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DEMAN Live: Cinematography with Robert Yeoman '73
with StudioDuke

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.

01:15 StudioDuke student

Thanks so much for being here and for making time to talk to us. My question is about your Duke experience. And if you could maybe talk about if it shaped your professional interests and aspirations? And if so, how? How do you use what you learned at Duke in your work?

01:32 Bob Yeoman

Okay. Well, as Amy said, I was at Duke, a long, long time ago, before any of you were even born. And it was a different school, then. You know, it's certainly evolved quite a bit since I went to do. But when I was a do, most of the kids students were, you know, went on to become doctors and lawyers and people in the professions, and there was no film program, there was no film classes. And, you know, I came to Duke and to be honest, my first semester there, I was, pre-med, I thought I wanted to be a doctor. But after spending, my first semester, in a lot of labs, I realized that wasn't for me. And I kind of drifted along, you know, I wasn't really sure, you know, and I took all kinds of different classes, and just still a little lost in what my career path would be. And I got involved. I always loved movies growing up in Chicago, and I got involved with Freewater Films, which at that time, would show, you know, foreign films on the weekends. And I was, you know, I always watched American studio movies, but I hadn't really been aware of a lot of the foreign films, and it kind of exposed me to those films. And, you know, it opened my eyes a lot to cinematic possibilities. And I remember, I still didn't really consider a career because, you know, making movies was something they did in Hollywood in New York, it was not something they did in Chicago, or certainly not in Durham. And but one weekend, I went over to Raleigh, and I watched the movie Clockwork Orange, Stanley Kubrick movie, and I was just so kind of blown away by the film, that I as I drove back to Durham, I was like, I really want to get involved in this. And again, at that time, there wasn't a lot of there were zero film classes, but and I didn't know anybody in the film industry as from the Midwest. And so I decided to go to grad school, I went to USC grad school. And you know, that's where I kind of honed my interest. But to answer your question about do I value very much my education because I really appreciate the quality of the education I was getting there, even if it wasn't film related. And if you go on to work in the film industry, you know, most of the directors I work with are very smart, educated people. And you have to really relate to them on that level, you know, and I think that that's one thing that Duke gave me was just a very broad

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based education that I've greatly appreciated. And certainly I have to credit free water films with introducing me to a lot of these films that I was unaware of. So in today's world, of course, you have a film program there and it's becoming very good. And I've been following over the years. I know Josh Gibson, I know a lot of the people involved and they seem like really good people. And I think there's a lot more opportunities today at Duke There were when I was there as far as filmmaking goes. So I hope I answered your question.

05:06 StudioDuke Student

Thanks for doing this. This is a really cool, it's not every day you get to, you know, talk to a Hollywood cinematographer. Yeah. My question is like, Yeah, you really, really, like well known in the field, but everyone has to start somewhere. And I know, you said you didn't take any phone classes at Duke. So I was just wondering, what kind of film experience did you have when you were an undergraduate? And how did you start expanding on your experiences during college?

05:29 Bob Yeoman

Well, I was always a still photographer. And, you know, it's, it's back then everything was film. And, and so I took a lot of stills. And but I think with the contrast it with today, with the digital revolution, I mean, you know, if you want to shoot film, motion pictures, it was a very expensive proposition, you had to rent a camera, you had to buy film, you had to pay lab fees there, you know, it costs a lot of money, and most students can't afford to do something like that. So with today's digital cameras, though, you know, relative I mean, we own a Canon cameras, we own BlackMagic cameras at my house. And once you buy me another, and I'm not talking those brands at all, but you can go out and shoot digitally. And you can even edit on your computer, as you probably all know. And so I think what it's done is it's allowed people, to young people to experiment more and go out, make your own films, my daughter's a student, she's a senior at Wesleyan. And she shoots a lot of films with her friends. And I think there's more opportunities today than there were back then it was a tougher time to break in. I mean, that said, with COVID. It's a tough time to be a college senior right now, because you know, the opportunities, very limited, because of COVID. And it's kind of knocked a lot of people out of the game. But I hope that's only a temporary thing. Because as time goes on, you know, we're trying to welcome more young people into the film industry, but it's a tough, tough road. And even back when I got out of school, it took me a long time to kind of get a foothold in the business, particularly if you don't know anybody. So it's a tough, tough, tough road. I hope I answered your question. I'm going to Okay, great. Thanks, Aaron.

07:34 StudioDuke student

Um, so my question was, after Duke, you went to USC, and I was just curious, what was that experience, like, and how are those years?

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07:43 Bob Yeoman

It was very different. I mean, you know, USC is a city school, it was a whole different environment. And coming from dukkha, it was kind of it come from a very smaller, tightly tight community, you know, and USC was this big city school, and I was not particularly adept at first to dealing with that environment. And I had to kind of adapt to it and learn and, you know, it was a less friendly kind of environment than Duke had been for me, and a tougher place, but in many ways, that was good, you know, I kind of come out of the protective environment of Duke and went to a place where it was a little more sink or swim in a lot of ways. And, you know, you had I had to learn to adapt to that very much. And, and most the kids, I went there to grad school, and a lot of the kids had done undergrad film programs. So they had a leg up on me, you know, they'd gone to NYU and undergrads and other schools like that. Back then there was really only, you know, I hate to say, but it seemed like there were three major film programs. It was NYU, Duke and I mean, NYU, you see USC and UCLA. But now of course, that's expanded. There's tons of great film programs across America, and you can go to many schools and get a great education and film but so a lot of those kids came in and they were, you know, a little tougher than I was and a little more experience, so I kind of scrambled my first year there but then I gradually adapted and I, you know, came out doing okay, so it was it was tough at first though definitely. LA being very different. If you've never been to LA, it's a very different place. And I was from the Midwest and then I lived in Durham and you know, all of a sudden I'm in LA, which was this total crazy place, but I've been here ever since. I love it. So you know, takes a little while to adjust.

09:51 StudioDuke student

Hi, Bob. Hey, Bob, you again for joining us today. When Amy told us that you're originally coming. I started stalking you online. Of course, and I saw that you said that when you were at USC, you initially tried directing. Yeah. But you found yourself drawn to cinematography. So my question is, what about cinematography drew you in and seems to have never let you go?

10:14 Bob Yeoman

Well, part of that was, you know, I was very intimidated working with actors, I had never done that before. And they make you take acting classes, USC, and, you know, I was very kind of shy and withdrawn. And I, I didn't understand acting, and I didn't know how to deal with the actors. And because I had always been very strongly drawn to the visuals of films, you know, even as a young kid, I love the spaghetti westerns, I loved Hitchcock, Kubrick, all those kinds of directors that have very striking visual films. And because I did a lot of steel work as well. I just kind of fell into it. And what happens in a film school, and probably any film school is you when you crew up, you get people who are good at, like, some people are natural editors. And so as time went on, I kind of got known as the camera guy. And so when people would grew up, they'd asked me to shoot their films, and I studied a lot of the cinematography, and it just seemed something I was more naturally drawn to. And in the end, I guess I had a talent for it, because that's kind of the road I chose to take. But, you know,

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certainly a lot of cinematographers as they go on their careers. A common stepping stone is, when you work in television, the cinematographer is there every day, whereas they bring a different directors in every week. And so after a while the cinematographer knows all the actors, he knows how the show should be shot. And many cinematographers then use that as a stepping stone to go on to direct television, for sure. And, you know, some even go on to features but it's a different mindset, I think. So I just more comfortable and many people will say, and I agree in many ways, I have the best job on the set, you know, and many directors have said that to me, and, you know, it's a very pure job, you don't have to deal with a lot of the politics and a lot of the BS that all the other departments have to go through. And my job is, is is very pure, you know, and and I'm very comfortable with it, and I enjoy it. So I don't feel any need to really go rock the boat. So...

12:38 StudioDuke student

yeah, okay, so, um, do you think you'll ever use that stepping stone if you haven't already, to go into directing? I mean, it seems like you really like cinematography, maybe in commercials or something?

12:51 Bob Yeoman

Maybe down the line. But you know, I'm very happy with what I do. And I'm lucky that I've been fortunate to hook up with some really great directors and, you know, I really enjoy my job. And, and I'm not out to pursue it. I know, some cinematographers are and many do move on to direct. But I'm very comfortable. And quite honestly, the director has a lot more headaches than I do. And I, you know, I can go home and go to bed without 100 phone calls and complaints and studios calling me and you know, I, I'm very comfortable with where I'm at. So it's not something I really seek and particularly in commercials. I just got back from a month long commercial. And, you know, I shoot a lot of commercials. And, you know, it's gotten to a point where the directors are really kind of tortured a lot of times by agencies and things and I don't have to deal with any of that stuff. You know, and, you know, it's a much I'm a person who doesn't like a lot of confrontations. And directors, their lives or confrontations, confrontations with studio people, confrontations with producers, confrontations with actors, you know, and I prefer just to keep a smooth road and do my thing, and no one seems to bother me too much. So I'm very happy where I'm at.

14:26 StudioDuke student

In there, um, my question is, what advice would you give your 20 year-old self about your career?

14:34 Bob Yeoman

I would tell, do I have to go back to the, to the 17 or 20 year olds today? Because it's a different world either, either, either. Well, I would rather talk about kids today. Because I think there's, as I mentioned earlier with the digital world, there's a lot more opportunities for you and people say well, how do I practice cinematography? I say get your camera out and just go shoot it. Even if it's your iPhone, you

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know, it doesn't matter. You know, like my daughter a few years ago wanted to make a little film. And we were shooting in LA and we were writing, we believe it or not, we do have a train here. So the the gist of it was my son gets lost on the train and goes downtown, and he gets lost downtown. And, you know, and you know, I knew that if we brought a camera and a tripod, we attract a lot of attention. I said, Why don't you just shoot on your iPhone. And so we were riding the train shooting on the iPhone, no one even said anything. We were downtown, you know, this station down there, this beautiful station in downtown LA and we were walking around shooting stuff with him and no one ever once came up and said, What are you guys doing? Because she just had her phone? And all you say is I'm just taking a picture of my brother. I mean, know if that happened. And and, you know, it's it's, it gives you the opportunity, edited it on our computer. And you know, it turned out really well. You know, and so I would advise people just get your camera and start shooting stuff, it doesn't matter what it is, you know, take a shot of cars driving down the street, you know, just something and start editing it together. And I think that editing because when I when I got out of school at USC, I get a job in the editing room, and you really learn how to shoot in the editing room, because that's in the end, that's where the movie is made in the editing room. I mean, it's me on the set as well of course but and if you know how to shoot for the editing room, I think he'd become a much better cinematographer. For sure. So that's, you know, just get your camera and start shooting stuff, get your friends it doesn't matter if they're actors or not, you know it just in and learn and, you know, watch a lot of movies, which is something I've always done. And during COVID I was pretty much glued to the Turner Classic Movies and watching all those movies that I I hadn't seen. And, you know, I discovered a lot of really great films that I didn't even know existed, so you know, it's important.

17:08 StudioDuke student

Hi, Bob, thanks for coming. Um, so I guess my question is, is about like kind of the cost of everything, like grad school, obviously is one thing and then if you want to do cinematography, or any sort of independent work, you end up having to rent stuff or buy stuff for yourself. What's my question? My question is, how do we hone our skills and get noticed and also like make sure that we're not living in squalor I guess like how did you do it? How did you kind of get those opportunities?

17:40 Bob Yeoman

Well, when I started as I said it was all film it was no digital digital cameras didn't even exist and so you know, it was very difficult they were very frustrating because when you start you're never get hired for anything and so you just sit in your apartment waiting for the phone to ring and we didn't even have the answering machine. So you couldn't go out because if you missed the phone call you were screwed. So you just kind of had to sit home and hope the phone rang. And in you know gradually I worked in as I said I worked in the editing room eventually and then I just begged the people to let me go out and shoot stuff and gradually let me do it and we made some really bad commercials but I learned a lot but in today's world I think you need to just get out and make stuff and you know I just

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got off the phone with my daughter not too long ago and you know I said you've got a shot some student films and I said you got to put something together to show people because if you want to work the first thing they're going to say you know and no design Duke or any school but they don't say where'd you go to school you know they don't care in the film industry. They say okay, you want to shoot something that's the way you're done. You know and you have to have a reel of something that you've shot. So you know and and you know we would do things there's a thing that ASE has called shock deck. And you know, I would recommend you kind of look at it because they take a shot from a movie and they talk about how it was done.

And during COVID Just my house my daughter was here my wife and my son and she would get stills from movies and and we would just recreate them in our house and we shoot him on a Blackmagic camera you know and you can do it on a camera you could do it on iPhone, but you know and she would we have a couple little lights here and and just working with that. And with the digital cameras. The beauty is you don't need a lot of lights. You know, you can do things with very minimal lights. It doesn't even have to be movie lights, you know and you could take a lamp and put it here and lightly that with the lamp, you know, and just learn your craft and Learn what you like, you know, bounce the light, you know, try different things, you know, take a bounce card and put a light up and bounce into it from the side and then put it behind the camera and bounce it that way and put it down low bounce that way and learn lighting, and then gradually start shooting things in, you know, eventually, you know, you could put a little reel together. And then you know, it's so hard to break in, you know, I thought, you know, like, when I was a USC, we might last year there we shot, I shot a film that when a student Academy Award and I thought oh, well, yes, it's gonna be easy. I'm gonna go out and get a job right away. Well, no, I did. I worked as a PA, you know, and the only reason I got the job as a PA was the director was a basketball freak. And I was at a commercial house and Joe pika, who went on to become probably the greatest commercial director ever. And he liked to go out and shoot hoops in his downtime. So they hired me to go play basketball with Joe. So my freshman year, as Amy said, I was a block on on the team. And so I could play basketball. So that's what got me the job was I could go out and shoot hoops with Joe. And, you know, but that, you know, however you get your foot in the door, you got to get your foot in the door somehow. And, but if you have something to show, that's, that's really important, you know, really important and just shoot as much as you can. And if you can, edit as much as you can. And I think in today's world, things are a lot easier with digital cameras and digital editing systems, etc.

21:41 StudioDuke student

Alright, well, thanks for coming in. My question is just what are a few unexpected challenges of working on set and in the film industry?

21:51 Bob Yeoman

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Unexpected challenge? Well, every day's unexpected, I'll tell you, you know, there's always something that comes on and, you know, everybody to including the cinematographer gets thrown curveballs all the time. I mean, you're out there shooting, and it's a sunny day, like, okay, Florida, for instance, you know, you get out of Florida, and it's sunny for a few hours, and then it's raining, and then it's sunny, and then it's raining, and how do you match that footage, it's difficult, which is one of the reasons they moved the movie industry to California, you know, because it's pretty much sunny here all the time. But, you know, you're constantly, you have to be willing to roll with the punches, definitely. And a lot of times things change, you know, you have a shortlist that you work up with the director before you shoot. And then the actors show up, and they rehearse and it changes the blocking that changes everything. And so you have to be pretty quick on your feet to, to make the changes. And you know, many times I work with directors who we've kind of worked out how we're going to shoot a scene. And then when the actors get there, everything changes dramatically. So you can't, your game plan is just thrown out the window. And some directors like Wes Anderson, for instance, are very, you know, control, they're very much about the image.

Other directors I work with, are more about the writing and the acting, and they you know, you know, they'll say, Okay, what do you want to do, and they'll look at me, and I have to come up with the plan, you know, and you have to be really quick on your feet, which I think is another reason why having worked in the editing room. And understanding editing helps, because I know, kind of what you need to make this work. And, and so I can make my suggestions. And most of the time, they'll say, Yeah, that sounds great. Or they might say, Maybe I want this a little more, whatever it's so kind of a little bit of negotiation that goes on. But you know, you really have to think quickly on your feet and adapt to the conditions particularly when you're not in a studio when you're outside because you can't control what happens. And you know, it might you might have planned everything for a nice sunny day, and it's pouring rain. So all of a sudden, you have to change the plan. So it's a constant, it's a constant change. It's very rarely that things work out exactly how you expect it.

24:24 StudioDuke student

Hi, thank you so much for coming. Um, my question is, so you kind of already actually answered half the question about staying flexible on set, but like, what is your process for preparing in terms of cinematography? Like storyboarding shot list? And is there like a difference when you're planning a drama versus a comedy?

24:49 Bob Yeoman

Yeah, well, is that the proper the prep prompts, prep process is very different for Every movie really, typically, you know, I come in with the call prep, you know, and it can be a month, it could be six weeks could be eight weeks. And I go to every location with the director and the production designer, and we just get the script out, and we break it down. What do we like about this location, and we even try to block do a rough blocking of what's going to happen. And, you know, I'll talk about Wes for a minute,

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we actually bring a film camera, we should film on his films, and we often, it was just the available light, we will shoot shots, just for something for him to look at, and kind of digest. And so then he takes, after that, he'll go back and he has, they make an animatic, which is like a little cartoon, you know, and he will take the ideas that we come up with, and he will, you know, have is the guy who makes the animatic make a little animatic. And then then we all look at the animatic. And we break it down. And you know, we we always know, have a very clear idea with him, when we get to the set what we're going to shoot, and we rarely deviate from that it's always pretty carefully planned out. Because everything in his movies, if you familiar with his films, they're very carefully controlled, the backgrounds, the art direction, the car, everything is just so carefully controlled, we do a lot of testing with colors.

You know, like on the Grand Budapest Hotel, we we've painted flats, different colors, and and put the wardrobe on people that were not the actors, they weren't there. And we should test with that to see how the wardrobe will look against the background. And then we make certain alterations and the colors and things. And, you know, we're everything is so well planned so that when the movie is actually being shot, it's it's all been worked out beforehand, except for the actors, of course. And Wes is pretty good about, you know, convincing the actors to do what he wants them to do, and they're all pretty good about it. You know, there's no real discussion about No, I really wouldn't be sitting here I'd be standing by the window that those discussions don't really go on.

Whereas when I work with Paul Feig for instance, I movies like bridesmaids, you know, Wes, as always one camera, it's always very carefully controlled one camera, but on some of the comedies, you know, it's a lot looser, because so much of it is improv. And we shoot two, sometimes three cameras. And, you know, the actors get there, they do a rough blocking, they're free to go where they want, Paul certainly encourages improvisation encourages them to do what they need to do want to do. And so it's a much looser style. And so a lot of it's kind of more on the fly, you know, we get there, and then we see what's going to happen. And so then we, you know, while we're there, we kind of make a plan and try to stick to it. But again, we have to be so open to improvisation, which is part of the reason why we shoot multiple cameras is like, if you and I are having a conversation, they have a camera on me and a camera on you. And,

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you know, if something happens really funny, you know, that's, that's their dream. And that way they have it already captured rather than have to go back and recreate it because when you try to recreate something, it never quite matches what you know, you lose the spark and the recreation a lot of times and comedy for him the comedy is the most important thing. You know, he cares about how his movies look, but it's obviously not a Wes Anderson film where it's it's so, so controlled, and you know, everything is just so precise, whereas it's a lot looser situation. So comedies, there's, you know, people

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say, well, comedies should be brighter, you know, probably that's a little there's a little truth in that, you know, you know, it's rare that you see really dark comedies, but dark cinematography wise, and But that said, I think Gordon Willis and Woody Allen kind of broke a lot of rules and back in the day and they made him look more natural looking. They weren't just very brightly lit comedies, they were, you know, movies, it felt natural, but they weren't too dark, you know, and that's always kind of my thing with the movies is make them look like it's a real place in a real, you know, real situation. And, you know, people are a little downer, but I would never go, you know, overboard, you know, I just watched Mank, for instance. And it's, it's, it's a very dark movie and and you know, you know, I don't think that would fly in a comedy. You know, I think, you know, people want to see people's faces a little better than that. But, you know, that was the style that they chose on that particular show.

30:30 StudioDuke student

Hi, thank you so much for being here today. So you mentioned that you actually started out as a, like a still photographer. So I was wondering if there still is a space for still photography in the industry of like filmmaking, and cinematography? And if so how I can find opportunities as a still photographer?

30:50 Bob Yeoman

Oh, yeah, well, every set has a still photographer, by the way. And, you know, in my particular case, you know, because I'm in the union, you have to get into the still photographers union, I'm not sure how you do that. But they are on the set. And their job is to take behind the scenes shots of the cast, and crew and director, whatever. And they also shoot shots, while we're shooting many times that they use for promotion. And so we always have a still photographer on the set, you know, and, and they also do things like sometimes they for the poster, you know, they they take the actors off to the side, they might have a seamless or whatever, or they do it on the set, many times they'll want to do another set. So we've lit the sad, and then we leave and let them have it set for a little while so they can, they can shoot. So usually, it's only one steel photographer. But again, I don't know how you get into that. But you know, you might look at the steel photographers union and see what their requirements are. But they're an important part. And they're actually kind of part of our camera team. And that would be one thing that I think you could certainly look at, you know, is that and I just did this month long commercial, and they had a still team with us the whole time we were traveling around the US. And you know, we would shoot the commercial at a certain location. And then again, we would leave and the still guys would come in and they would they would have it for an hour or whatever they needed. And they would shoot stills because the when you make it a commercial, they also want to do print ads as well. And so they need the stills. So that's another way of looking into it, you know, is I you know, these people are kind of more known, you know, they're more known not in the film industry, but they're more still people who have gotten into commercial photography. So that's still a viable thing. And, you know, as I said, we travel all around and the still team, there's five of them in the guide

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for assistance. And they traveled with us so and they share a lot of stills that they'll use for, you know, advertising their products.

33:23 StudioDuke student

Hi, thanks again for being here. We already talked a little bit about working with Wes Anderson and Paul Feig. How is it to work with Noah Baumbach? And how did like your artistic ideas kind of like differ with those directors? And how was that like, collaborative process?

33:49 Bob Yeoman

Well, no, I was friends with Wes. They had been co writing and I knew, you know, very minimally through Wes. And Wes actually was a producer on squid in the whale. And so uh, no, I got to put the movie together. They Wes said, hey, you know, would you do this movie? And you know, I said, Sure. I liked the script a lot. And, you know, no, I had a concept partially because creative and partially due to budget because the movie was made for \$1.5 million. And we shot in like 23 days, which is nothing in New York City. And he wasn't he was a big fan of the French new way. And he wanted a very mobile camera. And so we shot it in 16mm, which was I won't say it was unusual, but most movies were being shot at 35 millimeter at that time. And it just gave us a chance to be much freer with the camera. Most of it was handheld, I handheld, the movie, and he also wanted the actors to feel free, you know, to move where they wanted. He didn't want to marks on the floor. So if the actors moved around, I was free to kind of move around to keep them on the frame or try to get as good compositions as I could. What I meant for me was more general type lighting. Whereas, you know, sometimes movies are very specifically lit. For certain things. This meant more just generally lighting a room so the actors can move around and do what they want. And, and I remember at the end of the film, Jeff Daniels came up to me and said, This is the most free I've ever felt than any movie, you know, he was being very nice. But you know, no, is really can is a writer, he was really concerned with the writing and the performance of the actors. And obviously, he had opinions on shots, and we talked it through, but I had a lot of freedom to kind of do what I wanted. And he was generous enough at the beginning of the film, to say, you know, because we're shooting in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and I said, you know, the street looks great in the afternoon or the morning, it's all frontman, it's not so good. And he said, Listen, I just need to make my days. And if you need to shoot the street in the afternoon, we can shoot inside in the morning now. And he was very good about that. And so I think he only lost one scene because of time, and we were on a very tight schedule. So he kind of gave me a lot of freedom to do what I needed to do within the confines of what I just discussed. It was handheld and general lighting, and, you know, but knowing that, you know, I embraced that as a as a concept. And, you know, it was a great experience. I think we all had fun working on the movie, and be honest with you, it turned out even way better than I thought. You know, I mean, so a lot of it has to do with no, and the actors, of course, but uh, you know, you know, it came out even better, you know, I thought it'd be a good movie, but it's funny, because certain movies I work on, I think it'll be great. And they don't turn out so great. And

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other movies. You know, you think, Oh, that'd be pretty good. And they like Bridesmaids is a perfect example. I had no idea when we were making that film, you know, that would turn into such a phenomenon. And, you know, so all of a sudden, it became this huge hit. And I was like, wow, I mean, I didn't expect that. So, you know, you never quite know anything, I guess. But squeaky wheel was a great experience. And it was kind of modeled on the French New Wave, I guess. So.

37:37 StudioDuke student

Hi, I'm Marlowe, thank you for speaking with us today. I had a few questions. But I feel like you've pretty thoroughly covered most of them. So I'm going to just narrow it down. And ask kind of about the evolution of your influence on films and projects and how you feel like that's gone from when you started out in the film industry to now and like, how you've evolved as a part of projects and the influence you've had as they are in development?

38:12 Bob Yeoman

Well, when I started out, I would take any job I was offered. And I think most people are that way. And so I think anybody who's been in the business, as long as I have no matter whether you're assumed photographer, director, actor, whatever, you'll have a few stinkers on your reel, you know. And, you know, that's just part of the deal. But so I've become a lot more selective as I've gotten older. And as you get more experience, you get offered a lot more, you know, I get offered a fair amount of movies. And I just, you know, hate to turn things down. But I just say and sometimes it's difficult because you're haven't worked for a while. But you know, you're kind of judged by what you've been working on. And it's easy to be pigeonholed. And many cinematographers, for instance, you know, you get into these big comedies, like I've done. And then all of a sudden, all you get is the comedy scripts, and you want to be able to do other things as well. So what I've done is I've been very careful. If I've done one or two big studio comedies in a row, I purposely made my next movie a more personal drama, dramatic type film, or, you know, I did a movie Love and Mercy. I don't know if you know, about Brian Wilson. And it's great. And just just kind of, you know, try to bounce back and forth because otherwise all after a very short time you you get pigeon, it's like an actor really. And an actor does, you know, some comedies and all of a sudden that's all he never gets a dramatic part anymore and then and all of a sudden, you see some actor, you know, doing a dramatic film, you know, I mean, Jim Carrey, or Adam Sandler, and you're like, wait a minute, you know, that's, that's, you know, but then you see him in a dramatic film, and they're really good. And so it's important to mix it up, I think the one thing I've learned in terms of my approach, and this goes back to Gordon Willis, again, a famous cinematographer. And he said, you know, simplify, and it's more about taking things away than putting things in, you know, and and, particularly with digital cameras, I learned, you know, oftentimes, it's, generally the first thing I do is like, go in and ruin my turn off all the lights, you know, and just see what's there. And, like, I was just on this commercial, and we were at a gymnasium, and we were in a pool situation, and that they had all these really ugly lights that were casting all the shadows. And so I

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said, just turn all the lights off. Yeah, immediately, it just looked way better, you know, there was just this giant window at the end and let this light in. And we just filled it in a little bit.

And with digital cameras, you can do that, you know, with film, maybe you couldn't, you know, and they're so sensitive these cameras, and, you know, so that's what I say you're shooting something, and there's a window in your room, just turn all the other lights off, for starters, and see what's there, you know, and then maybe you have to add one or two little lights, and you're fine, but it'll probably look really beautiful. You know, and so simplify things and don't overcomplicate it, you know, some people get so hooked on technology, and they you know, like many cinematographers, I mean, the ASC which is American society, cinematographer. And, you know, you go to these meetings, and, you know, sometimes these people are so hung up on all the latest gadgets and latest gear. And I, you know, I'm like, you know, I have no interest in that, you know, it's, it's, yeah, okay, I try to keep up on it, but, and if something can help me, I'll use it, you know, LED lights, for instance, you know, you can get LED lights now. And I bought a couple for my daughter and our home use here. And, you know, they take less power, you can control the lights you so much better and, but I'm not hung up on that stuff. You know, it's it's meaningful, but meaningless at the same time, you know, what, what are you trying to achieve? And what emotion are you looking for, to visually convey what the scene is all about? And that's, you should look at your script and look at the what you're trying to say and discuss with the director.

You know, what if we try this, you know, and, you know, seek it his input, or his or her input? And and, you know, many times directors don't even ask, I'm gonna light it, I just do it, you know, and they come and say, Are you ready? I say, Yeah, you know, so, but you have to react and put yourself, you could take 10, cinematographers, and you bring them into a room, and, you know, you have the actors rehearse the scene, and then you say, Okay, how are you going to shoot this? And how are you going to light it? And I could almost guarantee you'd come up with 10 different ways. You know, everyone brings their own perspective, their own experience, their own being into how they make those decisions. And, you know, that's what distinguishes Roger Deakins from you know, Joe Blow down at the news station, you know, I mean, it's, it's, you know, you know, and when we started digital cameras, I remember an editor saying to me, you know, well, I guess that's the end of cinematography, because anybody can do it now. And I just looked at him and say, Okay, you get Roger Deakins, a camera and one light, and you give somebody on the spirit of camera and one light, and him shoot the same thing. And let's see what happens, you know, because it doesn't matter. The technology is only a tool that we should use. It's not something that should control how we think. So that's kind of my, my feelings.

44:08 StudioDuke student

Hi, Bob. So again, thank you for joining us today. But the question I had was the work and a lot of different projects, different genres. And I'm sure that filming on set can be quite a time consuming and

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demanding task. But so my question was more along the lines of how do you recharge creatively? Do you have like passion projects on the side to kind of refill your energy, your passion? Are there other things that you like to do between jobs?

44:36 Bob Yeoman

Yeah, I mean, I think it's important to take time off. I remember one time years ago, I did three movies in a row and by the third one, I was just so burned out. You know, it was a mistake and I've learned to take downtime. I try to watch films. And I'm a sports junkie. I you know, I want to do basketball. Unfortunately, what happened was really sad. Our team was just starting to gel, I think, and I'm a big fan of our freshmen, I think not to be a sideline here. But, you know, I think Williams really proved himself at the end there. I love Steward and Roach, you know, I think that if all those guys come back, we're gonna have a great team next year. But, you know, that said, My son is a soccer player, and I never really felt soccer, I go to all his games, and you know, you have to have other interests. And you know, he kind of, and most of my friends, hearing at home, or not in the film business, and so we just go and talk about sports, politics, all kinds of things. And you know, it's important not just to get tunnel vision, I think, you know, and expand yourself, go to museums, again, I love photo shows. I take a lot of photos when I'm not working. You know, and I love still photography, I always have and, you know, you know, it's something that I just enjoy doing and have a hobby, I ride my bike on the beach, you know, and it's just get yourself out and expose yourself to a lot of things that you might not ordinarily expose yourself to. And sports has always been a big part of my life. So that's one thing that I like to do. So, you know, go to museums, museums, for sure. Okay, good.

46:34 StudioDuke student

Sorry for interrupting. No. Hi, Bob. Thanks, again, for coming. I'm Andrew. And I was curious to ask you, although you've talked a lot about like individual projects you've worked on already? What is your favorite project that you've worked on? And why?

46:49 Bob Yeoman

Well, it's always, I always get asked that question. It's always difficult. And I guess, if I were to choose one, I mean, each one is unique. And each one is a life adventure. And particularly when you travel, you know, like, which I do with Wes. Every movie is very unique. And like, we went to India, I mean, you know, you know, how can you put a finger on that? I mean, you know, you experienced and one of the things I like most about it, is that I typically work with local crews. And so I immersed myself in their worlds. And it really teaches you a lot about other cultures. And I think a lot of Americans tend not to travel through the world. I've been, you know, China, Asia, all through Europe, I've been Africa, India, everywhere, you know, South America, and you really get a world perspective on that. And I think that's really valuable. And you kind of see the see the world differently than I think a lot of Americans do.

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You know, if I had to choose one, I would probably say *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, because we were in this beautiful little town in Germany, Eastern Germany, on the Polish border, and in the winter. And we had a really special crew, a really special cast. And, you know, I think also the fact that film turned out, in my opinion very well. You know, it certainly shades my decision a little bit. But, you know, any of Wes' movies. We just did one that's been sitting in the can, *The French Dispatch*, and we were in a little city and called Angoulême, France. And, you know, in a weekend, we would all head to these little French bars, and everyone then meet up and have drinks. And you know, it was just the sense of camaraderie you get with crews is really special and something I wouldn't trade. And, again, having worked with crews from all over the world, you really kind of get insights into their lives, and you learn a lot about people and that, you know, you really learned that we're all just, you know, one big, happy or unhappy family as the case may be. But yeah, I mean, I just the traveling and experiences I've had with traveling has been incredibly valuable for me. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

49:30 Nina Wilder

Hi Bob, I think I get the last question. Um, I'm not a StudioDuke student actually, I graduated last year, and I studied film at Duke. And everyone's been such a consummate professional speaking with you, but I had to say that you are one of the reasons I came to Duke. Oh, that's nice. I keep this on my car. There are some great photos of you in here. So yes, um, but I just wanted to maybe finish with a fun question. Well, they've all been fun questions, but I just want to know a movie that you've watched recently that you really liked. And that really stood out to you and why?

50:07 Bob Yeoman

Oh, I liked a couple of movies. Well, you know, I've been watching a lot of the screeners. And I liked *Minari*, I liked *Nomadland*. I liked *One Night in Miami*. And I'm stumbling because I can't remember but it was the one about the Black Messiah, the guy who goes behind with the Black Panthers. I really liked that movie. And I liked *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, that was a really good one. So these are recent movies that I really liked a lot. You know, I think that the most interesting films today in America, you know, are the smaller budget films, you know, too much. I'm not, you know, I shouldn't say this, but I will. I'm not a big Marvel fan. I'm not the big studio movie fan. You know, I think those movies become more about certain, you know, merchandising, and things like that are the smaller personal films, I think, to me, the most interesting ones, you know, and, and so that those are the films I tend to really like, and I'm really happy to see, particularly this year, and I voted, you know, for the first round of the Oscars. But we have another round come up, but, you know, to see those films get recognized and, and I hope that, you know, as the younger people come along, that they embrace those films as well. And, you know, as younger people start making these films, and we're seeing filmmakers, women, people of color, people from Korea, you know, who are getting attention, which I think is just awesome, and

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great, you know, I'm all for it. And it really, it, you know, it gets us out of a rut that I think we've been in for a while now. And I'm really supportive all that.

So, you know, any of those movies in the kind of camera, the name, the one about the Black Messiah, Judas, Judas and the Black Messiah, is such a great movie. And Daniel Kaluuya is so fantastic. And you know, I'm just so, you know, excited when you see that kind of thing. And, you know, what's interesting, too, in that particular film, what struck home to me was, you know, that was in the 60s, when, when I was in Chicago, and, you know, I grew up in a white suburb and, and the Black Panthers were always kind of, you know, looked upon in the white suburbs as yo, yo, stay away from them, they're trouble. And then you see it from their perspective. And, you know, you kind of opened your eyes, you know, a little bit to what was really going on. And so it really struck a strong personal chord with me when I watch that film, and just, you know, you know, anyway, I like the smaller films, generally, you know, very rarely do I see a big blockbuster that I go out. That's a great film. It's more than smaller films. But not only was another one, I thought, Minari and I and at the ASC I sponsored that I have to, you have to make a speech about Minari. But you know, you know, I just kind of, really is there was a truth to it. And Nomadland the same way there was a real strong truth to those films. And I know Frances McDormand, I've done several movies with her. She's such a sweetheart and a great actress. And, you know, it's just so you know, wonderful to see those types of films get that recognition.

55:06 Amy Unell

We're pretty lucky to have you with us today. Round of applause. Thank you so much.

56:18 Bob Yeoman

Alright, you guys take care.

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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