in paperwork wise and document wise whenever you're delivering shit. I just did a show called Cleo Speaks and it's like clockwork now whenever you're delivering in post how to do stuff. Whereas the first time I was doing it, I was like, "Whoa." I'm looking at all the stuff we have to deliver and it's intimidating. Same thing as delivering a show for distribution.

RM: I was going to ask. When you say delivery, it can mean from production to post or it can mean from the final post-production to distributor.

JW: Post to distributor is what I'm talking about in this one. For example, with this one, you'll have the legal binder, the production binder, and then the main hard drive that you have to deliver to the network and the list of things that you don't think about doing whenever you're actually shooting a movie. On Quiet Storm, we didn't even fucking think about that. We were just trying to get the movie made.

RM: Yes. Same on Laundry Day, yes. [Laughter] We have five production photos maybe.

JW: Right. Most of those are from a fucking cellphone because it's just something you take on the fly. It just didn't strike me. The second that I learned it though, Plaquemines, we had a fucking still photographer because it's just one of those things that on the indie level you don't think about. It's like, "We don't need photos because why are you getting photos? It's for marketing." It's not for marketing. It's so that whenever you deliver it, you have those things. Whenever we delivered Plaquemines to HBO, we fucking had everything and that was because of dealing with stuff before that. Quiet Storm was actually really good about getting paperwork because of shit like Big Short where you knew if you were shooting somewhere where there's a lot of people on bikes just driving by, I better have every fucking NDA and every goddamn likeness release that I needed to get people to sign off on this shit right now and then stuff that I wouldn't even thought of. Plaquemines, there was a picture in the back of a shot that I thought it was under a blanket agreement with the prop house but it wasn't actually that prop house, it was a different prop house.

So I had to go track them down at the end of it. It was just shit like that. The thing is, knowing that, and knowing what you're going to need to do about that, you wind up putting a lot of that in the front whenever you're doing prep and you're thinking about all these things. The thing that I see a lot of now that worries me, and this was a perfect example with this show, was that there were so many things that you're like, "What the fuck? You can't do this." Be it changing agreements in the middle of an agreement or whatever or tweaking things. It was always something. I don't know if we're going to have a freaking holding [space for extras] today because this wasn't... or somebody changed their mind on this, or some shit like that.

To your question, no, it was not a director kind of thing. This was an above the line kind of deal. It wasn't even above the line, because above the line was Jeremy Kleiner, great dude. Dede Gardner who was there for a fucking handful of days and Brad Pitt, same thing, Plan B. Jeremy was the main guy that was there, and Jeremy was great. I actually liked him a lot but the other person that I won't name was the fucking culprit of a lot of these things. [Laughter] Whereas Green Book, the person in the same position, there was actually two of them, fucking phenomenal. Actually, we're working with one of them right now on these Amazon flicks. They're wonderful. Absolutely

fucking wonderful. If you went to them and said we need this, they understood it. Whereas on Big Short it will be like, “No, can't do it.” It was just like, “What the fuck are you talking about? You agreed to do this already. We can't say no now.”

So that was a fucking learning experience and one of those ones where I actually use a lot of [the lessons] to this day and I also use a lot of people that I met from there to this day on indie shows, because going back to your thing about people not getting it, there was a lot of people on Big Short and other shows, that you just have to know who would get independent films and not complain about the things you're saying. The other thing is that also whenever you see that starting out, yes, nip it in the bud immediately because it's not going to change. Those people are going to want to be on the fucking main shows or the major gigs. They should go do that because it's like, “I get it, dude. If you want ‘what the fuck are we doing’ and ‘flying by the seat of your pants’, don't get anywhere near a fucking indie show because you don't fucking know what's going to happen day to day half the time no matter how hard you try.”

RM: That's such a great point. I'll give you a quick story from my first movie. I told you, we set it up in LA and we shot in Huntington, West Virginia in the middle of February. So we're talking, everyone's 2000 miles from home in freezing conditions, snowing all the time. This was a \$100,000.00 production basically back in 2002. [Laughter] The guy who came in as first AD, he had been working his way up through the AD department. He got a waiver from the DGA and he had just come off of Jurassic Park 3 and we thought, “Cool, we'll have some leadership at the top who can really train the rest of us green horns.” What ended up happening was is that he had such massive cognitive dissonance with the low budget nature of the production that he kind of lost his mind. After eight days of shooting, he had a complete nervous breakdown. He trashed his hotel room, snuck out in the middle of the night, stole a rental car from our company cars, drove it to the airport, took a golf club, beat the shit out of the car in front of the terminal and then went in and booked a ticket back to LA. [Laughter] This was like I said, February of 2002. So we're talking six months after 9/11. So they caught him on camera beating the shit out of his car and then abandoning the car in front of the terminal, the “green is for loading and unloading” section of the airport. So it created a TSA national security situation where they had to inspect the car for bombs. [Laughter]

JW: Right.

RM: Of course, they traced it back to the rental car company who traced it back to us. So of course, we got woken up the next morning with police and TSA and Homeland Security in the lobby of the hotel looking to interrogate the producers for suspected terrorist activity or whatever. It was just a classic case of the wrong man on the wrong show.

JW: Absolutely. I will say again that a lot of people in production, especially locally, a lot of them came from being PAs and working their way up. So they get it. They're not complete pricks when it comes to what you're talking about. [Laughter]

RM: Yes. So Plaquemines wins the LEH grant, the \$50,000.00 Deep South award-winning... uh... There was a one-time \$50,000.00 grant through the Film Society and LEH to a short film that you had to submit a proposal to. I'm curious when you submitted that proposal and won that grant, did the proposal contain the crew members that you wanted to use and the productions that you had met them on and worked with and was that part of what sold it?

JW: Yes. It contained all of that. It contained a schedule. It contained everything needed except for money to start shooting immediately. Honestly, we used pretty much the same crew as Quiet Storm. It's the same DPs, it's the same costume designer. Production designer was going to be the same person but she couldn't quite do it so it was a different person. Basically, I just used the same people on A Quiet Storm for that with a couple of tweaks due to availability. Almost everyone from A Quiet Storm, we just kind of took and brought over in some capacity there. So yes, we used the same names as those and some of the people. They would ask, "Well, who's the water safety advisor?" I'd be like, "Well, funny you mentioned that because it's the same guy that was on the Big Short." Which it was, it was a guy named Steve. In the pitch that we did, they would ask questions, and [we'd] be like, "Yes, no. We have this person standing by."

Plaquemines is also in 2015. So 2015 we did Big Short and then the second that we finished that, I went and started doing Quiet Storm. Right after Quiet Storm, we're doing post with that, Nailah, who was the director of Plaquemines, asked me if I was interested in applying for it because I had asked her to give me feedback on Quiet Storm. So I went ahead and did the producing side of it while she did the directing side and we submitted it. Then yes, whenever they asked for the budget and all, I just kind of took from people that I knew from Big Short and from Quiet Storm and kind of used those. That's one of the reasons why this movie is... the PTSD I actually have from this... It actually helped me out considerably career-wise, because it taught me a ton of shit both what to do and what not to do. It also helped me meet a ton of people who have been influential career-wise. So it actually did, like, Hollywood South-wise, has expanded the pool both on major shows and independent shows exponentially.
[01:10:00]

RM: Yes, that's fantastic. I mean, that's a system working at its best. That's how it's supposed to go.

JW: Absolutely.

RM: One of my frustrations... it's not a personal frustration, it's more of an ecosystem kind of frustration, sort of living vicariously frustration, with the city is how many one-and-done directors we have, where you have a little film collective that'll come out of Tulane or UNO or Dillard or what have you. They'll spend a couple of years putting together a feature, they'll spend several years in post, five-year typical turnaround time for first feature for this group of friends, and then it kind of comes and goes and then there's no follow-up. It's kind of like it breaks their spirit or something, or they expected A24 to show up and scoop them off their feet and make them celebrities and stuff. [Laughter]

Whereas most film schools now, they make people work multiple crew positions over the course of their years in film school. So they'll direct one film, sure, or produce one film, sure. But they'll also have to work in the AD department or have to work in the camera department or they'll have to be a location manager er cetera, et cetera. That way, they get to try everything but the net experience is that you're meeting people in departments, you're getting to know what makes a good department head in different jobs and you start to see how the puzzle gets put together so that you have a broader perspective. Plus, you have all those contacts that you can use to put together your next film. So hypothetically, you have this momentum going.

You worked on *The Big Short* and then initiated those next two projects but you also have been working for other things. If you don't have the momentum in your above the line position, you roll into the momentum below the line and so forth. Then that way, you're still meeting people, you're still developing experience, you're still developing contacts and especially the example of the water safety supervisor is a great one because that's such a niche position but it's a life-or-death position literally and you're not going to need it every production but when you need it, who's going to be the person who has that contact. It's the person who paid attention to that, kept up with that person, et cetera. So no matter how tangential anyone may be, it's the whole networking, apprenticeship, social dynamic of film productions.

That's why I kind of feel like the one-and-done phenomenon that I mentioned for directors here is a... I think the overall independent community has a bit of a stagnation where it's always percolating a little bit, right? Then occasionally, you get a little flume up *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, but there's no... it's hard to get people to rally around each other here. I don't see... the film collectives tend to be these little airtight bubbles that don't seem to allow permeability crosswise.

It's a little frustrating that you can't... or maybe I'm naïve, but back in LA and New York, there was a thing where I would go set to set to set. [laughter] Over six months, I might be on four or five different sets just helping people. Not getting huge positions or titles or not moving up any particular ladder, but my phone would ring and someone would be like, "Hey, we really need someone." I ran sound on a Kung Fu movie that was shot at UCLA and stuff for a week because for one week they didn't have a guy and I was totally green but I was open to everything and I learned how to run sound and boom and mix and so forth just because I was happy to help, and they knew I'd be happy to help. So they called me and I don't get those kinds of calls in New Orleans but I did in New York and LA. It's kind of weird.

I think maybe people think because I directed Laundry Day that I wouldn't be open to that but it's also something to do with the quantity of production here. There are just not enough independent films going at one time to have a lot of that kind of thing. It's also, I think we live in this era where social media has created this transparency with major film productions. Now everybody knows everything about how the Dark Knight was made or what have you. Then they're looking at their own productions and maybe there's a sense of I'm not worthy and they're kind of embarrassed. They don't want people to come on and see what they're doing, only their friends, to see the modesty of the production, which I think is a big mistake because the fact is, until you ask, you have no idea who's willing to help you.

I mean, even on Laundry Day where I was unknown to the city as a filmmaker for the most part, I cold-called Larry Blake and just asked him, "What do you recommend for production sound and so forth?" Not only was he willing to talk to me, he turned out to be a great ongoing resource for the entire post-production of the thing. I could just pick up the phone and email or call him. This is a guy who's made every Soderbergh film and stuff, he has no reason to give me the time of day but he just did. So I think we as a community could definitely lean on each other more and ask, reach out to each other more, for favors or advice or just like whatever, instead of this sort of film collective thing that tends to keep everyone really isolated and prevents that lateral education.

I mean, just talking to you, I always learn so much about the inner workings of crews and things. I feel like I want these conversations. It's one of the reasons I started this podcast, is for the educational value of slowly picking the brains of everyone I know in the film community and learning every single time. It's... Without fail I always learn from this, and I wish people would take the initiative and reach out. Part of the reason I put together that list you alluded to at the top of the show - it's got 100 something films on it but I made sure to try to get every major New Orleans feature done in the

last 15 years onto that list because those directors have either... They've either moved into documentary film like Zac Manuel, who shot LIVE EVIL back in the day, but LIVE EVIL is a good film unto itself, but it's a wonderful template for low budget, high concept, independent filmmaking.

Even though Zac's now an acclaimed documentary guy, I'm sure he would still have a lot to share and a lot of wisdom to impart from having gone through the gauntlet of an entire feature film production and so on and so on. I don't know. It's easy to talk yourself out of things, but my advice to filmmakers out there is reach out to people, reach out to me, email. My emails are online and everything. Reach out to Jon, reach out to everybody, to anyone. Just look up independent, like New Orleans independent features, Google that list. Most of those filmmakers, their information is going to be out there somewhere and people are going to be happy to talk to you. You'd be surprised. So that's my advice. Jon, do you have any advice for people? You come at the puzzle from so many angles. If you were to talk to an average 20-something cinephile who wants to make the next Panic in the Streets or something for New Orleans, what would your advice be?

JW:

Okay. I actually can use a decent example of this. So Jason did Quiet Storm, Jason Affolder, like you said. I met Jason through a professor at UNO who also was one of the creators of Timecode:NOLA, Aaron Rushin. Aaron's a good dude that asked me if I could help out on one of Jason's shorts. I think on Spare Change. So I showed up at Spare Change, helped out. The next thing he did was Quiet Storm. Aaron actually asked me randomly because I was doing Big Short and all about, "What do you think of this?" Read the script. The first thing that made me think about reading the script was how fucking expensive this was going to be. I wrote Jason. "Aaron was like, Hey, here's what I will tell you. I did Terminator and you have a fucking Terminator style scene here of running through the streets with a gun battle and you're talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars to lock down these streets and have fucking car chases and rounds being fired. Yada, yada, yada. That's a \$100,000.00 scene right off the bat. That's not going to work."

So Jason was one of the first people that I had ever met that actually took the advice of some random fucking kid and rewrote the script to where it's now more like you see in the actual film and the opening scene where it kind of cuts to black. That is obviously a low budget ass thing to do but it's also something that allows that to get made. Jason will tell you a similar story of when he was trying to get that made, he sent it to a producer. I forget her name but it was his first choice because he had gotten told by somebody, "You should reach out to this person". She read the script and was like, "You can't do this for under a \$100,000.00 or under \$500,000.00". He's like,

“Well, we only have \$75,000.00 available.” She’s like, “Well, then you can’t do it.” That was her thing, was you can’t do it. Mine was, how can we do it. I think that that is the best thing I can ever tell someone, is you don’t look at something on the negative side of it. You look at what you have available to you and then you go from there. So see what you can do and how can we do it. If you want to have a movie, it’s just a matter of figuring out which way works the best.

One of the unfortunate truths is that doing it for \$50,000.00, you will have a harder time getting it distributed because they don’t have the name talent that they want to put on a poster because that’s all distributors really give two shits about a lot of times is the names that they can put on a fucking poster. So that’s where a lot of money comes from, or a lot of money goes to that, makes things so much more expensive than they need to be, is just getting that name talent. Again though, if you want to do it, then you just go do it, especially if it’s your first or second feature. There’s a same thing. Similarly, a horror film that we’re doing that it has a very solid cast. It has a lot of moving parts and it can be done for about \$400,000.00 realistically and safely. That’s not an unheard-of amount but it’s easier to get \$6 million than it is to get \$400,000.00 a lot of times. [01:20:00]

That’s another thing that I think a lot of new people don’t realize is you’re not approaching studios right off the bat. You’re approaching friends, family, coworkers, shit like that. So those people need to understand if you’re doing something smaller that it’s going to be a smaller level like going to an investor. The thing is, I refuse to lie which is probably a shortcoming of mine [laughter] and tell them that they’re going to make millions of bucks on it. I was honest, “The minimal you’d get out of this is a finished movie. The best you’ll get out of it might be a lot more but I can’t guarantee you’re going to fucking make your money back.” Because it’s just the truth. You’re more than likely going to lose that money but you’ll have a fucking film that could be something that people watch and love and whatever or it could be a complete failure and not lying to people I think is also one of the best things [laughter] I can tell people. It might also be the worst advice I can give someone. Just be honest when you’re trying to make that fucking feature.

If you have \$10,000.00 and you can make something for \$10,000.00, go make the goddamn thing. If it’s something that you need \$100,000.00 for, try to piece it together, figure out if you can make it for cheaper or if you can get people to give you a bit and start doing it. But no matter what you do, don’t act like you’re making a fucking brilliant movie that is going to be the next fucking Blair Witch and exponentially increase its budget. You’re not going to be. It’s a fucking low percentage. Instead of looking at the ones that have succeeded that way, you have to look at all the other

ones that have not. Most of them, the truth is, your first time is going to be \$100,000.00 or less and it's going to make fucking \$10,000.00 if you're lucky at fucking local showings or whatever. [Laughter] So you just have to take that into account when you're making stuff. You're not making the most brilliant fucking film in the history of time.

I think that that mentality is why a lot of the collectives you talk about filter out because they think they're making brilliant fucking art. They think that they're going to make a ton of money once they finish it and it just doesn't happen. It takes, I think you said five years, most features from prep - from just development I should say until getting distribution. Yes, five years is probably a realistic example because you're going to have to find money, you're going to have to get all that done and taking five years to do something and then seeing it at best, most of the time, get on fucking streaming for free probably does take a lot of your confidence out and probably does just completely deflate you. The thing is, yes, it does. Then you go and do it again. I mean, fucking Peter Jackson did *Bad Taste* for four years, shooting on weekends with his friends.

This is a different time, where film festivals were actually meant to give people who weren't big names a fucking platform, and it wasn't just trying to sell tickets. So he got into Cannes with that goddamn thing. [Laughter] Nowadays it's much, much more difficult to get into fucking film festivals because they care about selling tickets. More than likely, you're going to get rejected by tons of film festivals as well which is another reason that I think a lot of people give up because they keep getting that rejection thing and they spend money on the festival entries and you get nothing.

RM: Well, I think that's a great example because you're talking about the difference between the legend and the reality like Peter Jackson is one of the most acclaimed filmmakers of all time at this point. The fact that his micro budget horror movie got into Cannes is a total anomaly. I mean, we all hear these legendary stories but without hearing about the hardships, the failures, the rejections that came along with all of these success stories, everyone has a skewed set of expectations and those expectations are why it's so heartbreaking to hit the modern festival circuit and not understand how everything has changed. I think if you can calibrate your expectations more modestly and think of it as work leading to more work as opposed to work leading to the red carpet and fame and glory, then you're in a much better place to savor the successes and develop a body of work than just crashing on heartbreak because you expect to be discovered as the next J.C. Chandor or what have you. Anyway, yes, I think that's great advice. We've got to wrap up but l..

JW: I want to give you one last quick thing about that. Just as far as the festival circuit you're talking about. Another thing that is very important. We just had a horror short that we got rejected left and right on.

RM: The Way Station?

JW: Way Station, yes, sir. Left and right everything just rejecting us. I showed it to the same person I mentioned before, Paul Uddo, who's a local dude. He gave us a suggestion for a pickup shot that we went and did. Just putting that in and tweaking this scene that preceded or the shot that preceded it, has now gotten us into every festival just about that we've applied to. So it's one fucking shot is the difference between it. So that's the other thing is that look at what you're doing and if it's not great, show it to more people. Don't just hide in your fucking collectives and think that you have some great thing if things aren't going right. There might be something that somebody watches and gives you one piece of advice that changes everything for you. I can't stress that enough. Get out of your comfort zone and go show people that might tell you what you don't want to hear but that will be the difference a lot of times between getting into the festivals you wanted and just completely wasting your money.

RM: Awesome. No, that's dead on. Especially if you have a short film, there's no excuse not to share it.

JW: Absolutely. [Laughter]

RM: I'm not talking about throwing it up on YouTube. I'm talking about slipping it to professionals in your network who can give you honest feedback, especially in the festival circuit when stuff like premiere status still helps.

JW: Right.

RM: Got to be bold and open to feedback. Especially in the modern era where everyone's got a non-linear editor in their computer and you can tweak until the day you send it to the festival. Cool. Jon, this has been amazing. Everything I hoped for and more.

JW: If anybody needs anything, like you had mentioned before, feel free to reach out because especially right now, this is a great time to be doing some pre-pro and just doing things that for movies you might have put on the back burner or whatnot. There's a lot of things you're going to overlook that a lot of people are out there as references for that, that can absolutely help you out and give you advice.

RM: Yes. Take advantage. I mean, it's a weird thing to say the pandemic is a blessing but it's I guess what they call a blessing in disguise. Find that silver lining, get to work on your screenplays, get to work on your planning, your pre-pro. Try to get it as far down the line conceptually as you can so that when you can get these groups together and hit the ground running.

JW: Absolutely. Absolutely.

RM: Well, thanks again. This is fantastic. This is the longest episode I've ever recorded and it's all gold, baby. [Laughter]

JW: Yes. I warned you about that. I told you I fucking talk too much. [Laughter]

RM: Subscribe. Rate. Review. Tell your friend. Et cetera. [Music]

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