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Interview with Melissa Johnson, Director of No Look Pass

Author: Teddy Wayne

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No Look Pass is a stunning new documentary by Melissa Johnson, a former web producer and director for Comedy Central ("The Colbert Report") and BBC America. Johnson was also a basketball star at Harvard, where she returned for her film about Emily Tay, a Burmese immigrant who makes it to the hallowed university against the odds and then breaks all the rules of tradition by playing professional basketball in Germany and coming out as a lesbian. No Look Pass is a sensitive, nuanced, and heartrending examination of a young woman's personal and professional development in rarefied environments, and it recently won the Special Programming Award for Freedom at its world premiere at the Outfest film festival in Los Angeles. It makes its East Coast debut at the DOC NYC film festival at the IFC Center on Saturday, November 5, at 2:15 p.m., and Monday, November 7, at 10:15 p.m. I talked with Melissa about the risks of documentary filmmaking, the familial tensions that might arise from the film, and her advice for first-time filmmakers.

How did you find this story?

I'm neither Burmese nor gay, but I am 6'4" and played basketball my entire life, including for Harvard. As a captain for Coach Kathy Delaney-Smith, I would jokingly threaten her that I was going to come back and make a film about her someday -- such as, "Taking me out of the game, eh? See how THAT gets retold in the documentary." Kathy is one of my favorite people on the planet. Nine years after graduation I did return to make a short film about her positive life philosophy called Act As If -- it was my thank-you gift for being such a rock-star mentor for so many young women.

I walked into the gym during a practice, had five minutes to pick out several players to interview, and immediately noticed this gorgeous Asian girl hanging from the rafters and throwing behind-the-back passes that would make Steve Nash jealous. My cameraman, Geoff, leaned over and whispered, "It's my responsibility to tell you that the camera loves that girl." Despite her initial shy reluctance, Emily came around to the idea of being interviewed for Act As If (read: Kathy made her do it.)

It was late on a Sunday night in the locker room when we started rolling; everyone else had gone home and Emily opened up into this jaw-dropping story about her life. By the end we were all crying... Emily, me -- even Geoff. Afterwards, I walked out into the silent dark gym and saw NO LOOK PASS in a flash. It was like a force was calling on me to make it -- which induced a flurry of excitement/terror: "Oh yes, this will be amazing!" / "Whoa -- how am I going to pull it off?"

What surprised you most in making No Look Pass?

I was blown away by how a camera in a room inherently informs what's going on -- specifically in terms of how people relate to one another. For example, it enabled Emily to have an important, emotional conversation with her parents on camera that she couldn't have in everyday life. And she loved the opportunity. That's profound to me.

How did making the film change you? What did you learn from it?

A big thing I learned through making No Look Pass was my capacity for risk -- I have no interest in casinos and you couldn't pay me to get on the back of a motorcycle -- but apparently when it comes to my own projects I have no problem betting the farm. (And by "the farm" I mean ten years of personal savings and every ounce of my focus, time, and energy.) This was news to me about myself -- how I took easily I took the plunge when I realized this was the only way to make it happen.

Here's a secret -- after you take the leap it's a surprisingly calm feeling: I'm all in. Simple. I don't need anyone to reassure me that this is what I should be doing.

It's a good feeling to know how far you're willing to go for what you believe in. It makes you a lot harder to shake. I bet kids who make films off trust funds don't have that. (They also don't have massive credit card debt, but I digress.) When you meet another filmmaker who has been through it you recognize one another immediately and give the secret handshake. That I enjoy.

What was most difficult about the process of making the film?

There are moments that you think are hard when they're happening -- like sprinting down a frozen sidewalk in Ithaca trying to make it to the car rental company before they close with 100 pounds of gear hanging off your body. Or crashing on a friend of a friend's couch when the guy's cat INSISTS on sleeping on your head and you wake up with giant allergic welts all over your face. Or hearing from your dream festival after an agonizing wait, "You were one of my favorite films, but there just wasn't room for you in the end."

But then there are things that are actually very difficult. Straight up, I feared that No Look Pass was going to fundamentally damage someone's family. And not just "someone," but a massively talented young person who looks up to me. Everyone in the Tay family participated in the film, but not everyone knows the truth about Emily's sexuality, which is fully revealed in the film. To this day not everyone knows.

I called an expert on traditional Burmese culture to ask for advice on how to handle the situation, then found Emily a fancy Connecticut therapist who would take her on for free (which Emily politely turned down), and had check-ins with her roughly 3 million times. What it enough? Will everything be okay for them?

I don't know. I made No Look Pass to do something positive in the world and my greatest fear is that it could backfire for the people who trusted me most. It still keeps me up at night.

What advice do you have for other first time directors?

1.) You're only as good as your relationships. I don't care how brilliant you think you are -- alone, you're nothing. A documentary film takes a village and if your relationships suck, sooner or later your film will suck.

2.) You better be an obsessed crazy person -- good crazy, that is. Because although it takes a team effort, no one is going to care about your film (baby) as much as you do. When your film (baby) keeps you up late at night you better tend to it. Finally, one day, little Filby will be ready to leave the nest to make its entrée to the world -- and let go, woman, you raised it as damn well best you could!

3.) Listen to everyone; listen to no one. You're going to need all the help you can get -- not just with how to make your film but then how to get it out into the world. Constantly ask advice from veterans who know more than you do. And when it starts to get overwhelming and contradictory (it will) -- remember that there's no single path to making a film and it's ultimately up to you to figure out what's best for your story and its specific audience.