



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Oliver Pierce: Independent Film Maker

Interviewed in Shokan, New York. June 20th, 2006.

Born: 1987 in New York City, New York

“Programming your unconscious mind... you’ll begin to see opportunities and chances where before you would have missed or ignored them. You’ll find yourself moving toward your positive future as if it were drawing you in the same inexorable straight line that drew Newton’s apple from the tree.”

— Thom Hartmann in *“Walking Your Blues Away.”* (Park Street Press, 2006, p. 87)

“Drop out of school before your mind rots from exposure to our mediocre educational system. Forget about the Senior Prom and go to the library and educate yourself if you’ve got any guts.”

— Frank Zappa in *“Freak Out!”* (Liner notes, June 27, 1966)

OP:

I’ve decided I want to be a successful filmmaker in the areas of writing and directing. Toward that end I left school after 9th grade to pursue independent study and focus on all the different aspects of filmmaking: writing, directing, acting, cinematography, editing, and producing. Those are the main seven things it takes to make a movie.

I’m not rich yet. Everything I’m working toward is just a working hypothesis, which I think is going to work. I’m pretty confident in my decision but everything I say can be taken with a grain of salt.

If I’m going to be a writer or director it’s also important to understand the other things, so I worked in all of those things and I made a bunch of short films. My approach is to study with people who are active in their fields, professionally active in those different fields as opposed to just taking a course at Ulster Community College (the local community college), where the person teaching the class has no... I don’t want to say they have success, but they’re not working in the industry doing what I want to learn.

Through asking different people — finding the right people to work with — the people I found were, for the most part, really willing to help out, to give me their opinions and their time. In the past year I’ve gotten a little work: little film projects shooting ads for people or editing short films. I’ve done a bunch of my own films that have been in festivals, and I’ve started to line up some bigger projects. Now the challenge is making those happen. The next step is trying to go to Los Angeles and really make the bigger things happen.

LS:

Do you know the pivotal moment when I decided to go off in this direction?

OP:

Let me think. First, from very early on I always knew I wanted to do film, and then it was just a question of how to pursue that. I toyed with the idea of leaving school for a while.



The exact moment I decided to leave school was the summer between 9th and 10th grades. I was on a camping trip and I was getting close to when school was going to start again. I finally decided that I was not going to go back to public school. Then I went and threw up in the woods for about half an hour. I was really nervous about the decision. But I'm glad definitely, definitely glad I did.

LS:

You didn't think of going to another school?

OP:

I did think of going to another school but I figured what would be the point? I figured, "Why, when I know so much about what I want to do, why have someone else's curriculum?"

LS:

Did you find school was annoying to you for other reasons?

OP:

Well, I went to Waldorff school through 8th grade, and I liked Waldorff school for the most part. But it only went through 8th grade, and then I went to Rondout (public high school). It's not like I had any terrible, terrible experiences at Rondout, I just knew what I wanted to be doing and that wasn't it.

LS:

What are the big problems you see for yourself now?

OP:

I don't see any big problems, I see a lot of little problems. Anything is just a series of little problems, in a lot of ways.

LS:

You don't see the lack of a degree or a certification as standing in your way?

OP:

Not at all. For other people it would be, but film — and I've heard a lot of people say this — is really the last bastion where you just go in, and if you're good enough you can get a job. You don't need degrees or any formal piece of paper, which is totally different from most fields. And I'm pretty sure it is true.

I keep kind of a mental list of filmmakers I know left high school. It's a really long list, three of the top of my head are Quentin Tarantino, Jim Carey, and David Fincher. I know all three of them dropped out of high school. And many, many, many of them dropped out of college, in fact most of them, pretty much.

One of the only things I kind of missed about not going to school — which I got over and was able to do without, even though it was one of the reasons I left — was having a deadline which



can be really helpful if you're doing a project. It's really easy to put things off if you don't have a deadline. In school it was all deadlines on projects that I didn't feel were necessary. I figured I'd rather do my own projects, not have the pressure of a deadline and be forced to focus and really do it on my own, than have the luxury of that deadline pressure in order to do projects that were of no real interest to me.

LS:

So how did you get the feeling that you could pursue a project to completion?

OP:

I don't know. With something you want to do, that helps. I could never do it with something I don't want to do. And even with something I do want to do it's hard. But I just figured I'd take the chance, and I have, I think. I do pursue my projects to completion.

LS:

How do you think you're going to find your way? Are you relying on people to reveal the landscape to you?

OP:

I don't think there's any "right way". If you're trying to be a lawyer then that's what knowledge is to you: a bunch of rules. If you're trying to be an artist it's totally different. I'm not looking to be an artist, exactly. I'm looking to be really main stream.

LS:

How do you learn that?

OP:

From other people who are really main stream (laughs). From other people who do total middle-of-the-road... not boring middle-of-the-road... but TV or film stuff. I'm not trying to break the mold.

LS:

You're trying to do an apprentice approach?

OP:

Sort of, yeah. I'm taking a two-pronged approach in which one is to work in menial PA, production assistant, type work on sets. Taking in the whole scene. And the second prong is working on big projects that would give me a big payoff. But those are harder to get to happen.

LS:

What things make you nervous?

OP:

No huge things. Obviously failure in all its different forms, but it doesn't make me really nervous. Occasionally you always get the negative voices that come in, but basically I'm not that nervous.



LS:

How do you deal with those voices?

OP:

I just try to get them out of my head. Some days I can do it, some days I can't. If I think about it logically I don't feel I have very much to be nervous about. I don't mean that to sound cocky at all, like I said I'm not rich yet so hopefully I'm right about all that I'm saying, but you never know. I feel confident enough that I'm right that I'm continuing to do what I'm doing.

LS:

That begs the question of whether you would be certain that you were right if you became financially successful?

OP:

Yeah! I do measure success financially, at least for the entertainment industry, yeah.

LS:

Well, it's nice to have a bench mark, it's really useful. But a failure can also be turned into a success if you can learn from it. One of the things that I do when I'm confronted with a depressing situation is to revise...

OP:

... what success is.

LS:

Success can mean learning through failure. And then all of a sudden your failure is not a failure at all.

OP:

Yeah, I think learning through failure is a good thing but I don't think that's success, really. It's just learning through failure. I don't think there's anything looser-ish about failing a lot. If you fail a lot then the odds are in your favor that the next time it will be a success! (laughs) Assuming you do learn from your mistakes and don't repeat the same mistakes. I see a lot of people that do that, too.

Another thought I'm having about the reason I left school is... I mean I suppose I could go to college and become a lawyer or a doctor now... I wanted to create a situation for myself where I didn't really have any other option other than succeeding. If I made the odds that much higher, then I'm that much more motivated to succeed. I didn't really make a back-up plan specifically for the reason that I don't want to have anything to fall back on, that way I have to get where I'm trying to go.

LS:

What's the great success that you'd like to achieve?



OP:

I don't know. (laughs) I mean I do know: some highly paid, very creative, job in the film industry.

LS:

That seems like some definition of heaven. Could it be anything in that universe of filmmaking?

OP:

Well, in writing or directing.

LS:

What about producing?

OP:

I could be a producer, but I'm not really trying to be. What I'm really focusing my energies on is writing and directing. And that's what I feel like I'm going to end up being. I'm OK at the technical part, I'm not great, but I'm more into coming up with ideas for shows and things like that, mostly writing and thinking. If you're trying to come up with a reality show that you want to sell to MTV then you write a pitch.

LS:

What's your attitude toward selling?

OP:

What do you mean?

LS:

One of the things that institutional learning environments don't provide you is the ability to sell: they don't teach you how to sell. They tell you "meet this criteria and you'll go on to the next level" and you proceed forward like a cow thinking that life is just a staircase that you climb one step at a time. You never learn how to sell yourself or your ideas to a variety of different peoples. When you get thrown into the real world you realize that almost everything is selling.

OP:

Yeah, in film it's like selling yourself. It's like "Oh, I'm a really, really funny guy and you should definitely hire me to write this script because it's going to be funny", something like that. You have to convince them yours are good ideas and that they're going to be profitable. There are classes where they say they'll teach you that, but I think you're either good at or you're not.

I think I've always been — well, sometimes I am not at all, but *usually* — pretty good at talking to people. It's a lot about following up, which is something I'm not always good at. It's so much about knowing the right people, like almost all of it, probably. That's what I hear most, and it seems to be true.



LS:

How do you get to know the right people? Is that a question of skill or luck?

OP:

I think it's both. It can be luck, but even if you're not lucky but you have the skill, then you can make it happen. Some people are just lucky, some people are just born into the circle of people they need to know. Other people who are born and they live in a place where they're totally removed from anyone. I feel that if you want to meet the right kind of people you just have to, like, meet the right kind of people! (laughs)

LS:

How do you do it?

OP:

Just go places that they're going to be and, or, talk to people. Like, I'm talking to my neighbor and I'm going, "Oh, yeah, I'm trying to do this film thing." And she goes, "Oh, well my friend is a producer for such-and-such a show. I should give you her number and you should give her a call." Then I give them a call and I go, "Hi, I'm Oliver, I just left high school to do film. I'd really, really like to meet you and talk to you about doing some sort of work for you," or something like that. Then usually the person says "yes" and you meet them and start trying to make something happen. You just do that *a lot!*

There are even places — and I'm talking again just about film — like, say, the Woodstock Film Festival has this youth thing every year where you go and there are 20 people in the industry and you can go and ask questions. What I did was I brought them my stuff that I thought was pretty good. I went and showed it to someone who could give me some advice, and they called me, and I ended up meeting with them.

I think anyone could go and ask people for anything. Ask them if they'll look at your work or if you can help them somehow. Offer your time for free, sometimes you get paid, sometimes you don't. It's just trying to meet the right people, so that the people you meet eventually grows into something.

LS:

Where do you think you're going to be 5 years from now.

OP:

Ah! (laughs) I don't want to jinx myself, and I don't think that what I'll be doing 5 years from now is appropriate for this book. I don't think I could say it out loud (laughs) and I don't want to say it anyway, but it's pretty good!

I don't know if I've answered any of your questions. I don't know if I've been any use in this interview (laughs)! I didn't really come prepared with anything inspirational or really educational to say.

LS:

OK. Can you think something up!



OP:

I think the biggest tool... well, what do you mean?

LS:

If you were talking to kids who didn't do what you did, what would you say to them? Are they on a different track to an equally important place, or are they missing the track?

OP:

They're on a different track and some of them are going to an equally important place, some of them are not. I think there are going to be people who go through the normal educational system who are really successful, and people who are not. I don't know how doing either one of those increases or decreases your odds of success. For me leaving school increases my odds, but I think it depends on what you do if you leave, and it depends on the career that you want.

LS:

What are the most important things a person could learn if they stayed in school, versus the most important things they could learn if they didn't?

OP:

I think you can learn pretty much anything you can learn in school, out of school. You can, that's a fact. All the information is obtainable. For some people who don't... let me think this through a little bit. What you can't do out of school that you can do in school is get a piece of paper that says this is what you know.

There are more things that you can learn out of school than you can learn in school. You can learn anything out of school, including what's in school. Now, there are some people who are not going to learn anything if they leave school because they're not motivated to learn anything, but they do realize that they want a job that might require one of those pieces of paper. Different kinds of schooling are right for different types of people.

LS:

Some people say that there's a unique community and support network both in schools and universities.

OP:

That's probably kind of true. When I talk about trying to meet people I'm talking about trying to create a kind of support network for myself. Whereas in school you don't get to choose who's in your support network, when you're on your own, as long as you have the will to create the support network, you can create a really good one.

LS:

A typical response to that would be to say that in schools you'll find people who are great sources of something or other. Teachers who are actually paid to sit there and yak with you all day long. Whereas for you to get the same kind of attention out of school requires bringing together so many other things that the odds are against you.



OP:

Yeah, the odds are that not everything you do is going to work out, no matter what you're doing. And you're right, when you're dealing with people who are busy and have lives other than being a teacher, whose job is not to teach you, you're not going to be able to get as much time getting critiqued as you would. But I think if you're dealing with the right people... I mean I'd rather get like 10 minutes with certain people than 4 years with others.

If it's someone I respect and I see their work and how good it is, then I really, really listen to what they say and take it to heart. Whereas if it's a teacher I'm like, "uh huh, maybe I should listen to you, maybe not." Not that there aren't really successful people who can give really bad advice, because I'm sure there is.

One of the things that really appeals to me about film — it's not the only thing that appeals to me about film — is that it's a fun way to get money and power. It's not like being a suit who has to work, go in and scream at his secretary, do numbers all the time to get money and power. It can be fun and profitable.