

DEMAN Live: Breaking into Hollywood: A Conversation with Asian American Creatives

This episode features distinguished Duke Asian American alumni working across the entertainment industry and sharing their career paths, creative processes, and experiences at the intersection of representation, race and storytelling.

Presented in collaboration with Duke Asian American & Diaspora Studies, Duke Asian Alumni Alliance, Duke's Asian Students Association and Duke Undergraduate Certificate in East Asian Studies.

Panel

Moderated by Daniel Kim '21, aspiring screenwriter/filmmaker in the 2020-2021 [StudioDuke program](#) and recipient of the [2020 Benenson Award in the Arts](#), our panel features:

- Geeta Patel '98, Emmy-nominated Writer/Director (*House of the Dragon: The Game of Thrones Prequel, The Great, The Mindy Project, Fresh Off The Boat*)
- King Lu '15, Screenwriter/Director (*From June to July*)
- Wenny Katzenstein MBA '03, VP, Marketing Strategy, Funimation/Sony Pictures Television
- Angela Zhou '14, Actor (*Promising Young Woman, Hell on Wheels*)

Intro: Dave Karger

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.

05:31 Daniel Kim '21

I'm excited to be in conversation today with this all-star panel of Duke alumni.

So for the first question, everyone will have a chance to answer. So speaking from outside the industry, it seems that Hollywood is giving more attention to Asian American narratives, recent examples being movies like *Minari*, and *Riya*. How have you perceived these changes within entertainment as Asian American professionals? And how has this impacted your career? And Angela, I would love to have your thoughts on this first.

07:09 Angela Zhou

Transcript

First thoughts. Um, I think it's great. I think it's really exciting. It definitely makes it easier to feel like you can actually pitch ideas that are with Asian American leads. And then, and I feel like I hope at least that in the future of financing these sorts of ideas won't seem so crazy, and that it might lead to more of them actually.

07:32 Daniel Kim

Awesome. How about you, Wenny, from the business perspective?

07:37 Wenny Katzenstein

I mean, I think it's, it's, I've been in entertainment for 27 years and working in the multicultural space, actually, for quite some time. And it's actually pretty gratifying. I wouldn't say it's perfect by any means. But I think we've gotten to a point where there are a lot of narratives that aren't around proving that there's a business case here. I think people are actually beginning to recognize and realize what the power of these stories and the representation can do for the business. So I actually, I have a little bit of optimism while moving in the right direction.

08:07 Daniel Kim

Yay, that sounds good. And Geeta, do you share this optimism?

08:14 Geeta Patel

I definitely share optimism. I also I think still think that we should keep the pressure on the industry. I feel like we don't want Asians to just be sidekicks. And we don't want to look at a cast where it's like, you know, United colors. Like I think we want to still tell stories of Asian families, Asian groups of friends, there's just so much left to do. And I think that needs to be done in the commercial space. It's happening in the independent space, the independent space has always been welcoming of our voices. Everybody's voices of just because of the nature of independent film, and television. But I think we still need to keep the pressure on in the commercial space.

08:59 Daniel Kim

Hmm, yeah, definitely keeping the pressure on. And how about you King?

09:04 King Lu

Yeah, I definitely agree with what everybody has said. I think, you know, obviously, I haven't been in this for as long as Geeta and many. But I remember when I was first telling people that I wanted to be a writer, director, everybody's first reaction was like, oh, like John Woo, times have definitely changed since that, like eight or nine years ago, you know, there's so many more comparisons, there's so many more filmmakers who are making work. It's really cool, because I have projects that I've been trying to pitch, you know, like a basketball story, you know, it's kind of like bougie, or, you know, a family drama

Transcript

that from June to July, and it's similar to minority, and it's cool to have those people to look to and that those projects are getting made and that it's actually possible.

But definitely there still needs to be some more progress than I guess, just thinking about the definition of progress. If there's a problem and it's been rectified, then you're only undoing the problem and you haven't actually made actual progress, yet.

10:00 Daniel Kim

Wow. Yeah, thank you. I totally agree about the diversity of stories in the Asian American space. And yeah, thank you all for your insights industry as it is today. It'll be super helpful for those of us who are transitioning into entertainment, including me. And speaking about entertainment, Geeta, you began your career in finance and made the transition to Hollywood as an associate screenwriter isn't that that's great. And so when did you decide to pursue your passion for storytelling? How did you manage this transition?

10:28 Geeta Patel

Um, you know, it's, it's interesting, because I was just thinking about this yesterday, I, when I graduated, which I think a lot of people probably feel this when they graduate school like Duke, I felt a lot of pressure to get a job where I make a lot of money or one day would make a lot of money, get a job that look great on my resume, make my parents proud. My parents are immigrants, they came to America with nothing. I mean, it was just so much of that.

And I also felt the pressure to pick exactly what I was going to do. And because I felt like whatever you picked after college is what you did for the rest of your life, which now at 45 years old, is hilarious, like such a joke, because it's not true. You know, I was just telling somebody yesterday, I think what I've learned, you know, as I keep growing up is when you know, every moment of your life, you pick a lane and when that doesn't work, you switch to the next lane, and you just keep switching. And maybe your life is a journey of switching, maybe your life is you finally like it's not it's not the same thing as love, you know, you're not married to this one thing forever.

I didn't know all that. So when I graduated, I took a job from the on campus interviews, the job fair, I think and it was in finance. And I always knew that I wanted to be in storytelling, but I couldn't figure out if it was a hobby, because in my culture, from where I come from, nobody was in the arts, and every anything artsy was a hobby. And so I went to New York, and I started this job working for General Electric and their FMP program, which some of you might be familiar with it or watching. And it's a hardcore program where you're getting kind of your MBA and teach and working. And after two years, my father said to me, I just want to see you smile, I haven't seen my daughter smile.

Transcript

And I had written so many letters to people in Los Angeles, I had used the Duke in LA program, I'd been in the Career Center, looking at people I don't know if that's still there, but like, you know, there are all these people that were I don't think demon was around them. But I there were so many resources at Duke that I was using. DAVE KARGER who's still ahead of the group was someone who helped me and so all these people kind of came together and I was able to jump over to LA through I must have written like, 200 letters, I have more than a binder.

But one of those letters got me my first job as a writer's assistant on a television show. So anyway, that that's how it happened. I and I don't regret a single minute of it. I think the finance thing needed to happen. I think there's a path. You know, it doesn't I think the biggest thing is, I was under the false impression that anybody who just went straight to LA and or, you know, regardless just immediately went to the arts, they deserve to be in the arts, and I don't think life is that simple. I think whether you're 40 years old, 50 years old, whatever, you know, when it's time, it's time, and you follow your heart.

13:23 Daniel Kim

Wow, thank you for that. I love that. I know my parents are watching. (laughs)

13:30 Geeta Patel

50 bucks. 50 bucks.

13:35 Daniel Kim

Wow. Okay.

And so the next question is for Wenny. And I, a lot of us are curious about I know, I have a lot of friends who are interested in marketing about what the daily life responsibilities is a vice president of marketing strategy at Funimation Sony Pictures. And I know this is he probably can't talk about this. But what types of projects?

13:59 Wenny Katzenstein

Yeah, actually. So I just want to point out Geeta, I think you and I are the same age and have a very similar experience in the sense that my parents are immigrants. And I like to call myself the black sheep of the family, because everybody else is, you know, in science and math, and actually my sister's professor at Duke, and really great at what she does.

I also wanted to be a storyteller, but I'm clearly not as creatively minded as the rest of my esteemed panelists. And so the way that I've actually approached storytelling is through the process of marketing. So I don't create ads, what I actually do and in particular, in the role that I play here at

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Funimation, but also what I did for Disney and NBCUniversal is, I'm creating lifestyle brands. I am literally taking the art and the work that the really great creative people do, and finding those emotional connections with fans and people to give them a space to be together.

So I'm very fortunate to be now working in the medium of anime which I have discovered is a, an amazing entertainment platform that helps people self-care. It gives them opportunities around discovering identity, so it's a really lovely opportunity to actually storyteller but in a slightly different way from Geeta. So I spend a lot of time doing exactly that explaining to people storytelling, developing programs and platforms and executions that allow fans to be able to annex that and hopefully make it part of their lives.

15:30 Daniel Kim

Wow, that is cool. I should check it out marketing. Thank you for sharing. And Angela. So you had an acting role in Promising Woman, which I am excited to see soon, and the film received five Oscar nominations. So can you tell us your experiences getting in filming this role? And what are some of the essentials that are important to you in deciding your next project?

15:55 Angela Zhou

Um, well, it's a rather like convoluted process when it comes to you know, getting the roles, but generally speaking, it starts off with an audition. And but for the smaller roles, oftentimes, actually, I realized afterwards, that most of the movie in independent film is office already. So I didn't realize that I was one of the very few people that actually auditioned for the movie. Most of the people were already in it from the beginning, we're in it when people were there to greenlight it to get it all booked out. And there were only like a handful of us, who actually auditioned for it. And so when that actually happens, they don't send out to a bunch of auditions. So it goes to the people that the casting director already knows very deeply. So this casting director is a woman who I think is a big is a is a is a big sort of cheerleader of mine, even though I've only met her once. And that's because I think the first time I met her at an audition, we went straight to the callbacks.

And we met, I met her while I met the director and the producers. So because of that, when the smaller roles came along, she sent it my way, I read the script, and I was just blown away by it. I think, you know, having done a lot of development, internships and reading a lot of scripts, I've realized that actually, it's no matter the race, or gender or any act, it's very rare that you find something that is incredibly well written, entertaining, and then also has meaningful conversation to bring that's fresh. So when I saw that, I was like, Okay, I have to get on this project.

17:30 Daniel Kim

Transcript

And now King. I know a lot of my friends and I were trying to make short films before you graduate. So what is something about filmmaking that you didn't know about writing and directing your first film after do and what projects are you working on right now?

18:00 King Lu

Yeah, I think, hopefully, this hopefully this is simple to people. But I think one thing that I definitely didn't really think about when I was making shorts at Duke, and I didn't really realize until I got out of school, was just thinking a lot more about how to create an experience with the film in sort of have an interaction with the audience and thinking about kind of the effect that the shots will have on the audience.

So yeah, I think this hopefully should sound like pretty basic about like what a film is, but I think, especially because I think I do a lot of the classes were geared towards experience experimental filmmaking. So I think when I was an undergrad, a lot of it was just like, what do I want to make? Like, what's the story that I want to tell? And like, what kind of shots do I want to use to tell that instead of thinking about like, Oh, you know, like, if I have a shot of somebody walking down the street, and then you smash cut to a shot of blood splattering against the wall, like that has an effect on somebody like the audience's like sitting forward.

And there are a lot more interested in what's going to happen and you can sort of play them, like a cat with a string or something, although not like, intentionally trying to be demeaning towards audiences. But that that's really like what directing really is. In terms of projects that I'm working on. You know, I mentioned the basketball project is about Asian and black kid who start hustling in the streets playing basketball, so it's kind of a new spin on white men can't jump and, and there's also this political thriller that I've been working on as a feature.

19:29 Daniel Kim

So we've heard from every panelist so far, but now I'd like to go around and do a rapid fire set of questions that every Duke student is wondering. And I'm going to ask you to do this in a couple of sentences or less. The first question is, share the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of your job. So I'll start with King and then I'll go around from there.

20:02 King Lu

Okay, so the most challenging, I think it's definitely the uncertainty. How in unstable kind of the career can be and then the most rewarding is, it's pretty much the greatest job you could have. You get to wake up and just dream stories and create dream worlds. What's more fun than that?

20:21 Daniel Kim

Transcript

Geeta, can you go next?

20:28 Geeta Patel

Yeah, I would say the most challenging is the politics of the business, and the most rewarding is the impact of the art.

20:43 Daniel Kim

And how about Wenny?

20:44 Wenny Katzenstein

And I think from my perspective, right now, I think entertainment was one of the last industries to truly get disrupted by tech. So are the challenges figuring out what that impact is on, on how we go to market and how we keep things, not just the everyday blockbuster, but things that keep it fresh and interesting, which I think this team obviously spends a lot of work on.

And I think the most rewarding part is, when you're actually able to push through something emotionally, again, 10-15 years ago, I was desperately trying to get Disney to think more broadly, about characters and representation. And I was so gratified, you know, say what you want about the production of Mulan, but the fact that my kids can actually see, you know, a really strong female, Asian character, and those are the things that are most gratifying, just sometimes takes a little bit longer.

21:37 Daniel Kim

And Angela?

21:41 Angela Zhou

Yeah, so totally echo everybody's sentiment about the ups and downs and everything. But I think no matter what career you pick, you're going to have the bad days. And I think on any of the bad days, we're really helps you get through as an overarching goal and sort of a belief that you're where you want to be in terms of making the impact that you want to make in the world.

And so I think on my worst days, it's really when I'm, I'm wondering if there's any impact at all, you know, receive all the, all the Asian hate around and I'm like, gosh, have we been able to create any of the empathy that I've been hoping that this has all been about, you know, and it makes me wonder if I would have more impact if I went into a startup for green energy instead. But then I remind myself that but those aren't the skills that I was given, you know, probably an engineer would do better at advancing that, and that we all play our own little pot in the world, and we push our little pot forward. And then on the best days is obviously when you're on set, and you're just like killing it.

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And you're suddenly realizing, Oh, my gosh, all my skills fit perfectly into this job. And it's all working out well. And, you know, sometimes it's amazing when you hear from people who say that, you whatever little art you made sort of helped them connect with their own family members during a difficult period or something, you know, so that's great.

23:02 Daniel Kim

And for the second question. If you were to do Duke again, or Fuqua, what is one thing you did or would have done differently to prepare for your life post-graduation, knowing what you know now? And I'll start with Wenny

23:26 Wenny Katzenstein

I gotta be honest, I had such a phenomenal experience at Fuqua, I don't think I would change anything that was part of that experience. I mean, I think we are very fortunate group of people at the business school that are just a uniquely type-high culture. You know, there's a reason why they call it Team Fuqua. And I think that even though the majority of my classmates aren't in entertainment, I had a lot of support and a lot of a lot of, you know, great opportunity there, even though that's not necessarily the focus, so I wouldn't, I don't know that I would change anything or do anything differently.

24:02 Daniel Kim

So what is what is one thing you did that helped you a lot? Either one thing you did, or one thing you would do differently?

24:11 Wenny Katzenstein

Yeah I mean, I think it's what probably everybody would say just about being in business. And particularly being in entertainment is use every aspect of your network. Your Duke network, your Fuqua network, your undergrad, your family. Like that's, that's how you make how that's how it works, I think in this business.

24:29 Daniel Kim

So King, what about you? And this can be for your Columbia MFA program, as well.

24:43 King Lu

Oh, I mean, I can answer for Duke. I think one thing that I was really happy I did is I made a lot of shorts and just was always trying to shoot stuff even during the summer like I stayed in Durham a few I think second year and third year like I just stayed around and like found actors and started shooting stuff through Freewater Productions, which is the filmmaking group at Duke, I think if I would have done one thing differently, I would have maybe tried to do Duke in LA and do an internship and just have a

Transcript

better sense of the outside world. And like, what the business is like, so that I could have sort of a better understanding of what what that looks like.

25:19 Daniel Kim

And actually, Duke in LA is where I first met Angela. And speaking of Angela, what do you think?

25:28 Angela Zhou

I so echo when a sentiment about like, I just loved my time at Duke so much, it was such heaven that, you know, if you think of the butterfly effect, if you change one thing, like who knows what you would have changed, you know, but in the hypothetical world of You know what, maybe I could have done more, because I did Duke in New York and Duke in LA, and then I was a Robertson Scholar.

So I did another semester away from UNC, I didn't, you know, the time that I did actually spend at Duke, I spent it all trying to make the most of my friends and the experience and then learning as much. So I looking back, I didn't get to make a feature film, you know, or the short films that I made, were not of a quality that I could show anyone today, like, I didn't realize that, you know, I finished it with two feature length screenplays.

And one of them, I sort of rewrote a little bit and put it into the Sundance Writers Lab, and it got into like the final round, but in that round, they want you to, they prefer people to also put in a short film that they've directed, because the only way to get into the directing programmers to the writing program, right?

So I was like, gosh, if I had made something that I could have actually put in there, then like my actual application for that maybe would have been better. But like I said, that would have required time out or something else. So I don't know. But I would say having something that you actually show that doesn't look like it's student film quality, something that you could put in would be great.

26:53 Daniel Kim

huh, wow, that's very helpful. And, Geeta, how about you?

27:00 Geeta Patel

um, as far as what I think was, you know, a great thing that helped me, in a long term, I feel like I took advantage, I tried to take advantage of everything Duke had to offer, career wise I, as much as I could I, I was always in that resource center, or whatever it was Job Center.

Transcript

And I was always reaching out to people always learning from alumni. I was fly out to LA and meet them, just talk to them. I didn't ask them for anything. It was just a really beautiful part of what Duke had to offer, especially not being a school where, you know, we had it we at the time, I don't know about now, but we didn't have a huge arts program. That one thing I have to be honest about is, I actually had a really hard time in college, I struggled with my identity a lot. I struggled being first born in the United States, I struggled with marriage. Because in my culture, we marry within the culture. And there's just a lot of things that connected with my going into the arts, because it was just another fail.

You know, and I, I think the one thing that maybe I would do more of if I you know, if I was going to go back, and this is one of those things I think everybody would probably say is, you know, I have very low self-esteem and you need, that's something we all need to work on most of us that are human as we grow up, but especially going into the arts, it's something that really kind of was my biggest challenge becoming a director like if you met me back then you would never think that I would be a director and I would have never told you I was going to be a director.

I was absolutely like a mess. So I think I think I would have you know, tried to seek more counseling, tried to really work on myself try to kind of get clear, but then again, I mean, you're in college, you know how much that's just part of growing up.

28:55 Daniel Kim

Wow, thank you for being so honest about that, though. I know a lot of college students definitely struggle.

The next question is actually for Geeta again. So what are some of the differences and similarities to directing documentaries and directing scripted projects such as Superstore or the Game of Thrones prequel, House of the Dragon?

29:39 Geeta Patel

The the documentary world is mainly independent. Please someone correct me if I'm wrong, but at least my experience has been independent. And with that, there's wonderful things first of all, independent is where it's at. I always will say that I just think it's where we get to be what we want to be it's you know, there's not a million notes coming down on you from somewhere that that may not have to do with what you're really doing blah blah blah documentaries for me are you know that's one of the biggest things is that you are a free bird on some level you are also broke most of the time I didn't have a car until five years ago when I started directing commercial television and film so there's that part of it that's hard and also just the the prep process is completely different when you're doing a documentary there's a myriad of you know I'm sure a lot of people know i mean you you can't really

Transcript

tell people what to do if you're doing a pure documentary you're you're following the story and each of my dogs took eight years because you're waiting for something to happen with with commercial or you know, scripted whether it be independent or not.

There is a level of preparation that's really important you've got a crew with you, you've got you've got to know how you're going to shoot a scene of course Nomadland is a complete you know, kind of a different part of that Nomadland is actually a great example of putting the two together and a lot of ways but most of my work and television is a lot of communication a lot of preparation.

A lot of storyboarding or diagrams of this is where the cameras gonna go you're gonna go here and the luxury when you come when you go from documentaries to scripted the awesome luxury is like all of a sudden you can tell people what to do you know documentaries you can't but with scripted it's almost like it feels like offensive, you're like hey can you like stand here and then go there and cry You know what I mean? It's like everything's just so controlled. So it's pretty rad when you have that that transition but I think with scripted there are so many other challenges that are amazing like just the camera work the the ambition of storytelling, you know, all of that. I could go on forever obviously about this. I mean it's just there there is a huge difference.

But I think the greatest part of it that's a similarity is you're working with beautiful artists, I think, working with actors in scripted and working with non-actors and documentaries, my technique is pretty much the same, nothing really changed. And it is my greatest joy. Like it is the number one thing that if you don't like working with people, and particularly actors who are just so filled with like genius than I personally don't think it's worth being a director. I don't think you hide behind the camera.

32:36 Daniel Kim

And my next question is for Angela who is an actor...How did you get the process of getting an agent and we're forming these relationships with this casting director to help you get these types of roles?

32:52 Angela Zhou

That is the big question that most of them listed the Duke graduates calling me about but it's - it's really just it's like a long process what you don't realize is like so many so many actors in this business are kid actors.

And then the parents are also in it and a lot of that is because the just the business is so opaque and even like thinking about a potential corporate ladder is it's very difficult to know and then once you get that big break there are big issues of like taxes and unions and you know residuals all of that stuff that brings up the financial element of being able to like push you forward longer so it's a lot so you know, for anybody out there who wants to be an actor call me and especially like before you take your big

Transcript

role or anything you're about to sign the sign the deal, call me about that stuff and I can go into more details but for me it was I did a lot of acting in high school that then led to me winning some competitions in like acting mainly but also a little bit of the directing and the writing stuff.

And through that they did add a whole New Zealand costing for this movie that then I became the director's number one choice for that ultimately, the producers thought I was too old for it. But because I had met a bunch of friends through doing like the Globe stuff I went and I trained at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London for a bit they had reps and I went to their reps I didn't even ask them about it but I just like cold cold emailed these reps. They read Lucy Lawless as well. And I was like I'm a huge fan of Lucy Lawless.

And like I'm friends with blah blah no you rep them and I just did this program with them. And also I was in this this feature you hear that they're casting I was like the the director's choice for that if you want to go like ask the director about that. He said he'd like vouch. And so they're like, Oh sure, come in for like a an interview. And then I went in for an interview and they signed me.

And then a couple of months more one month later, I was like, oh my bad I'm going to do bad I'm gonna go to college. And I was like, oh, but you know, I'd love to audition when I come back in the summers for anything if you have anything available so what happened was then one summer I booked in my first time I had enough time to come back. I was lucky I booked an international McDonald's commercial because it was New Zealand and Australia.

And then when I moved to LA at that point I had oh and Duke in LA, I took screen acting classes on the side, I took a screen acting class back in New Zealand from my original acting for my original New Zealand agents. And then it meant that by the time I actually landed in LA, I had a demo reel. I had headshots, I had a resume and I sent out cold emails to people in town with the subject title like Asian female speaks fluent Chinese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and then I was like, international McDonald's commercial. And then that's what happened. Yeah. And people I got signed up like a couple of weeks.

35:53 Daniel Kim

Wow, that sounds like a real hustle. Yeah. I mean, hopefully,

35:57 Angela Zhou

A long, convoluted story, right? Like not just like I showed up to LA and was like, hey, what's up?

36:03 Daniel Kim

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I think it's a that that comforts I think a lot of people knowing that every person stories individual, and it's going to be their own.

Transcript

And we'll come back to the individual questions in a moment for Wenny and King next. But I wanted to make sure that we get to this question, which is another question for all.

As Asian Americans, the model minority stereotype and the perpetual foreigner syndrome are built into perceptions of who we are. So for those of you who may not be familiar with the perpetual foreigner syndrome, is being constantly perceived as foreign or other and thus, on a similar level to America. And we have seen these perceptions lead to an escalation of violence discrimination against Asians during the cold pandemic.

So what role can artists or media professionals play in combating these stereotypes? And how has this impacted your working the industry? Or how will it in the future? So we can start with, If we can start with Wenny, and then I'll go around?

37:06 Wenny Katzenstein

Yeah, it's a it's a great question. Like I said, I mean, years ago, it was a lot of focus on the business case, to even have representation. I think that increasingly across business, whether you're an entertainment or not, it's putting your money where your mouth is, it's not enough to make a statement.

So at least at Funimation and within Sony, we've had a lot of conversations about what this looks like, I can tell you, it within our own organization, the the sense of being able to support our internal teams on having dialogue on how to, you know, even be an ally, our big conversations that we're really trying to figure out how to support even internally, our opportunities there so that we can actually push that out amongst our fans as well. It's hard, it's hard to be credible about making a statement if you don't take care of your house first. And so we are spending a lot of time understanding how to best support our internal organizations so that we can have that level of credibility.

38:05 Daniel Kim

Wow, yeah, those conversations are very important. And King, what is your response to the question?

38:14 King Lu

Yeah, I think my response would be pretty straightforward. Just I think there. As more and more creators, and people in the business side, have more opportunities, I think, as we tell our stories, that's going to help change people's perceptions.

And when I say that, as well, I also believe that, as creators, like we have to be free to tell whatever stories we want to tell. And that includes, like, if you're an Asian filmmaker, and you don't want to

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make a film about Asian people, I think that's fine as well. And if you want to portray Asians, I mean, there are good Asians, there's bad Asians, you know, there's flaws and warts and everything. So I don't think it's just like, Oh, we need to have like Asian heroes, which is great. But then also, like, have room for, you know, films that show some of the flaws as well. I think just the more freedom, and the more people who have the opportunity to do that the better.

39:03 Daniel Kim

And Geeta?

39:15 Geeta Patel

I feel like, you know, Mulan is a great example of a forward moving you know, step with all of this. I think, what I learned in working in documentaries is that it's very easy to preach to the choir. So make, it's really easy to make something that where your audience already is on board. But I think the greatest form of the greatest vehicle for social justice messages are actually our big commercial four quadrant films, I think Marvel DC Comics.

I mean, when I traveled around the world with the State Department, particularly in their film program, I was so upset because of course if nobody wanted to watch my film, and it wasn't that great, but nobody wanted to watch a documentary in general, everybody wanted to watch an action film from the United States.

And I think that's where the money is that is like to reach audiences who are somehow related to those people that are expressing hate on the street, to teach them in a way that they can understand, which is through the stuff that they watch the stuff, they absorb the stuff that, you know, I was embedded with troops where they were watching our action films before going out and unfortunately, shooting, you know, guerrilla fighters in a war zone, like, do you see what I'm saying? Like there's just all this opportunity in that market. I'm not saying everyone's to go into commercial film or commercial television.

But I think it's just a practical thing. Like there is a vehicle for social justice in mainstream media. And so I mean, I've pretty much committed my, my life to that now. Like that's all I want to do is figure out a way to make a difference through what I can't help but just submit to, which is people want to watch fun stuff on TV that, you know, so how do we get to them?

41:11 Daniel Kim

Yeah, the impact of media, especially on our perceptions of people is really underestimated. And oh, Angela, yes. Do you have something?

Transcript

41:18 Angela Zhou

Yeah. 100%. I love what Geeta said, because in fact, like that was one of the things the great, the show that she was on. I love that so much that I literally had to email her afterwards, I was like, that was so great. Can't believe I saw your name.

Because that's like exactly the same as in what I loved about Promising Young Woman, as well. It's about entertaining people that that should be the minimum. And then if you're actually able to stoke up the conversation, that's, that's like when you're in that perfect sweet spot that's so read, because I made my major in politics, economics and creative media at Duke in Program II, and through that I actually learned that a lot of the issues in our world, they don't have to do with logic and you trying to explain to people, you're trying to change people's minds.

You know, I took a class called political psychology and then another decision neuroscience class, where they were talking about basically like, the theory is now that when you start engaging people's logic, no matter what you give them, they're going to interpret new facts through the lens of what they already believe. Like, that's why political lawn signs are the dumbest thing to have, because the more lawn signs you put up, instead of changing people's mindset, and trenches them and whoever they already believe in, right? So through those classes, they were saying the way to really change people's hearts, is to actually get at them emotionally, when they're in when they're not using that logical side of the brain.

But when they're going through more of their automatic side when their body's kind of just relaxing. And so that means when they're watching entertaining things in their spare time, or even if it's just like being exposed to people from different backgrounds as themselves, like, one of the reasons why Hell on Wheels was such a special thing. Now looking back, for my first big break is that it was a show whose demographic was the railroad of America. So the demo, we used to joke on set that we sold Chevy's and Viagra, to like the middle of the country, because that was the demo.

But then in their final season, they decided to write about the other half of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. And it was the first time the Chinese workers were ever talked about from a leading actor perspective. And from I can't imagine how many people were introduced to Chinese, like Chinese immigrants and their plight in America through that, and who would have never tuned in if it was just originally sold as that.

43:46 Daniel Kim

Yeah, no, as a teaching of teaching that's really amazing that media is able to do that. And so now Yeah, we have more time for individual questions. So I'll go to Wenny, and going back to Fuqua, how did you choose to maximize your skills and professional development for the creative industries?

Transcript

44:12 Wenny Katzenstein

Um, Well so in full full disclosure, I started in entertainment and then I went to business school thinking I was going to be a good Asian child and go into marketing and sell mac and cheese because that seems like a more stable sort of approach.

And I did that for the summer I did an internship and quickly realized when I looked at the passion of my classmates around you know facings and color palettes and and I thought, oh my god, it's leaving me completely dead inside. So if you'd I completely understand where you're coming from from your GE example.

And so I decided to go back into entertainment. And it was a weird time to do it. It was 2003 is the year that I graduated, it was a rough time in the market. It was a rough time to do it. Anything that was sort of non-traditional, but, you know, the networking piece was a huge part of it. And then in terms of just thinking about how to break into the business, you know, at the end of the day, all these guys on the panel are doing amazing creative work. But somebody still needs to go out there and make it monetizable and commercial. And so I took a lot of the skill sets that I learned in the process of being an MBA, and I applied it to the opportunities that were in front of me for entertainment.

45:31 Daniel Kim

And for King, there are many paths to becoming a screenwriter, as well as there are many paths to becoming director like Angela suggested earlier. And I'm aware that you went into Columbia's MFA program for directing and writing. So what are a few tips for students or alumni hoping to establish themselves as screenwriters for directors? would you suggest graduate school for pursuing a career in entertainment?

46:01 King Lu

Yeah, thanks for the question, Daniel. Hope that doesn't sound like a cop out. But I think if I could give an overarching tip is that you really have to figure it out for yourself. And one thing that I remember is like, I actually took a phone studies course with James Schamus, who used to run Focus Features and work with Ang Lee. And then twice a year, he would have a 10 minute Q&A at the beginning of class where people could ask him questions. And he kind of turned it into an exercise because basically, whatever people asked him, it's like, hey, like, should I just go and make a bunch of movies? He's like, yeah, you could do that. But then when do you have time to reflect on making films, you say, Oh, so I should, like, you know, like, just sit down and take out a notebook and reflect on me. And he's like, well, but then you're not gonna go make anything. And he's, he's just kind of being facetious, like, Oh, you know, there is no real path, I can sit here and give you a bunch of tips about, you know, go make movies, go watch movies, go read books, in the library of movies, go read books, like all of that.

Transcript

But I think ultimately, everybody is different. And you know, as you've already conceived, from what all the panelists have talked about, everybody has kind of a different path to where they're going to get to, and everybody has different strengths. So I think just sort of play to that. I guess the one other tip that I would give is, ultimately, you do have to stick with it, I think, and I heard this, one of my friends told This, to me the other day that I thought was really funny and really true, is that if you stick with it long enough, eventually, like all of your competition will probably drop out.

So you know, that's something to look forward to. So if you just stick with it, like I think ultimately you find your place. And in terms of going to film school, I think it depends, you know, I think you have to know why you want to do it. And I think you also have to be prepared for that tough question. I know when I first went to film school, the first month, I was just, you know, like questioning myself, like, what am I doing? Is this insane? Like, how much debt am I going into? Why would I possibly do this? But I think, you know, the more time I spent actually going to film school, and you know, remembering why I made that choice, I realized ultimately that it was good. And I would definitely do it again. But I think you know, it depends for some people, it depends on your situation, and what you kind of want to get out of it.

48:07 Daniel Kim

We will now open up our conversation to the q&a that they have submitted.

So continuing on this individual path and learning from those Geeta, can you talk about how you started as a writer's assistant and shifted to directing? And did it feel like that this was your calling that you were meant to do as a storyteller, ultimately, as a director?

48:39 Geeta Patel

When I was at Duke, I was even before I was always obsessed with storytelling, and the because of the limitations of my family kind of expectations. The one thing I could do where I wasn't messing anything up was right. So that was a thing I focused on. I think if you asked me back then what was I interested in? I was interested in everything, you know, I would do any, I would have acted, I would have done anything. But that all required a lot more logistics.

But the one thing I could do without anyone knowing was just right. So I did that. And I wrote and wrote and wrote, and when I got this writer's assistant job it was because I took all these trips out to LA wrote a ton of letters, just like so many people on this panel, I'm just, you know, hustled as much as I could, and then got this job as a writer's assistant, not knowing anything about what it meant. And so I'm working on this television show and learning some program on a computer of what helps them do all the different pages that are in different colors. And I'm on set and I I could just cry right now telling you how happy I was in that moment. It was the coolest thing. It still is when I walk on a set. It was just

Transcript

magical. And so I just You know, for the next four or five years, was a writer's assistant and the man I worked for took me with him to do production rewrites.

So production rewrite is when you have a big action film, like we worked out all the Rock movies, Fast in the Furious, Blue Crush, and we would be the team, my boss would be the main person who would do a quick rewrite for like two to three weeks, and get that film into what we call greenlight, like ready to shoot. So we did that. And there is a point to my story, I promise I'll answer a question.

At some point, my it had been, I think it'd been five, six years. And my boss came to me and he said, his name's Kario Salem, and he said, Geeta, you've been hiding behind me for all these years. He's like, What? What are you doing? Like, are you just going to be my assistant your whole life, like, you can't, I can't make you a writer. And the truth is that I was completely and a lot of people will feel this when they come to LA, it's very intimidating. And I was so intimidated by all the talented people, I just didn't think I had it, I think deep down.

And also, I didn't know my own voice, because like, as King was saying, you know, sometimes you're either working, or you're or you're writing, but it's hard to negotiate the both. And as an assistant, you're working all the time. So I hadn't written anything in five, six years, I didn't even know who I was. So because my boss said that, I went home and I realized, okay, I need to, excuse my language shit, or get off the pot, you know, like, and so I went home and I started writing and writing and I turned into a novel. And then I, I did what is the advice I'd give anyone listening right now is I followed my bliss for the first time in my life, really. And my bliss took me to writing a novel, The novel was set in a war zone, I went to the war zone in Kashmir, I saw that people were dying in a vacuum picked up a camera started filming didn't know how to use a camera, I found some friends who knew how to use a camera, made a documentary, you know, took eight years to make it. All I knew was that in those moments, I was happy. I had no clue what I was doing.

At some point, I'm at the Sundance Labs. And they're talking to me about how I'm a director and I'm like, Oh, I'm directing. Okay, like I you know, I'm saying, and so that's how it happened. But it happened through following my bliss. It didn't happen through saying, I want to be famous, I want to be this I want to be you know, I need to make money. It wasn't about any of that it was actually about just going in a direction that made me happy. And I've said this before to so many Duke students.

And you know, and to myself is I don't think happiness is making money at being an artist. I don't think happiness is being famous happiness is being happy enjoying, you can have that right now, wherever you are, whether you're, you know, doing it on the side or whatever, like, anyway, that has that doesn't answer the question. But anyway, that's that's how it happened. And now I will tell you that

Transcript

even though I am a director, and I'm doing Game of Thrones and all this stuff, I am no happier today than I was back then. Like, I promise you.

53:21 Daniel Kim

Wow, I really appreciate authentic answer.

And so King, this next question is directed towards you. How do you write your stories, and so this person says they have trouble balancing tropes and cliches and making fiction believable, and other people can feel free to jump in on this too. He, he or she would love to know your process and coming up with ideas and how you put those ideas onto paper.

53:57 King Lu

Well, it's a tough question. I think I'm just draw I try to draw a lot from start from like real life incidents, I guess. I think ultimately, everything you write kind of relates to your own life, although obviously Hopefully, it will become something more than that. But I just try to pull from experiences that I have and the emotions that I feel relating to those experiences. So you know, the script that I wrote from June to July, was about a real life boating accident that happened within my community when I was growing up. And to see like how that aftershock kind of rippled through the community and all the relationships that was something that I knew I definitely wanted to write about at some point in my life. So I worked on that for a few years and you know, I always played basketball so I always kind of knew what it felt like to walk into the court as an Asian kid and see how people look at you and what they perceive about you.

So that again, was another inspiration. And I think that helps as well to avoid tropes because you know, it's your own I feel like you kind of know the realism of what that feels like. So I always feel like that's a good starting point. And that's kind of how I go with the process.

55:24 Daniel Kim

And I think we have time for one more question. Angela, How does being an actor and film different from being accurate TV? does one have any advantage of the other? Should you focus on one?

55:59 Angela Zhou

I don't know if there's like a huge difference anymore because everybody seems to be crossing over. You know, people have movie actors are doing TV shows and TV actors are doing movies. I don't think I'm a particularly great person to ask because I think being on an indie film, like promising a woman is completely different to being on a Marvel film.

Transcript

And I've never been on a Marvel film so but what I will say is shooting television is can be insanely fun and fast paced, when you're shooting outside in the real in the real elements instead of you know, shooting in a soundstage. Because sometimes you'll go out there, you'll be thrown into a ice cold River. And Joel and the sun will be setting and you'll only get one take and then you know, that goes out to the rest of the world forever. So that's TV for you.

56:53 Daniel Kim

Yeah, so I know, anime is becoming huge, like I see all over Facebook, Subtle Asian Traits. Everyone is watching anime, but has the pandemic and the consequent rise of streaming and no enemies appearing and a lot of streaming now to change your marketing strategies or target audience?

57:18 Wenny Katzenstein

Um anime as a medium is definitely exploding. It's on a global level. And I think it's a, you know, it's interesting, I think a lot of people have asked us what the impact of the pandemic has been explicitly on our streaming component of our business, the truth of the matter is the growth rate that was happening for this medium as a whole, whether it's viewership, you know, merchandise, whatever the case may be, was already on a pretty insane growth pattern.

So I think when you when you start to notice that the Netflix's of the world and the Amazons, and Disney's and everybody else are paying attention, I think you start to understand what the impact of this particular medium is. So the pandemic certainly I think, put the content in more people's laps, but that was a phenomenon that was already happening without without the current environment.

58:11 Daniel Kim

And that is a good note to end on. So thank you so much Geeta, King, Wenny Angela. It really was an honor to moderate this discussion. I learned a lot. And I'm sure many other people did, too.

Outro: Dave Karger

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 Duke DEMAN, 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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