

[Interview] Anna Martemucci: the new revelation of independent cinema



Last September, amongst all the new TV-series Starz Channel launched an original program called *The Chair*. This real-TV show was giving the opportunity to two young filmmakers to direct their very first film based on... the same script. On the occasion of the release of the show on DVD, we had the chance to chat with the charming Anna Martemucci.

The Hollidaysburg director talked with us about what she calls a “*crazy and tremendous experience*”, this wild challenge of directing her first film, of a competition with a youtube star and also of being filmed. “*There were some nights when all we wanted was just to go home, put our pyjamas on and not see anyone. And they were here so there were some moments when we were like “oh no no no”*”.

But despite difficulties, all that remains is a wonderful memory. To always go beyond her dreams and her limits and at the end to offer an authentic, funny, wonderful film... proving that “she can do it. A unique opportunity of directing the film she wanted and most of all to realize how natural being a director was like “*a jacket I was always meant to wear.*”

4 months after the end of the show, it's surrounded by her super-team of Periods.Films that she continues her crazy movie journey...



How did you get involved in the Chair?

It all happened very organically. Chris Moore [producer of the show] had seen our film Break up at a Wedding at a screening we had organized and he really loved it. He hired us to rewrite a web series he was doing. At the same time, Victor and I were discussing about me directing because I really wanted to do that. I went to the set of the web series and asked to the

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director if I could shadow him, which I did. The Chair was something Chris Moore always wanted to do and, then when he saw me on the web series set, well, me being a part of it came up as a possibility. He was “seriously would you do that?” I had a whole month to think of it and after talking a lot about it...finally I accepted the challenge.

How did approach the whole idea of not only being a first-time director but also of a competition between two people directing the same script?

I thought it was a very weird and strange project but also a really good idea, it would be an interesting look at creativity, to see how two different people interpret the same thing. When Chris told me about Shane, I didn't know who he was so we went on youtube and saw he had so many followers [10 million]. It actually put the pressure off a little bit. More than his followers, I discovered we were different. Also when Chris told me we could rewrite the script, I knew it was going to be a very different film even if it was the same structure. I forgot about the competition. It was just an opportunity to make my first movie.

Instead of just rewriting a few dialogues you totally rewrote the film. What motivated you to do such a thing?

I always wanted to do a movie I had control on it... I wanted to bring to life something I had originally envisioned with my collaborators. I really wanted to see an idea evolve from its birth to its execution. That was what I had worked on for so long. With The Chair I could do it, which is so striking. I love teenager-movies and come to an age films. This theme is the thing Chris wanted us to keep from the script. After reading the original script I knew I couldn't offer much to it and that it was very important that I rewrote it totally and put our own ideas on it. I knew that it was the only way for me to totally direct this movie.

The original script is a comedy the genre you used to work on. Funnily instead of rewriting into another type of comedy, you turned it into a dramedy...

It just happened naturally. When we met Victor, Phil and I we were doing comedy short films so we kept doing those types of works. With this movie, I felt that I needed to get personal to myself. There have been a lot of movies about coming home for the holidays and I wanted to bring something very authentic. I realized in the process of rewriting it that what is the truest is usually the funniest. The way I got to the truth was to base it on my memories, on a lot of things, of relationships, of people that I knew and situations that really happened to me when I was having a hard time. I thought of those funny awkward times and that they would be funny. And it ended up a little more dramatic than what we had planned but I tried to have jokes every minute.



In the Chair you direct, write and also act but it seems that what was the most stressful wasn't those three jobs but being followed by the cameras...

Totally...

Was there a moment when you were looking at them and just wanted to say “leave me alone guys” or “gosh I’m going to direct my film without the cameras”?

It was crazy. The relation between my crew and the Chair crew was really intense and antagonistic, like we were all good but it was also awkward. Me and my crew had one goal: making a good movie, and their goal was: making a show. And we were all in this small space together. There were a lot of negotiations and tensions sometimes. There were some nights when, after a 12-hour shooting, all we wanted was just to go home, put our pyjamas on and not see anyone. And they weren't coming home with us every time but sometimes they had to be here, when something was happening that they needed to get. You never knew which nights they were coming with you at home. So there were some moments when me or somebody else of my team was like “oh no no no they're here”. But we were really nice, really accommodating. I was also worried about our safety and their safety especially when they were holding a camera in a moving car. So it was crazy but my goal was to make my film and to enjoy this crazy experience.

How did this crazy experience change you personally and professionally?

What the Chair did to me was tremendous, there are so many levels I can talk about. I realized that I could be more than what I had ever imagined. Being a director felt so natural to me, not at the beginning, but when we started shooting it was like putting a jacket that I was always meant to wear. I didn't expect it to be such a huge revelation. It also forced me to get very clear with myself about what I wanted to stand for, what kind of career I wanted to have, and what kind of stories I wanted to show. I knew that I wanted to tell stories with compassion and equality, to bring people together and to tell stories about complex female characters because they are just a few, like real quite complex female characters. I knew all of that stuff...but this experience clarify even more what I wanted to make my life all about.

Not only strong female characters are rare but it's well known there is a sort of discrimination toward female directors and screenwriters in Hollywood. Do you think that being on The Chair was important in a way to show to men that women can do this work too and maybe motivate girls to consider doing this supposed-to-be man's job?



Absolutely, even if at first I was like “It's terrifying, oh my god I'm going to be filmed”. The one thing I always wanted to make my life about was supporting women and empowering women. To be a woman that when other people see her they say “well she can do it”. And to be honest I didn't really know how bad it was because I loved so many female directors and there was also the case of

Kathryn Bigelow [first female director to win an Oscar in 2010]. I didn't realize how bad the problem was really in general. Once I was aware about this, well it was like a fire in my belly telling me that I had to keep doing it. I couldn't say “I'm tired I'm gonna leave this job, I'm gonna leave this show.” It is just so wonderful.

And at the same time, you're working with a lot of men and quite a team, you're a family. How do you guys work together when you're creating a project?

It's a constantly evolving process between the three of us. It started with our short film "Pilgrims" Victor and I made and in which Phil starred. We are like "let's making this thing" and that's what we do. It's through the doing that we figure everything out. We've always been really involved creatively in everything we made. For example in Break up at a wedding, I had this idea of a whole section of the film, I rewrote it and said "look at it". Phil and I were always giving creative ideas, at the end of the day Victor, as he was the director, was the one who could say yes or no. That's how it works between us. And this is how Hollidaysburg worked, I wanted them really creatively involved but at the end of the day it was my decision.

What was so cool about the Chair was that it was taking a pre-existing working relationship between the three of us and just tweaking it: "let's do an experiment where Anna is the director instead of Victor". And I hope one day Phil get to direct a movie and we all be a part of that. It's a really cool thing just to have a group like that.

About your work with Victor. On the show it seemed like even when he wasn't on the set, he was in a way on the set because you have such a strong working relationship that you needed him.

It's a thing the show may have exaggerated a little. We love working together and we always make sure to remind each other that; because things get done and at the same we have a lot of fun. It's proving to be very exciting. It was so natural for me wanting to continue this relationship on the show because all this thing was so new and so scary to me. A lot of what I learned, all the things I used and the knowledge I had of directing were from watching Victor direct. At the beginning during pre-production it was true that Victor was always there. The first two days of shooting I was a little freaked out because we had a very emotional scene to shoot and I was "Victor, Phil Help Me Help Me" but after that I pretty much had it and Victor sort of disappeared. I felt I was a bit misunderstood about this because by the end the day the movie was very much my voice. And when you're making a film or a TV show it's so collaborative you have to work with other people and if there are people with whom you're working perfectly it will be a shame not to work with them.

And despite that you're perfectly working together are interested in doing something totally on your own?

Absolutely. All of us have different projects we're working on. We love working together but we're fine working separately too. What was interesting with Hollidaysburg was that I thought I would hire people, like my DP, that I was familiar with but I couldn't. I had to hire new people and I was able to prove to people that I could do it a little by myself.

Any new projects coming...?

Everything is in development, it's nothing official yet and we don't know which things we're gonna make first. But we are working with a brilliant comedian Drew Droege, we have created a web series that we are going to shoot in the next few months. I'm working on a pilot for a series and it's so personal that's it only me writing it. It will be a television show created by me but I'll probably hire them to work on it. Victor, Phil and I have just recently written another movie that Victor will direct... so lots of stuff.