



Interview with Nathan Vass – NRFF Artist of the Month

[Archived from (former URL): <https://newrenaissancefilmfest.com/interview-with-nathan-vass-nrff-artist-of-the-month/>]

NATHAN VASS is the NRFF Artist of the month (May '20). This is the second in a series of exclusive interviews by Anya Mani Patel, featuring 'emerging talent' from film, music and dance.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in Seattle, the NRFF artist of the month is the multi talented NATHAN VASS, aka film-maker, bus-driver, photographer and author. Vass' parents are musicians and painters, thus art has played a major part of his life. An accepting, empathetic, curious and integrative thinker, Nathan's personality shines through his various forms of artistic expression. His positive, affective presence is highlighted in his best-selling book *The Lines That Make Us*. In his 9th film *Men I Trust*, he underscores a desire to portray strong, female characters in a true and thoughtful manner. Vass rejoices in all aspects of life, especially the everyday people he meets working as a nighttime bus driver in Seattle. Above all, his art brings to the forefront the importance of fairness, kindness and generosity to others. Here, we chat with Vass (an award winning artist) about his latest film project, his creative process, the female gaze and much more.

–Anya Mani Patel

Nathan, congratulations on being the NRFF artist of the month (May '20), and on winning Best International Short at the recent NRFF Amsterdam 2020 Awards for your medium length film 'Men I Trust.' How does it feel, and did it come as a surprise?

First off, it's a tremendous honor to be selected. Secondly, I'm humbled. Saoirse Ronan joked that awards attention means getting dolled up so you can go out... and lose! One never expects a win. I'm stunned, and I couldn't be happier. Thirdly, we all know that American artists secretly wish for legitimacy from European entities!! More seriously, I'm particularly thrilled because *Men I Trust* aspires to be more aligned with auteur cinema and international narrative art cinema, which isn't as interesting to some of the festivals in my hometown of LA. It's not an art film persay, but it tries to express content through form, in the tradition of

my favorite directors. For me, NRFF's selection highlights that aspiration as legitimate, and I'm hugely grateful.

You've been described as "the filmmaker who drives a bus and the bus driver who wrote a book!" Can you explain how this came about, and the common thread linking these roles?

My desire to drive buses and write about what happens on them (I'm one of those drivers who talks to everyone!), and my love of film and art in general all stem from a passionate interest in human nature. Viola Davis said art is "the only profession that celebrates what it means to live;" editor Brittany Hammer references Schelling when she says "Art is the only thing that can manifest what cannot be understood." The dialectic arrived at the intersection of these two perspectives— that is, appreciating existence without needing to understand it— is at the core of both my arts practices and how I try to live life. These different disciplines all involve developing skills and deploying them artfully toward exploring life and human nature on its own terms. Directing is the hardest thing I know how to do, so it feels great to take on that challenge, but a great night bus driving feels just as significant of an accomplishment. Neither job is easy!

As an essential worker and an artist, how has the current lock-down affected you?

As an artist, I'm hugely fortunate to have such a secure job, especially one that doesn't disappear during a pandemic! I'm grateful for the leave options available and must admit the extra time and slower pace afforded by the lock-down is a boon not just for staying healthy but for being creative. As an artist, you're always desperate for more time for all your projects, as well as just more time to think!

What key events or people in your early life inspired you to become an artist?

My parents are painters and musicians whose considerate attention to how best to live life is an inspiration. Artistically, discovering Don DeLillo was a revelation; a writer who can articulate my worldview infinitely better than I ever could. Terrence Malick's sense of wonder at existence is intoxicating, as is his tendency to photograph light as a presence; no other filmmaker has so fully realized the possibilities of Pure Cinema, especially with his late work. Art has always been part of my daily life, and cinema excited me enormously as a teen because of its high-impact potency

What is your 9th film 'Men I Trust' about?

The plot synopsis reads, "two sisters and a spouse wrestle with love and loss, finding hope in unexpected places," which I know is awfully general! More specifically, it's about the intensely human tendency to ask "why" when confronted with tragedy, as well as the question of how willing we are to apply Nietzsche's theory of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same to our own lives in the face of tragedy. I wanted to explore these ideas without sentimentality or solutions, because I haven't seen many films do the same and enjoy when they do.

As a man, was it a conscious choice to tell a story about strong women? How did you find the process?

Absolutely. Thank you for asking this! As an artist I feel like I'm always trying to fill voids I see in art, and one void we all know of is the lack of female-driven cinema. The male psyche has been explored to death by directors way better than me, so there's no need for me to go there! In 2008 I resolved to only have female protagonists going forward, mostly because it's refreshing for me, but also to do my small part in balancing things out. I kind of don't like that "Men" is in the title, but I want the film to do what the title does

grammatically— offer ‘men’ not as the subject but the object of the sentence, where the “I” represents the doer, the female perspective. I imagine it’s easy for female viewers to consider films through a female gaze, but the title is there to encourage male viewers to do the same, to enter the story from the female characters’ perspective. Also, men need better male role models. They’re expected to be heroes without emotions who fix everything— which we all know doesn’t exist, and thus makes men feel emasculated all the time. I hope the Ashley character can represent a different kind of man— sensitive, unafraid to assign importance to feelings, and who defines himself by his love for another.

Your actors were very convincing. How did you cast and prepare them for their roles?

I’ve made casting mistakes in the past and learned the hard way that it’s a critical step. Most problems can be massaged in post; poor casting is unfixable. We auditioned over a hundred actors for these roles— Seattle has a good theatre scene with a lot of film-trained talent— and primarily struggled to find people who resembled each other at different ages, as well as actors who could speak French and dance. I love rehearsing with actors. We discussed the intention of every line and what would be going through each character’s heads, as normal; but I also had the older actors play the younger scenes in rehearsal, just so they would have the muscle memory of having shared those moments together, even though they physically never act them in the film. I’ve worked with Eleanor Moseley before; the desire to work with her again was the original impetus to make the film.

Where was the film shot and were there major challenges you had to overcome?

It was a 4-day shoot originally scheduled for 3 (extended due to weather; we were disappointed but eventually thrilled to get some great light on the 4th day!), in Seattle. I wanted the setting to be ambiguous— an unspecified city as easily imaginable in Europe or perhaps Quebec as the States. All but one of the vehicles onscreen can be found in all three places, but keen eyes will know from the foliage in the forest that we’re in western North America.

Preproduction and production were the nightmare of anxiety that they always are, because you never know if it’s all going to fall apart. What if the boom operator has a hangover and doesn’t show? You’ve got no movie! Thankfully we had great people in every role— most of them way overqualified and over-experienced for a project this small. I think that’s why it turned out so well!

I wanted to challenge myself— I hadn’t done a crowd scene before, directed in another language, or used steadicam. I wanted to do a number of things short films don’t do— a story that takes place over a long span of time, has crowds, uses different languages, and utilizes feature film pacing and grammar rather than going for brevity at all costs. It’s not really a short film, where a static state is articulated in as short a time as possible and then reversed at the climax. Instead, it’s paced more like the second or third act of a feature.

The French music score by Vendredi Sur Mer is a key element throughout the film. How did this association come about, and what did you want to express from the music?

I spent six months listening to French dance and club music trying to find the right sound. It was tons of fun! The Vendredi Sur Mer songs we use are all produced by Lewis Of Man, whom I chose because his work epitomizes Hugo’s definition of melancholy: happiness that has turned to sadness. Most music of this type is too obviously one or the other emotion. His blends the two indistinguishably, which I find more compelling and in keeping with the film’s aim toward unsentimentality. I loved the songs so much, and wanted to impress the label and artist with what we were trying to do, so I cut the scenes to the music before asking permission; I wanted them to have a clear idea of how we’d use their music so they’d hopefully say yes! It was terrifying to cut scenes together so intricately without knowing if we’d get the music. Finally getting the clearances was

one of the happiest days of my life. The songs end up being even more perfect than one could hope for; they were chosen for mood and rhythm, but the lyrics make sense too, like the last moment in the film happening while we hear Charline Mignot singing: “Maintenant les femmes dansent / en ronde autour de moi / et c’est dans un silence / que je sors du coma.” It’s crazy how perfect that is.

You are a multiple award winning filmmaker. Can you share with our audience any advice for how to make a successful film?

All directors have a vision; the ones that succeed in conveying it are those that can articulate what they want to others. You have to have such a complete understanding of what you want that you have the answers to all questions on set. Figure out everything beforehand, and learn how to talk to people. Watch the classics; not enough young filmmakers do. They’re great! (If I could recommend only 3 titles, they’d be: Seven Samurai for grammar, 8 1/2 for subject, and Raging Bull for passion and technique.) Also— don’t make a film unless you have something to say. Wait until you do. It just isn’t worth the herculean effort it takes otherwise.

Your photography is punctilious and empathetic. How do you tell a story through a 35mm lens, and has photography shaped your work as a filmmaker?

I love those adjectives, thank you! I care a lot about form and emotion, and try to use the former to express the latter. My parents are painters, and visual language comes easily; with photography I’m trying to capture what the moment feels like, instead of what something looks like. Many of the photos on my site are of famous locations like le Tour Eiffel or il Colosseo, which have of course been photographed thousands of times; I try to search for what hasn’t been captured or what’s unique to my experience, and usually that’s some detail that represents emotion. I could only use film for this kind of approach; 35mm allows you a sensitivity, organic tactility, and richness of color unique to itself. Less than 3 color darkrooms survive in the US; I was lucky to make a couple thousand chromogenic prints before the one near me, a world-class facility in Olympia, Washington, was shut down. Digital encourages decisions to be made later; film encourages decisions to be made on the spot, through means of film stock and filters, which is more conducive to reacting in the moment. Film is an artist’s medium. Digital can be used for art, but it has better applications for journalism and documenting things like sports and crime scenes.

Growing up around painting and photo has made me look at films with a priority toward their visual communicative abilities. I consider cinema a visual medium, and feel if the movie isn’t conveying its themes through mise en scène, choice of angle, movement and color, it’s not worth making as a movie. It may as well be a stage play, or perhaps a book. Photography’s ability to convey mood also translates to cinema; there are long sections in my film without dialogue, where character is conveyed through images and atmosphere. I place a lot of importance on these, and think the best films are character-based more than plot-based. So I think I see cinema as I do photography, a vehicle for expressing existence, more than just a storytelling platform.

Can you tell us about your book ‘The Lines That Makes Us’ and the impact that it has had?

I’m so surprised at how well it’s done. My day job is as an artist and filmmaker; my night job is driving city buses! It’s so much fun. The Lines That Make Us is a book version of my blog, which is stories that have happened on my bus. So many publishers rejected me because there’s no other popular book like it: positive interactions with street people, told truthfully. It was too much of a risk for them, although now I’m sure they wish they’d acted differently! Many Americans, especially those of us in big cities, are very disappointed with our government and various societal constructs that increase inequality and push people apart; this book is about what we all have in common, and I think people respond to it because it brings us together.

And finally, what are your hopes and dreams for your future as a filmmaker/artist?

There is such a tendency in western thought to define ourselves by what we do, rather than who we are, or how we treat others. In future years I hope to continue to find peace in existence and joy in creating. As it relates to artistry, cinema now interests me more than photo, which is what I spent much of my 20s focusing on, and I'd like to pursue more movie projects. It's the most dynamic art form.

NRFF wish super talented Nathan Vass continued success with his film 'Men I Trust'. Visit his website and Facebook page for more information.