

Transcript

DEMAN Live: TV, Film, Docs & Digital

INTRO: Dave Karger 0:04

Welcome to DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, Duke alum and host on Turner Classic Movies. DEMAN is the Duke Entertainment, Media and Arts Network. And it's the University's hub for the creative industries. On this show, you'll hear a past episodes of DEMAN live, which includes panels and one on one chats with alumni. Thanks so much for listening, and enjoy.

Dave Karger

On behalf of all of us who are here to hopefully give a couple words of wisdom, Welcome to the kickoff of the DEMAN Live zoom series. So I want the other seven panelists to introduce themselves and tell us what your who you are, where you are, what your you are, and what you're up to now, so I want to start with my classmate, Amy. Amy, say hi, and tell us about yourself.

Amy Gravitt 1:03

I am Amy Gravitt. Trinity 95. As Dave said, I am currently in Los Angeles and I'm the Executive Vice President of HBO programming comedy series, which means that I'm in charge of all of our scripted half hour series.

Dave Karger 1:25

Translation. She's a rock star. Vahradian, Mark...

Mark Vahradian 1:31

Yes, here I am. Mark Vahradian, Trinity '89, as hard as it is to say that I'm a film producer at Paramount. I've been out here for about 30 years doing studio movies for the most part. And I was a film executive at Disney for a long time. And I've been a producer on the producing side for an equally long time. And I do movies like Transformers and Deepwater Horizon and usually visual effects oriented larger scale movies, but I've done a lot of I've done a few smaller ones too. And I work a lot with Amy on DEMAN, and a lot with Dave actually and DEMAN LA. So we helped to organize new alumni and current students as they come and try and make entry into Hollywood.

Dave Karger 2:26

Essentially, if Mark Wahlberg is in the movie, Mark Vahradian probably produced it. including an upcoming movie. That's right, Infinite. Right. Okay. I know all about it. The Fabulous Geeta Patel. Hi Geeta.

Geeta Patel 2:41

Hi, I'm Geeta and I'm in LA. I'm Trinity '98. And I'm a director. For the most part I am a writer as well, I've, let's see, I started independent film. And I made a couple documentaries. I worked as a writer's assistant when I first got to LA. And now I work mainly for the last four years I've been doing television directing, and let's see, I'm working this year I'm working on the Witcher. Last year I did Dead to Me. So I've done comedy and drama.

Transcript

Dave Karger 3:18

She also made one of the documentary she made is called Meet the Patels and it's about her family and it is hilarious. I highly, highly recommend it. Robb Chavis.

Robb Chavis 3:28

Yeah. Robb Chavis, Trinity '98, former lawyer turned writer and on currently producer level writer on blackish on ABC. Pretty much ever right now. I work on films and write my own features and all of that stuff to stay in busy the way a writer has to but that's what I'm working right now.

Dave Karger 3:51

Robb was one of the keynote speakers at deema weekend a couple months ago and he had the crowd hanging on his every word. Where's Julian? Here.

Julien Thuan 4:01

Julien Thuan, Trinity '97. I'm an agent at United Talent Agency. I also supervise the film literary group, which is writers directors producers. On the film side. I also supervise the media rights group, which is our book to film and television also journalists, articles, etc. And, you know, visually represent a bunch of, you know, people who work in both film and television and in publishing.

Dave Karger 4:34

And we have two young alumni with us as well. Hi, Chandler.

Chandler Phillips 4:40

Hello, Hi. My name is Chandler and I am a documentarian I had a fellowship through CDS and I currently work at Sundance Institute in the impact engagement and advocacy department and so many words in that but essentially, we're here to support artists on Particularly impact producing and advocacy work at the field level.

Dave Karger 5:05

Thank you so much. And Jade is with us, say hi Jade. Tell us about yourself.

Jade Richard-Craven 5:10

Hey, everybody, I'm Jade. I'm in LA right now. I'm class of 2015. Did Duke in LA and I am an aspiring writer, and I'm also Director of Development for fighting 99th Entertainment, a small company that my boss has an overall deal with Amazon right now. So yeah.

Dave Karger 5:31

Great. Alright, so that's all the housekeeping. So, I want to get to some of the questions that were submitted. I want to start with a question that I want to point towards Amy Gravitt and also Chandler, and it involves what work is like and a work life is like now. So obviously, with

Transcript

everybody working from home, Amy, what is working from home look like? For you? And then Chandler answer after me, please.

Amy Gravitt 5:59

Um, I would say there are so many more emails very practically speaking. It's interesting production aside, when this hit, I had a couple of shows about to go into production. So the first couple of weeks, we're just about pivoting those shows, and sort of winding them down until we can all go back to work safely again. So there were sort of two weeks of figuring that out. And now it's calmed down into what I guess is the pace of the new normal, which is both very much the same, in that there's a lot that we can do working with writers not seeing one another. But I have to say I do miss that. I do miss just seeing people face to face and talking face to face. And I think there are some details that can get lost. So you have to be just sort of extra careful. Um, and on top of things and and I have to say I have to not small children at home, but I have an eight-year-old and 11-year-old. So I'm going back and forth between supervising google classroom and, and working in a way that they didn't necessarily blur together before all of this.

Dave Karger 7:23

Have there been any really hard decisions that this whole situation has forced you to make?

Amy Gravitt 7:30

I would just say that whole situation is hard, but not necessarily one hard decision to point to like we haven't changed the fate of the show, because I feel lucky in that way.

Dave Karger 7:43

Good. How about you, Chandler? What's different now?

Chandler Phillips 7:45

Yeah, well, also, so many emails, so many zooms. I've never been on a platform as much. And so I think that just the logistical. It's a lot of screen time. And then for the Institute, we do a lot of programming and events. And so we had like 58 events planned for March to August, that all had to be cancelled or reformatted. So it's a lot of shifting our thinking of like, What does engagement look like? How are we participating with artists? How does this affect like long term? Because I think this is an opportunity to sort of reimagine how we interact with audiences and think about accessibility and, and those sorts of things that have been big conversations. And so there's this like, bucket of urgent things of just like supporting the artists that come to our programs and our labs, and then long term thinking of what does this mean for Sundance in the future?

Dave Karger 8:46

Anyone else who's who's on this panel that's had like a major, I mean, we've all had upheaval, but has anyone has something just that's been kind of devastating and harder to deal with? Don't be shy.

Transcript

Mark Vahradian 9:03

No, I mean, for me, for me, I don't know about devastating...devastating will be laying people off and and, you know, people have families and and need need the financial, you know, income of the show. That's, that's really hard. I haven't had to do that yet. We had a movie, though. That was set up in Malaysia, and they were counting on that. And we had a good relationship with the production entity there. And as Corona came through Asia, we moved, our insurance was canceled for Asia.

So we moved it to Dominican Republic. And we were setting up for Dominican Republic. And then basically the world was shut down. So we basically stopped and we were meant to be starting that movie in a month. You know, so we had crewed up to some extent and All that has to be shut down. And now, you know, it's just a waiting game. And then the production difficulties are we don't even know what those will be at. I mean, we don't know that we can get insurance. That's not a studio movie. What's interesting about that is the insurance companies will not insure for Coronavirus, related delays to that movie. So if you're making a movie to major studio, and the studio is self insure, so it doesn't really matter, they're willing to take the risk on if you're making it for the in this case, it's Lionsgate or, or if you're making it purely independently, you cannot make the movie without insurance, and you cannot get insurance for Corona.

Therefore, the banks will not finance your movie, because you don't have insurance. And what I'm being told is, last time this happened around September 11. The solution was the United States government would back the banks to back movies, believe it or not, so they're waiting for the US government to say, we will support your your, your movies, and that's what they did before. And we're hoping that's what they'll do again.

Dave Karger 11:06

Great. Next question. I want to direct towards Julien and also you Mark, because two of you are so involved with helping students and recent alums navigate the job market, and I'm looking at the zoom and I see a lot of young faces. I see my friend Rebecca down in Cleveland, Tennessee. Hey, Rebecca, how's it going? I'm assuming that's where you are. You don't have to like and yeah, okay, thumbs up. Great. So this is a question these these are kind of two questions that came through that I want to group together. I thought these were really good, good questions, which are, what are your suggestions for how students and alumni can navigate their internship and job search during these uncertain times? How can students and alumni find a balance between staying in touch with alumni about career opportunities, but also respecting the fact that a lot of people are having difficulties of their own? So Julien, what would your advice be to people?

Julien Thuan 12:03

I mean, there's no way to there's no way to address the question without sort of first saying what the bad news is. And I think the bad news is that, you know, obviously, as well, as well reported and publicized every company is dealing with financial challenges. And so I think that it's very likely that you'll run across some hiring freezes, you know, hopefully, you know, not a

Transcript

lot of dramatic layoffs, although that some of that stuff's gonna happen as well. And, you know, so the tone of every conversation, the tone of every, you know, kind of submission of resume or, you know, or request to have information is, is layered with that. So, but in my mind, you know, you kind of have to dismiss that and say, What is the good news, and the good news is, everybody else is in the same exact position, and this will end and then there will be lots of opportunity, again, and, you know, I think that one of the great things about being a Duke alum is that, you know, you are a very strong candidate, in many cases for a lot of these opportunities.

And so I think it's really about the approach. And in my mind, you want to find, you want to try to find your gateway alums who can, that you can, if you already know them, or if you already have a relationship, or you already touched base, maybe it's a good time to ask for, you know, a touch base, you know, and, and really ask for advice, or ask for referrals for a couple of other people that you might contact. And I think if they can open those doors, it makes those conversations a lot more productive. And I think it also disarms them so that people don't feel like you're going in saying, I need a job right now you're going in and saying I understand the situation. But I'm trying to further build my network, you know, for the time when it does make sense.

Dave Karger 13:56

So would you say that people should kind of like, just hit pause right now. And because it's like, on one hand, you want to maintain the relationship, but you don't want to be like, why am I emailing someone now when they clearly don't have a job to offer, but then when the floodgates open, you don't want to be one of 100 people who's emailing the same person, like when the you know, when the world opens up, again, is the....

Julien Thuan 14:16

I would just I would just take I mean, I come from my general philosophy is there are no real secrets. So if you're calling somebody and not saying I'm calling you to maintain my relationship, there's this unspoken thing. So you might as well just say it, you know, in your email, say, I know that things are weird. If you are available or have any time the next couple of weeks. I'd love to just touch base. And I think that that makes it easier if if someone says no, I can't do it, or if they don't respond, that's okay. I just think you cast your net with, you know, as many people as you feel comfortable doing that with.

And again, if you find certain people that you've already established a relationship with, that's a great place to start because a lot of those people will open doors for you. They'll have a greater sense of tone and of where people stand in terms of that person. process, I know that certain recruiters that we have, you know, still maintain those conversations and still try to keep, you know, they're still open to discussing and vetting candidates, even though they don't have as much to offer in this particular moment. But I think we all operate, you know, aside from the personal, you know, experiences and struggles that everyone's dealing with and the realities of the economic situation. I think everyone operates with the belief that, you know, we

Transcript

opportunity on the other side of this. So most of the for thinking people that you encounter should be open to having conversations, I would, I would assume.

Dave Karger 15:39

Mark, how about you?

Mark Vahradian 15:40

Yeah, I mean, it for sure Dave, the, the idea that you would come graduate in May, and come out here and get a job in June, I think is probably unlikely at the moment, just because there are, you know, there will be contractions, people will be laid off there, there isn't as much to do right now. That being said, when the doors open, it's going to be a rush to, you know, to catch up. I mean, from the production side, from movie side, we're already jockeying to hire, or to hold crew members, because we know, the minute it's authorized, there's going to be 100 movies that will be trying to launch at the same time. So you have to be prepared to immediately jump on it, the minute those doors have been, I mean, like leave that afternoon when they say, you know, the president today said there's three stages to the reopening when they hit stage three, and the gyms dump, and you better be out here, because shits gonna happen.

And so I would, I would stay very alert. In terms of internships, we are hiring interns. Now, all the time, we do zooms with our interns, part of our intern program is educational, and, and, and we lecture and all that we do that on zoom. Now, most of the work that interns do is reading scripts, writing up analysis of scripts, I might I actually think that interns might have a better chance for face to face time now than they had than they had when they're in the office, because I'm not in the office that much. But if but I'm on zoom all the time. And I'd say take advantage of that what Julian, you know said is right, like this is a time I'm getting outreach from all kinds of people, from agents who want me to talk to directors, or meet actors or people that I never would have had time to have an in-person meeting with on zoom. And I think the same thing will be true for people, you know, looking to come into the business, we're now so after two or three weeks of this, so adjusted to this, I get on with people face to face that I've never, you know, met before. And we have great conversations and I come out of those conversations, as opposed to a phone call, I come out feeling like I know them a little bit more. And you know, and you get a sense of somebody's personality and their vibe and their energy and all that. And so that side of it's been good.

But for internships, I'd say apply as always, I think everybody's still gonna hire interns, you know, you won't you'll you'll get to avoid the coffee runs and all of that stuff. And you'll get hopefully, all the benefits of reading and learning, you know, about how decisions are made on material and things like that. And I would say that, you know, again, this question depends a little bit on what you're trying to do. If you want to be an actor, you can't really be an actor right now, if you want to be a director, you can't really be a director, nothing's being made. If you want to be a writer, you can write all day long, right? I mean, that's something your life has not been changed change at all, by any of this. And you know, if you want to be a producer, or if you want to, you know, be an agent or whatever, you know, you have the problems that we talked about, but I would, I would say you know, I'm ranting a little bit here but I would say prepare yourself now for very quick entry into this business and I think I gave me a list of that

Transcript

we give out to our insurance called Welcome to Hollywood which will be posted somewhere. Amy I can't remember were on the lounge or something.

Basically, list the books you should read that will get you up to speed the the blogs and websites that you should be looking at every day and trade magazines and basically all the ways that you should be prepared when you walk in the door here so if you're competing with with a lot of people, when the door is open, you better be very very well prepared. You better know who everybody is. You better know what's been happening in the business. You better be reading this stuff every day. And and come out here ready, ready to go.

Dave Karger 19:57

Incidentally, Amy put all of our emails in the chat. So, you know, feel free to take a note of those. And she's also she, you've already just let us know that it's in the DEMAN Lounge but what you're talking about, Okay, see, look at you, Amy always on the ball. Here's a question for Robb and Geeta, because you guys are like the, what I call the creators here of the group. The question is, many of you have directed your own shows, written script started your own companies, what's your advice for students and alumni, trying to spearhead their own creative projects right now, Robb?

Robb Chavis 20:31

Like Mark just said, writers, right, and writers can be writing right now. So my show wrapped up about a month ago. Since then, I finished up a feature that I was working on for a while I've pitched and tried to sell a show, I'm trying to get people to read a show that I finished up, you know, a couple of months ago, and I'm trying to come up with new projects right now to keep going. So if you're a writer, it's a self-driven hustle business, and you have to keep writing like you, you know, hopefully, it's something that you're in love with. That's the only way I can get through anything. But your ability to not stay on that one thing that you're in love with and not be willing to like jump to the next thing. And the next thing is what keeps you writing like, it's it's not a linear business where something ends, and there's something standing there waiting for you, you've always got to have three or four things, hopefully, kind of cooking in various stages of completion so that hopefully you can go from vine to vine as things go away.

So you know, right now on writing. As far as like in this specific situation, you know, the the place that it gets a little unsure is normally my writers room would ramp back up either at the end of May or early June. And I think that's what we're planning on doing. But not knowing when we'll go into production. Like right now there, let the writers go. And we'll hopefully I'll be together on a zoom or something to get things going. But nobody knows when they're gonna let 100 and 150 peoples stand on a soundstage and work together again. So we're, we could hit a wall at episode five, or six, where the studio says everybody go home, until we can kind of see what this is and know when you know, when we're gonna actually shoot something. And when we're actually going to put something that we can get on film and put on television. So that's out there right now, it feels a little bit further out there, because we wouldn't start shooting anything until probably August, September.

Transcript

Anyway. So you know, we haven't missed that goal yet. But that's definitely in the back of my mind as far as what I'll actually be able to do. But in the meantime, I'm just writing, you know, the thing that I hate is that usually now when I'm off, I'm going out to meet all the other writers that I've worked with before people I've never met with, I always push all of my meetings. So this window to be like, I'm super busy, but like in April, we'll hang out. And like none of that is happening at all. A little bit behind on my networking and stuff. But um, but I'm writing my butt off.

Dave Karger 23:08

Geeta, how about you?

Geeta Patel 23:10

Um, you know, there's, there's a quarantine answer to this question and a non quarantine answer. I think in the situation of us being you know, stopped. I am working because I'm a writer, director, I have been wanting for now, four or five years, I've just been like, Oh, I want to go back to my independent roots. I love independent film, I want to, you know, pull my scripts out that I wrote, I want to make those films and I have not done it in four or five years, I've been, you know, doing gigs and working for other people's ideas. And so what I'm doing right now is I pulled out those scripts, I have been working on them reading them going through story, you know, going back to my notes. I don't know if anyone else on this panel has this. But I never am an expert at story. I'm constantly going back to three act structure.

You know, protagonists, arcs. I mean, I'm constantly re educating myself. And so I think that's something that everyone can do. Whether you're a writer, director, producer, story is so important to our jobs, actors. You need to understand how to arc your character how to arc a scene. These are things that you don't learn overnight. These are things that I think is, you know, these are ongoing education that I believe go on throughout our careers no matter how old we get. So that's something that I always do, even when I'm stopped. And I encourage everyone to do that right now. You know, look at the shows you love. The films you love, analyze them understand why they were built the way they were built, they will affect everyone's jobs. Think about you know, if you read a script, and then after that, you we you watch the film, don't watch the film yet ask yourself how would I approach the scene? How would I? If I was an actor when I was a writer, if I was a producer, what are the things that could happen? I mean, there's just so much about story. Worried that I think we don't spend enough time on we're also busy busy chasing these titles I want to be of this, I want to be that this is the foundation story.

So Mark has a list that he you know, he's given everybody for books and things like that I think that's really the way to go is self-study and I'm happy to also send out some books particularly for directing. But honestly, story a story you don't you know, to be any of these things. That's the heart of it. Um, other than that, I think outside of quarantine, if you have an idea for a project, or you have a story you want to tell you, there's two sides of me, the independent filmmaker and me. Having started there, I just did it, I had something I was passionate about. It was a story. It wasn't about being I didn't even know I didn't ever know that I was going to be a

Transcript

director, I started just wanting to be a storyteller. I was in a writer's assistant, I was so insecure about my own ability, I didn't think I thought I was the biggest idiot in every room, I just thought everyone else was so talented. And then I fell in love with this story in a war zone, or these people were dying in this war. And I just wanted to cover it. And so that's what I did. I covered the war, I put it on my credit card, it took eight years Sundance funded it. Next thing you know, I'm in the Sundance labs, and I'm a director. So I think one thing is to just follow your heart, do what you love, don't worry about what you want to be just tell the stories you want to tell him that means you need the experience as a human being to have stories to tell. So I think that's one side of it. The second side of it, is, if you don't feel ready, or you don't have the resources to make something the way you want to make it if it's a big action film that mark would make, you know, then I would say take time to learn, go work for people and absorb. I worked as a writer's assistant for eight years. And those were the most amazing. Eight years, I learned so much. And so I think there's nothing wrong with that. Take your time. You don't need to just jump in and be it right away.

Dave Karger 27:08

That's great. And I was thinking I've come across this video on Facebook that was shared by a friend of mine, maybe you guys have seen it. It's like there's this woman and she looks like she she's definitely acting two different parts. And maybe she wrote it and directed it. But it's this woman today. And she meets her cell from four months ago. Have you guys anyone seen us? And it's a conversation between her now and her four months ago and her now is telling her like this is what you like, it's really funny. I'll if I'll try to find it and and post it in. But it's hilarious. And I just thought Wow, how enterprising of this woman who clearly has aspirations to do something. And she took advantage of the fact that we're all at home. And she made this super fun, clever three-minute professional video that I'm assuming she did on her own. Alright, here's a question for our two twenty somethings, Jade and Chandler, the question is getting your foot in the door to work on a production is challenging. What advice do you have for students and alumni to break into the industry during this production freeze? Or just to break into the industry? in general? Whether it's production or? Or any part of it? What would you say, Jade?

Jade Richard-Craven 28:17

Um, I mean, kind of piggyback off of the question earlier that Mark and Julien were answering, I would say, get in where you can. For me, I my first internship was in music supervision. And I had an interest in that, but that led to like a development internship the next summer. And I would say you never know, like, who you're going to meet. And in these times, like development is still going on, music is still going on, post production is still going on, and like physical production, is it so you're not going to come out here and be a PA, you know, in June, that's, that's just not gonna happen. But I think there are other ways that you could still get into a company that might not be your top choice, but it might lead to other opportunities.

Dave Karger 29:01

I love that. And I mean, I can speak from my own experience, I never thought I didn't think I was gonna do journalism, or particularly television broadcast, I started as an intern at a PR firm, and

Transcript

then I interned because of that internship, I got an internship at MTV, I decided to try that in production and then decided to pivot to Entertainment Weekly, where I worked for 17 years, but without those other two internships, which quite frankly, were not that related to journalism, I still probably wouldn't have gotten into Entertainment Weekly. So you don't you can have different kind of experiences that doesn't have to go on in a straight line. Basically. Chandler, How would you answer that question?

Chandler Phillips 29:38

Yeah, um, what I really loved what Geeta said about you can take a moment to and you don't have to be it right now. And so I think that what this time has showed us in all industries, it's like maybe this is a time to pause and really reflect and so I think that this moment with what everyone is saying can really be a time For you to see like, Who are the people that you want to talk to and not not this force relationship, but who someone whose mind that you just want to know more about these things that that are happening, that shared interest and passion. So I really encourage that of, of this won't be this might not be the time where it's like, Hey, can I get a job, but this can be a moment to really pick someone's brain apart and have this like, natural relationship that isn't necessarily forced. Because I think, again, this moment, has shown us the importance of human connection. And I think everyone who is getting reached out to now really appreciates that sort of authenticity, of, Hey, I just want to know you as a person in this time, now that we have some time. So emphasizing everything everyone has said, as well as that.

Dave Karger 30:49

The next question that I want to first director Julien, and I get that, you know, Geeta, I had you on this question too, but and I feel like you touched on a little bit. So that's fine. If you don't want to say anything else. But you if something else comes to your mind, you should and the question is, what are a few productive things we can be doing during this quarantine that will help us gain experience and prepare us for creative industry? And get I loved your answer about, you know, studying scripts and film. So if you have anything else you want to add to that after Julien, you can but Julien, what would you say?

Julien Thuan 31:18

I think, honestly, that was a great, a great way of looking at it, I think it's you know, the, I think it's a it is really important right now to take advantage of the time, you know, if your goal is to be in the entertainment industry, then market reference, really knowing who everyone is trying to understand how the how the business works, if you're interested in film, read a lot of books about studios or about agencies, or about the way in which film or television get made, there are a lot of great ones available. And they give an overview of the industry. And even though the names have changed a lot of the patterns of behavior and a lot of the existential questions, you know, that we face are the same, you know, the the problems were different, maybe it was video to DVD, or it was, you know, basically nothing to video.

But you know, now we deal with that with streaming, and we'll deal with something else tomorrow. And I think that getting inside of the minds of people who dealt with those

Transcript

transitions is really important. And understanding where the other opportunities are going to be, is really important. You know, every every one of these areas of the industry are sort of a matrix of puzzle, and it takes a long time to figure out how things work. It's very confusing, if you haven't sort of lived it. And to the degree that you can get some kind of a foundation.

It's helpful I, I interned at UTA the summer before my senior year. So I knew that I had a job when I went back senior year. And I really spent that entire time reading scripts, reading the trades, reading lots of books about the industry, trying really hard to understand what went on and then doing a lot of outreach to people, you know, in the industry at all levels. And I learned tons from assistance, you know, at the time, who would really give me tips of things to look at, or things to think about. I learned a lot by reading a lot of screenplays, and then comparing them to movies, I would take screenplays of movies that existed and then watch the movie at the same time and try to understand how they were structured and why and what worked and what didn't work.

And, and it's also a great opportunity to really look at the good stuff, watch the good movies, watch the good television shows, read the good, you know, books so that you can really identify the difference between a good thing and a bad thing. Because once you're really in the industry people an entry level people tend to throw you the worst problems, where there's the least, you know, the least likelihood of success or opportunity, once you've actually looked at it. So better to take advantage now of opportunities to really admire the highest level of execution in the craft and the you know, the biggest successes.

Amy Gravitt 33:59

Can I add one thing? Sorry, yes, just for anybody who somehow this causes a detour, if you are planning on moving out to LA and starting in the industry right away, there are some of us on here who didn't do that. And I think that the experience that I had outside of the industry is very much responsible for how successful I am right now. And because I learned how to work and all of these jobs take a lot of work so there's something to be said for experience that you bring to LA that others might not have that distinguishes you from people. So while I think obviously foster your creative voices and your creative instincts always I think all people should but also know that other outside experience is valuable. So you know maybe go maybe you know don't be too Don't be discouraged if your path goes a little bit off track right now.

Dave Karger 34:59

Geeta, anything else you want to add?

Geeta Patel 35:00

Yeah, a few things. One thing is just piggybacking off what Amy said, I was thinking, you know, these are the times I remember when I graduated Duke because I worked in finance for two years before I came out here. I just read about the world, I was constantly, I was so unhappy at my job. And wanting to be an artist, I just wanted to be a storyteller. But the funny thing is, I spend so much time just absorbing the world and reading about people's lives and stories. And

Transcript

that's I didn't do it on purpose. But that's what led me to my first project is I was completely and totally confused and fascinated by how wars happened.

And so it wasn't like, you know, again, it wasn't like, Oh, I want to be a director, it was just this, I think, you know, you bring to it who you are. The other thing is that there's a little trick for all you directors that are on here, I do this, I still do this, I will find a movie that I love. And I'll find the script online, and the movie will be you know, on Netflix or whatever. And I read the script. And after I read the script, I'll take one scene. And I would ask myself as a director, how would I how do I see the scene? How would I direct it? where, you know, where were the cameras be with the cameras be moving? I asked myself all these questions like, what if I had to direct it right now? How would I block it? You know, put people in places and then I would watch the scene on the film? And I won't watch you know, I'll make sure it's a film I don't know very well. That's a really great at least for me, it was a great exercise of just understanding why these incredible filmmakers do things the way they do them.

And the other The last thing I was gonna say is as far as writing and learning story and doing it you know, doing the kind of three act structure stuff that I was talking about, some of you might be like, Oh, I'm independent. I like the outside the box stuff. I'm, you know, I like to meander, I get you, I totally get it. I feel the same way. But the one beautiful thing about learning story and the strict tentpole for quadrant all these words you'll hear of commercial films is that you learn rules, and then you can break them. So I don't think you should shy away from that kind of stuff. Just because you might like films that are different.

Dave Karger 37:22

Great. We've touched a little bit on this, but I want to ask the question more pointedly and this is for Robb, and for Amy? What books, movies or resources? Would you recommend that Duke students or young alums check out during this time either as a way to escape or to continue to develop? We've talked about this a little bit. But is there anything, Robb, that you want to give a shout out to or mention?

Robb Chavis 37:42

Yeah, for sure. One of the things because I was a lawyer before becoming a writer, as I mentioned. And so coming out here, I was not going to do any more school. So my kind of my personal grad training was listening to podcast. So like, there's a one called The Writers Panel, which just goes in and interviews show runners and staff writers and people talking about how they broke into the business and what it's like to pitch and what it's like to be in a writers room. And I literally just listened to every single episode of that podcast, it's hearing stories, hearing all the different ways people interact, hearing challenges that they've had, hearing successes that they've had.

And just learning like everybody has been saying, learning the way the business works. And then as a comedy writer, I listened to a bunch of like just comedy podcasts of people having conversations and kind of understanding where people come from. As far as what you like, I mean, I've done a lot of the things that people have mentioned to as far as grabbing a TV script,

Transcript

having it in your lap while you watch the show, to see how those decisions got made. And actually, when I moved out here, just because I felt like I was always playing catch up. I used to try to watch like, every single comedy on television, like every single new pilot, everything that came on, so at least I knew what it was. And what I learned after about three years of doing that, is that I lost my sense of like taste. I'd like people say what do you like? And I say, well, I've watched everything. They're like, no, but what do you like? And I couldn't really answer it.

So I started like backing back out to say, what actually resonates with me why, like when you're watching something, figure out why you like it. Is it the actors? Is it the setup? Is it the story? Like what is it about it, that you actually like and appreciate because, you know, as a television writer, as you move up through the ranks, everything you do is just a decision. You have to decide what's funny, you have to decide what goes on the screen. You have to decide what makes a story work or what makes it not work and how to fix it is all decisions and having a sense of taste, knowing what's good and what's bad and what you like and what your sensibility is. It's still something I'm very much working on. But that helps you drive towards something like you have an opinion, you have a voice, you have an identity. And for a writer that comes across on the page, just like right now, I've been reading a couple of my old things just to, you know, see where I came from, and what my next ideas are and things that I repeat and things that I do over and over again, because I'm talking to people trying to pitch things, trying to put myself in a position to sell something and thinking about how to best describe quickly, the way I do what I do and what it is that I do.

And you start to see patterns, if you work enough, and you start to write enough things, you start to see patterns in your own work. And ultimately, that's what you're selling, you're selling your ability, you walk into a room, you try to express yourself very clearly about who you are and where you came from. And the way you see the world and hopefully the person sitting across from you gets it quickly. They want to be a part of it. They want to work with you to do something. So you know, when you have all this time at home, and you're trapped with your family, like mine that like figure out where you came from, and what those stories are and the things that shaped you and why you see the world the way you do. And are you a person when you get pranked that gets mad easily or you laugh, like, I've been thinking about those things like just how like, what makes you tick, if you can figure those things out as a writer, that's how you sell yourself in a room. And when you're ultimately trying to make something. That's what has to come across to the people who you hope to make something with, so that they know that you are the right person to see that thing all the way through. So like, constantly look at yourself, figure out what you really like and that'll, that'll really help guide you through.

Dave Karger 41:44

That's great. Amy, what would you say to that same question?

Amy Gravitt 41:45

Um, I would say well, one, I'm sure on Mark's list. He has the John August and Craig Mazin podcast Script Notes, one that I like to listen to. And beyond that, I actually go outside of the

Transcript

scripted space, the comedy space for inspiration, because that's what I process for work and, and I'm a big believer in the Jane Kenyon, quote, "have good sentences in your ears."

So really, it's just any delicious writing that you can, you can pick up and consumes, you start to get the rhythms of different languages down, I think, especially help people who want a position like mine, where I'm dealing with different tones, and I'm dealing with different voices. And it's not necessarily about my voice so much as a larger slate of tones. Um, and then beyond that, just as far as like something that I picked up before, before quarantine was the big goodbye by Sam Watson, which is like a good classic Hollywood book about the making of Chinatown and trying to Tom doesn't have to be your favorite film to enjoy it. But that's been kind of my lighter, more delicious read at night. And then watch survivor with my family. Last night, it was good.

Mark Vahradian 43:15

I would, I would join the Criterion Channel and you get classic movies and newer, more obscure movies. It's relatively cheap, 99 bucks a year, 10 bucks a month. And you know, you get the commentary, film comments, and there's nothing better than criterion movies to understand that how movies are made. There's literally nothing better. It's free or nearly free film school.

Dave Karger 43:40

It's so true. I would 100% do that. Okay, here's a question that I want to still direct to Geeta and Jade. But now I want Robb, I want you to think about this one too. The question was, how difficult is it to make a stable income, pay the bills? Is it better to go straight into the entertainment industry and work your way up or to have a safer more kind of corporate job? And then kind of make your way in, you know, on the side? And I just I mean, there's no one path. But when you think about the way things are today, would you guys have a different answer to that than you normally would. So let's start with Geeta on that.

Geeta Patel 44:19

Oh, this has been the heart of everything for so many years until just recently I come I was the first one born in America and my family and so my parents having this immigrant background and you know, things that you can read into it just you know, they didn't have a lot of money and they they did a lot to pay for me to go to Duke I was the first one to go in the US. It was a lot of a great responsibility I felt to make them proud and make money and wanting to be an artist is kind of the opposite of that for many, many years, if you're not lucky to be, you know, killing it right away. So when I started out I had no money. But I took this job in finance for two years, and I saved up. And then when I came to LA, I, you know, had a little bit saved up and had written all these letters to all these alarms, including Dave Parker. And one of those letters resulted in this assistant job that I got. And as I was working in assistant job, I got paid peanuts, I mean, very, very little and worked for free, most of the time doing all these, you know, internships and things.

So at a certain point, when I decided to be my own artist, and leave that security of some sort, it was a big step, because I knew that it's probably the feeling that a lot of you are feeling, you

Transcript

know, if you don't have a job, and you're going to come out to LA, how are you going to pay the bills? How are you going to? Well, I'll tell you, um, there was no other there was no plan B, when I decided that I wanted that I couldn't live without storytelling. Nothing else was important to me, I became a secretary, I was doing temp jobs all over LA. And I was the happiest, because when I came home on the weekends, or after I saved up a little bit money, I take a few weeks off, I was telling stories in my room by myself writing, and I loved it. To me, that's success. And I've said this to some of you that I've spoken to offline. But you know, the biggest lesson I've learned and all of this because I was broke. Four and a half years ago, I had sold my car to finish my last film, I the biggest lesson I learned is that success is not being on this panel.

Success is not being this big director a big whatever. And success is not making money. Success is doing what you love. And you have that in your hands right now. So if you really, really love storytelling, then get a can of beans, and tell your stories because you will be happy. And that's at least how I feel my friends all had the big houses in the cars. And I went through that whole process of understanding. But that's what I've come to.

Dave Karger 47:08

Jade, how about you?

Jade Richard-Craven 47:09

Yeah, I mean, I agree with so much of what Geeta just said, it's been like the constant struggle for me the past couple years, because I started as a writers, pa after college, and then I was a showrunners assistant. And then after season two of Luke Cage, I decided I didn't want to be getting people coffee and taking notes and doing all this stuff for a little bit because I wasn't writing. And so I was fortunate enough to become the Director of Development for my boss's own company. But I still don't know if I'm doing the right thing. And honestly, this whole thing has been a little bit of a gift to me, because I was going to go back and to look for assistant jobs. And now I don't have to do that. So it's like kind of a little bit of time for me to reflect and write. But all that to say, I still don't have some high paying job, I have a high title, I get to meet great people like Jen, Sophie from Amazon and Brian Grazer, people I never thought I would be in rooms with. And I get to sit in on pitches, which is invaluable as a writer.

So I think all this to say like get a job that also services what you want to do. Like if you could be a marketing assistant at NBC, I think that would be a great job, because that pays the bills, but then you could still write at night. I mean, some people would say just dive in, but I don't know. Yeah, what Rob, you would say to this, like, just be an assistant on a TV show and go up the ranks. But that didn't feel right to me. So I think you just have to follow what feels right and what like your finances allow?

Dave Karger 48:49

Because the way you did it, Rob is so rare. Yeah. So what what's what's your advice?

Transcript

Robb Chavis 48:54

Um, so I had a completely other career and I was an advertising executive, I had saved up some money, and just kind of decided that this was the thing that I had to at least find out whether or not this was the, you know, my purpose, it felt like it could be and I had to go give it a shot.

Um, you know, the two things that I'll say is number one, I didn't realize how much of a hustle business this was, you know, coming from a place where I was the CEO of a good-sized advertising agency, I knew I wasn't going to be a great assistant. Like it just it would have come off of me like people would have just been like you are you are not the guy who's here to get us lunches every day. And I just knew that for me, I just had to hustle my way in through the side door. And I wasn't built for it honestly, like I was I was an executive who thought that my resume would open doors for me and very, very quickly in this town I realized that you have to build relationships. You have to know people you have to learn how to express yourself. You have to learn how to speak the language. out here. And that takes time. And I did it very, very quickly by most accounts.

But even now, it's still a constant struggle, like it's not easy, and it takes a long time, and you have to be willing to be in it for the long haul. And you have to love it. Because if you don't love it, it's hard if you're doing something, like if you're doing it, because you think it's gonna make you famous, and you can't wait to see your name someplace like it is not going to get you through. That is not what's going to keep you up at midnight writing a new script, or making you work every single weekend, to get the next thing out, like you will stop, you have to treat it as a full time job. I came out here and I started working 40 to 60 hours a day a week, just writing and pushing and like just treating it like it was a full time job.

And that's to me why it happened more quickly than many other people find is because I just refuse to stop pushing and I'm still pushing, I still am constantly trying to meet people and expand and find people I can partner with and like just push as much as I possibly can. So like it's LA is expensive. It's, you know, it's not the easiest place to feel like you're always winning. But like Geeta said, I've never woken up in the morning and thought that I didn't want to go to work that day, I wake up wanting to do what I do getting to sit in a room, a writers room is a 10 hour meeting, where you don't get to chill, you don't get to turn off and like not pay attention, you have to be on for 10 hours with your boss in the room every single day. And I walk into that environment ready to go. So like and that's winning.

And in for me, if I get to be a showrunner, which is what I want to do, the job only gets harder, and I only see my family less. And I only have less time to myself, like but that's what this is like, I have to tell these stories, I want to do this job. And you don't have to have that right now. Like live, figure out what makes you tick all of those things. So you have great stories to tell. But as you're pushing through it, like that's what gets you to a place of success.

Dave Karger 52:20

That's great. Okay, with the last like two or three minutes we have left? Mark, I'll start with you as the elder statesman of the group here. Come on. You're gonna get you're going to get the

Transcript

overarching philosophical question, how do you think the impact of this pandemic is going to affect the future of the industry?

Mark Vahradian

Well, it's obviously a lot of speculation now. But you know, there's two answers of the question. Technically, the answer is, Will movie theaters survive? Will people just be streaming and there will never be a theatrical experience? I don't think that will be the case. Although I think, you know, streaming is really the future. And there will always be a place in the world for seeing a movie in a communal way, with other people laughing together at a comedy being scared together for horror movies, certain movies need to be seen on 30 foot tall screens. You know, but I do think it is inevitable that most people will ultimately be watching their their stuff on on phones and on their TVs at home. The more interesting question, I guess is, what does this do to the kinds of stories people want to see when this is all said and done? And you, you know, you could go to history and see how, you know, major social and political events influenced the kinds of movies people want, Will people see, you know, stressful horror movies after they've been stressed by this event?

Maybe it could be cathartic, right to see a movie about some other kind of, you know, danger in the world, will they want something more uplifting? I mean, you have a lot of things colliding. Right now you have a presidential election, which will be bitter. And you'll you have this situation, which is also bitter. coming out the other side, I suspect, you know, people will be more open to thoughtful, philosophical, you know, more dramatic material. Maybe even on big screens, maybe you know, the way we think my movies, you have to think about what movie stars, what roles will they want to play? Are they going to want to be an Avenger? Are they going to want to examine what's just happened to all of us? And if that's the case, then, you know, you may be turning back to those criterions sort of movies, which I hope is the case because you know, those are the ones that have stuck with people for a lifetime. They've changed the course of people's lives, they've made them change careers, they've made them, you know, marry somebody, they didn't think they've married, they've changed. They've literally, this is literature.

This is storytelling. This is very influential stuff. It is. It's the biggest, you know, source of influence for the United States. As a country, I think it's important. And I and I'm, you know, so that the, you know, I believe, you know, theater theaters, and all that stuff will will survive, studios will survive, and, and all of that, but I think the more interesting hopefully change will be in the stories we tell.

Dave Karger 55:45

Amy, how would you answer that same question, just to wrap us up?

Amy Gravitt 55:46

Um, no, I have a lot of the same thoughts in the middle of something like this, obviously, you can't make some grand statement, you have to, there's a little bit of wait and see and certainly knowledge that things will change. You don't come out of an event like this without without

Transcript

change, but it's hard to say exactly what it is. But beyond what Mark was talking about, I think also it's definitely changed and open up the way we work.

So I can't imagine going back to, you know, the exact type of work dynamic that I had going into this year, and everybody I think, is much more open to meetings like this. Whereas you would have taken a flight across the country to meet you know, with our New York office, you don't necessarily need to do that quite as often. So I think it'll be interesting to see that as well.

Dave Karger 56:41

That's great. As Chandler just wrote in the chat, we are here for you guys. All the people that our students are young alum, so do not be shy to reach out to all of us. We all like hearing from you. And we like trying to help in as much as we can. So I just am so appreciative to Geeta and Mark and Amy. I'm looking at everybody and Julien and Chandler and Jade and Robb. And Amy Unell, you're amazing Just for putting this all together. And yes, Liz older loves to. I'm an old alum too. So we love you too. We're here for you all. Stay safe and stay well and everybody. Thanks so much.

OUTRO: Dave Karger 57:28

That's it for this episode of DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, DEMAN is a signature program of Duke Arts and Duke Alumni Engagement and Development. Follow DEMAN on social and stay updated at DukeDEMAN.com, that's d e m a n.com where you can find our full archive of episodes. Thanks so much for joining us. See you next time.

This episode was produced by me, Lilly Clark, in collaboration with Hear at Duke, Duke's student run podcast hub. Our theme song is "Carolina" by Cameron Tompkins.

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