

Allison Anders, director

Allison Anders rode the independent film wave of the 1990s with such notable titles as *Gas Food Lodging* (1992). Although still an indie filmmaker, today she devotes most of her time to directing episodes for television series that range from comedies to police procedurals. Anders discusses the many changes she has seen in the motion picture industries over the last few decades and compares the challenges directors face in film versus television.

If you had to describe your work, what do you do?

I am a couple of things. I'm a writer. I write for film and television, and personal, prose-y things, too. I also, of course, direct, both film and TV. Writing is pretty self-explanatory. You know what is involved with that, but people have very strong misconceptions about directing.

I remember directing a TV episode with a TV writer who was very involved, very controlling. I asked him, "Why don't you just direct?" He said, "Oh, no. I couldn't do that. I don't know lenses, I don't know cameras, I don't know shots." And I said, "Well, I don't any of that shit either. I don't know lenses. That's for the DP [director of photography] to know." There are some directors who know that, but that's not me, and that's not the most important part of the job. When you direct, you are making creative choices. That's what a director does. Yes, I work on setting up the camera with the DP, but otherwise, directing is decision making. It's making choices on casting, on wardrobe, on makeup. It's choosing the paint on the wall. And this writer was very capable of doing exactly that, because without

realizing it, he *was* making directorial choices. The following year, he directed the first episode of his own show.

The other thing that directing is about is setting up an atmosphere that is going to achieve what you want. Everybody is different here, but for me, I am going to try to set up an atmosphere of trust on the set, so the actors can give it all up. You want to make everybody feel safe, and then get the hell out of the way and let them do their jobs. Most directors are not like that, but the ones who mentored me are. You guide the process and make a lot of choices, but once you are on set, you've already made them and you trust the people who are heads of their departments to realize those choices. Otherwise, you'll drive yourself and everybody else insane because you're trying to do everybody's job.

On TV you have fewer decisions to make because your episode has to fit with the tone of the series and stay consistent. If I decide to put my thumbprint on something, it may affect later episodes. So you don't want too much of your thumbprint on the episodes you direct, which is unlike my own movies, where that's the whole point.

You started out as a filmmaker during the glory days of independent cinema during the 1980s and 1990s, and since that time you've navigated tremendous changes in the way movies are made, financed, and seen. Can you talk about that arc of change, and how it has affected your career?

It's been incredible. I started with *Border Radio* in 1987. Kurt Voss, Dean Lent, and I made that while we were still at UCLA film school. It was shot on 16mm, black-and-white reversal film, with equipment owned by UCLA. After years of struggling to finish it, we got two pieces of financing. We got a soundtrack deal that was about \$10,000. Ironically that would have been crap in the 1990s, but it would be considered great today, because of the way the music business has imploded. We also got some money from German TV. The incredible thing was that German TV helped finance a lot of films at that time. They financed Jim Jarmusch's movies at the same time that we were making *Border Radio*. They had a bigger hand than people realize in the American indie film movement. By the 1990s, when I did *Gas Food Lodging*, there was another important source of financing, which was Larry Estes. We couldn't have existed without this man. He had a program at RCA Columbia that was phenomenal. He green-lit *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989). He green-lit *One False Move* (1992). He was a real champion of the emerging American independent film movement before we even had such a name.

During the 1990s, we had a lot of things in place that are no longer in place. We had had critics whose opinions mattered, so if they championed your film, people went to see it. We had theaters that allowed you to play your film for a while so that you could build word of mouth. We had audiences who went to theaters to

see the movies that we were making. And we had actors who were interested in doing something different. Now all of that is pretty much gone. That kind of support system doesn't exist.

Are you saying that today people like Estes aren't in the business anymore? That indie directors no longer have one or two people who can turn the key and make everything else happen?

I don't think there is anybody like that now. There are some people who have survived all of this. Like Andrea Sperling, who produced Gregg Araki's movies and then went on to produce other young, independent filmmakers. She has managed to stay in there and continues to find financing for independent projects with great success. But these films are being made for a whole lot less than what we had back in the day. Today a film like *Gas Food Lodging* would need A-list casting attached to all the major roles, which we didn't need back then, and the director would get maybe \$500,000 to make it as opposed to \$1 million.

By comparison, how does a film get made today? Do you put together the financing and shop it around at festivals?

Well, yes, but the problem is the rights that they want in exchange for the financing that they give you. When Larry Estes green-lit our movies, all he wanted was the video rights. When HBO green-lit *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), all they wanted was the right to air it on HBO and the video. They didn't want the theatrical. They didn't want distribution rights for the entire world in perpetuity. They just wanted a slice that mattered to them, and they didn't care what we did in other distribution windows. We were on our own for that. Now, investors want everything they can get. They expect to get everything back. They also expect everybody to defer salaries and have skimpy budgets for their departments. It's really harsh. It's a harsh reality.

During the 1990s, there was just enough money to be made in the video rights that things were a little bit softer to negotiate. Likewise with the soundtracks. You could make such amazing deals on your music because in the 1990s that was a huge business. The soundtrack could actually make a lot of money. The soundtrack deal could cover the cost of rights for songs you wanted to use in your film.

When did things start to change and tighten up?

Right around the millennium, when the music business failed and people could start downloading movies. When people stopped going to the movies and stopped

buying music, we had a real problem. At the same time, magazines and newspapers started having problems, so we lost critics, too. We lost everything that was supporting the indie movement. Creatively, we also had a shift, as digital cameras became available. I was one of the first people to shoot entirely on digital and go to Sundance with *Things Behind the Sun* (2001). It was great, but there are problems with that, too. We were the last generation to shoot on film, cut on film, and screen on film. I haven't worked on film since *Sugar Town* (1999).

So career-wise, you began to turn to television. Why did that become an important or viable option?

In the 1990s there had been some talk about me doing an episode of *ER* (1994–2009). I was terrified. I didn't know what TV was, didn't know the first thing about it. In the end, it didn't happen, but it was the first time I started to have a conversation about it. Later I met with the people from *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). I was already a fan of the show, and the producers said they loved my movies, so it was exciting. They wanted to get that “Allison Anders thing” in there. But it was a little harsh, because I came to it with the experience of writing and directing my own stuff. When I direct a movie, it's 100 percent my vision. People can give input and I can listen or not, but I make every single decision. When I began to prep an episode for *Sex and the City*, all of the things that make up the “Allison Anders thing” were already decided. The cast was in place, as was the look of the show, the characters' backstories, the type of music they listen to.

All these things had been decided. I was petrified. If all of this is in place, how am I supposed to give them the Allison Anders thing? The decisions are what create that thing. So I assumed the attitude that this is not my baby—and I still feel this way about directing episodic TV. I am just the foster mother, and I am going to nurture this along for the brief time that it is in my hands. I will hopefully impart a little something of myself, my experience, and my love. Then I'm going to pass it along to the next foster home. I don't want to leave too much of myself there, but there will be a little bit. There is one scene where Sarah Jessica Parker throws a Big Mac against the wall at Mr. Big, and people say, that was definitely yours. There was a rawness to it. There's always one scene where I can say, that's mine.

What's the most important aspect of working as a director in episodic TV?

It's working with the actors, for sure. In the worst of shows, there are a bunch of producers all fighting with each other. They say, I don't like the thing the actress is doing with her mouth. Or, that scene is tedious. So they deliver notes [that suggest changes]. That's the dark side of the job. On the best shows, that doesn't hap-

pen. Nobody is breathing down your neck, but it's still somebody else's show. Your job is to work with the DP and the editor and the crew. You get your cut, but ultimately you're going to be recut by your showrunner—and that is as it should be. You're trying to keep things in character with the way you understand the series, so you don't have complete freedom. The actors can't do something totally outside of what they've done up until this point. They have to keep consistent. Generally the day before you start shooting, you have what they call a "tone meeting." You go through page by page, scene by scene, with the showrunner and sometimes with the writer, the DP, or the editor. We're all trying to get in sync with what the tone is supposed to be in each scene. If there's something special that they want or don't want, that's the time to address it. It should be pretty clear what you're supposed to be delivering based on that tone meeting. I always take those notes with me to set.

Are you doing episodic to pay the bills? It sounds so different from what you were doing before.

It started out to pay the bills and to keep myself afloat, but now the beauty is that there are a couple of shows that I've enjoyed working on, and it's become a home base. One was *Southland* (2009–13). The other has been *Murder in the First* (2014–16). It's funny that I ended up enjoying working on cop shows, because you wouldn't think that by looking at my independent film work. But I find more freedom there than anywhere else. I think the genre must play some hand in it. For example, the way they shot on *Southland* was more guerilla than I ever worked before, more guerilla than *Border Radio*. They created this show that was, in their minds, a fictional version of *Cops* (1989–ongoing), so they could just shoot out in the streets and, if people looked at the camera, that's fine. People are always looking at cops and wondering what they are doing. It was an amazing freedom. We shot in the streets a lot. We were out there with the Steadicam the whole time. There was one little monitor on a C-stand for me, and the script supervisor, and that was it. It was an interesting way to work. And you have all these great professionals working with you, especially the stunt people.

When I got the first script that I was supposed to direct for *Southland*, it had a big car chase that ends up hitting this woman. I told [showrunner] Chris Chulack that I'd never done a car chase in my life. He said, "That's okay, I'm going to teach you how to do it." It was fantastic. I know how to do that now. That's why I consider Chris my TV mentor. So I don't know how people are learning anything new if they are not directing episodic. First of all, I don't know how they are making a living. And I don't know how they are keeping their chops because the technology is changing so fast every day. TV keeps you up to date. You wouldn't know what's happening out there otherwise.

Then there is the third hat you wear, which is the TV movie hat. Can you talk about that? How do you feel about directing TV movies compared to other parts of your career?

I've done two. First, *A Crush on You* (2011), a Hallmark movie. It was made for a very low-budget company and then sold to Hallmark. It was financed by a guy I never met, but he cuts everything and does all the casting himself—it's a weird situation. I was in a bind and I needed to work. But all those decisions were done. I just went and worked with the actors and a fantastic crew. Great little cast and crew. It was a great experience. But it wasn't the greatest movie. It's probably not something I'd put in my body of work because there is virtually nothing of me in it. Then there is *Ring of Fire* (2013). It was written by Richard Friedenberg, who had been my advisor at Sundance on *Mi Vida Loca* (1993). It was a beautiful script. And it was just so—I hate to say it—in my wheelhouse. That phrase is so overused right now, but it fits in this case. The movie drew on so much that I knew intimately.

It all started because Lisa Hamilton Daly was hired at Lifetime to up their game a bit in terms of their TV movies. They wanted to bring in good directors and make prestigious work. This project came along and, thank god, they wanted me. When I went in to meet with them, I said, "Normally, I would not be so arrogant as to say I'm the right person, but I am the right person for this job. I already know about these characters because I was attached to direct a movie about them before." They were so great to not force any casting on me. They had already been in talks with Jewel to play June Carter, but even then, they asked me what I thought about the idea. They were so conscientious about the director's vision. The music supervisor went out on a limb for me so I could use Joe Henry as the producer of the early tracks. I knew he would get that authentic sound, but he had to do the music here in Los Angeles. They had a tax break in Atlanta, so it meant they wouldn't get the tax break on those tracks. But they still did it for me.

So I absolutely feel that *Ring of Fire* is part of my movie directing career. And there is some episodic directing that I would include as well. Anything I did on *Southland*, on *Murder in the First*, even *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–ongoing). Those episodes feel like me to me. If I looked at that stuff twenty years from now, I would say, that's mine.

To turn to some day-to-day issues you face as a director, let's start with productions being spread across the country, and even around the world. How does that affect your career?

I would love to always be working in L.A. It doesn't get any better, there is no question about it. You have better crews in L.A. We are set up for the greatest efficiency

in the world for movie and TV production. There is a certain fluidity to getting around, moving your trucks and setting up locations. To move. You cannot replace Los Angeles for that. And working on studio back lots makes me think it was a stroke of genius for these early filmmakers and moguls to put this shit together. It is the most efficient, glorious way to work. Not to mention the prop houses and the costume houses and so forth.

Having said that, the next place you want to go is New York, because they have efficient crews there, too, although not as efficient as Los Angeles. However, it's difficult to get around. You don't have the same kind of fluidity. Actually, I think Vancouver is more akin to L.A. in terms of moving from one location to the next. If you have to move from the stage to a location and back again, you're screwed in New York if you're inside the city. They do have good stages, though. *Sex and the City* was shot at Silver Cup in Queens. *Orange Is the New Black* is shot out in Orangeburg in this abandoned mental hospital. That was a little bit easier. But in Vancouver, you can get around easily.

Then you have the weather issues. Shooting in Toronto in the winter, what a nightmare! Your day is so short. I love working in Atlanta. Crews are getting a lot better, but I felt bad for my department heads. The crew base there isn't strong yet. But what you do get in those southern states is the most phenomenal pool of actors. Fantastic actors that you can take from Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee, the Carolinas. They all consider that local hire. That was a real gift.

And there are the tax advantages for productions, you can't deny that, but overall you don't do any better than shooting in L.A.

If you're shooting an hour-long drama outside L.A., how long are you away?

Believe it or not, three weeks total. So you're prepping five or six days, shooting six or seven days, and then you've got your three days of editing. You're done in three weeks. It's kind of beautiful.

How long are your working days?

On prep, it varies. Maybe one day you've got half a day, one day you've got a twelve-hour day. Generally the days are lighter during prep. You find that your concept meeting, your production meeting, and your tone meeting may take up a good deal of time. Casting takes time, but sometimes you do your casting online. A lot of people don't like that, but it doesn't bother me. I like to watch the actors on tape, and I like to have discussions about it through email. So that's what you're doing in prep. Then during principal photography, those are twelve-hour days, generally. If I'm over twelve hours, something is terribly wrong. There's an efficiency problem somewhere along the line. These are always five-day shoots, so you have the weekend. I've never worked

on a show where you shot six days. Then you go to editing. A lot of times the editing is done online as well. You see the cut and you give the notes. Half the time I'll go in, but if I don't have time, sending notes and looking at the cuts online is fine with me.

As a director, what are the big challenges? Do you feel like the pressures are exorbitant, or are they pretty well managed?

To be perfectly frank, I think the hardest part is never knowing what you're walking into. I'm booked for two episodes of this new show and I have no idea what is going to be in that script, but I am going to have to deliver it. I would never do a movie where I didn't read the script and care about it ahead of time. You never know if there is going to be something offensive in the script, yet you still have to direct and shoot it. In those situations, you can make certain choices, which I always do, not to be gratuitous. But you're not going to know any of that until you're already booked to go or on your way there. Granted, by that time, you've already seen the show or read previous scripts of the show.

The other big challenge is if there are too many people giving too many opinions on the set. This is a problem that arose out of the Writers Guild giving producer credit to TV writers. That means a writer can tell you how to direct the scene. They might not know anything about directing, yet they are telling you what the hell to do. It's a drag. It's especially a problem with less-experienced writers. Imagine they've been in the writers' room all year long. They are overworked in there. They are all vying for the showrunner's attention. They all want their ideas to become the script. Their work is rewritten so much that by the time they get to your set, they are so possessive about it. And then they are sitting in front of the monitors and they have no fucking idea what they are looking at.

This is a typical baby writer I'm describing. They don't know that we're not getting everything in this one take. Maybe you're just shooting part of the beat and they are suddenly flushing with panic because they're not seeing the whole thing—but that's going to be shot in the next setup. They don't know how it all fits together, and I don't have time to teach them how this all comes together in the editing room. What we're getting are pieces and it's all going to be cut together later. I can't go through that whole process with somebody who's been cooped up for a year and is finally getting to be on set. That's the worst.

Let's get to an issue that has come up in a number of our other interviews: gender dynamics. During your career, have you seen things change for better or worse? What are the gender issues that the industry needs to address?

In terms of hiring, there is no question that things are getting better now. Only three years ago I got a job because they realized, we've never hired many women

on this show. On some shows, they hadn't even thought about it. On other shows, of course it's a mandate: *Orange Is the New Black*, *Sex and the City*. I don't think there was a woman director around at the time that hadn't done an episode of *Sex and the City*.

I know of a Tumblr site called "Shit People Say to Women Directors." I look at that and think, I don't know who you're working with, but I have never encountered this stuff in my life. Very seldom have I encountered a kind of boys' club mentality where they've dismissed me because I'm a woman. It has happened a couple of times, but it was years ago with old-school guys. But these guys I work with on *Murder in the First* are feminists. An example is, one of the characters is getting ready for a date. We've never seen her dress like this before. She has on these amazing black leather hot pants, high heels, really done up. They wanted to do the sort of male gaze, tilt the camera up and down her body. I said, "Guys, I hate to use the F-word [feminist] and say this is maybe male gaze-y, but can we just do something different?" They all laughed and said they got it. Maybe I should have gotten that shot, too, but I'm glad I didn't. That's a good example of where they were all right with going with my direction.

This conforms with what we've heard in other contexts. People say that the tone is very much set by the director or whoever is in charge on set. Gender dynamics are signaled by someone at the top and then get picked up on by the crew. It can range from what you just described to a situation where there is a real macho, guy-cult atmosphere.

Right. Most women I know, you wouldn't even try to pull any of that shit with them. My generation fought too hard to get in there. Martha Coolidge and Kathryn Bigelow? Nobody is going to get by with sexist attitudes around them.

The deeper aspects are that women are still not nominated for the big prizes for directing. And historians have left women out of whole segments of film history. I remember talking to a publisher at one point and asking why there are no books about women directors. I wasn't given a satisfactory answer. There are so few books on a single woman director's body of work. Leni Riefenstahl and maybe Sofia Coppola, that's about it.

Nerdism is a big thing, too. They have this in music. Music nerds want to keep that a boys' club. They don't want to let girls into that club of music nerdism. The same with movies. For years, I always wondered, why doesn't TCM [Turner Classic Movies] ever talk about women directors? The only women they ever interview about film are actresses. They don't talk to women directors about film.

When we were talking to DGA President Paris Barclay, he told us that he has seen statistics that show many women go into film school wanting to be directors, but

very few of them leave school with the same ambition. Why does that happen? What changes?

I've thought about that as well. I think about all the women I was in film school with and how few of them ever pursued it. I also came up with a lot of women filmmakers in the American independent years of the 1990s who made one film and left. I don't think it's because we don't have the stomach for it. I don't think it's that we decide family responsibilities get in the way. I think there are fewer opportunities. Most people, men or women, don't have an appetite for restarting their career every single time they go to make a new movie. It's pretty disheartening after a while.

One problem that I do see—and I've told women this over and over again—is that you have to be ready with your next movie while making your current movie. If you go to the Sundance Film Festival and you win the top prize and the critics love your movie, but then it comes out and nobody goes to see it—it's not a genre film or they don't know how to market it—then people are less excited about you. Well, you have to get ahead of that. You should already be making the second movie before the first comes out because otherwise you're not going to build a body of work. In other words, get your financing for the second film when people are still excited. Long before you get into Sundance is the time you have to make sure you have the next film lined up, and preferably already financed. Or use your time at Sundance to get your financing.

Another issue is that the “boy wonder” mythology is really, really tough to overcome. People in the film business are always looking for the next boy wonder. They are not looking for a girl wonder. I think Lena Dunham has come the closest to being a girl wonder. But then she stopped doing movies. I hope she directs another one!

Let's talk about the Directors Guild, which represents both an elite group—above-the-line talent who play a managerial role and enjoy profit participation—as well as below-the-line folks, some of whom are fairly low level. Does that create problems?

The guild is pretty effective. It's a fairly small guild, even including ADs [assistant directors] and UPMs [unit production managers]. Some of these issues are like I mentioned with the writers on set, for example. I think that is a problem, and I wish they could address it better, but I don't know how they'd do any more than they already have done. On other issues, you do see some impact. I don't know who has been pressuring people to hire more women directors, but somebody has definitely been on people's asses about it. And believe me, I'm taking full advantage of that. I would love to see women get more involved in the guild.

Another thing I would add is, I wish high-profile actresses who love to talk about needing more women behind the camera would put their money where their mouth is. There are some good ones. Charlize Theron and Reese Witherspoon have

hired and worked with a lot of women directors. But there are some A-list women who have never worked with a woman director. Every time I hear them, I just think, yeah, it would be great, so why don't we start with you? Why don't you hire a woman? A lot of people will say that flirtation and seduction between the male director and female stars is as old as the hills. Still, there are a lot of wonderful actresses who are big girls who don't need to be seduced into doing their job.

The DGA always comes on set. There is inevitably a representative who will come on set and ask the director how it's going. An interesting issue came up recently on *Murder in the First*, and this kind of thing seems to be happening more and more: it was my episode, but we had a scene that didn't make sense for me to direct. I was busy with a crew in a different location, and so we decided it was more sensible for Jesse Bochco to direct it, but we had to ask the guild for permission to do that, and they said no. So we had to make a phone call to this guild representative and then I had to write him a letter and say, "I want to do this. I need Jesse to direct this scene because I don't have enough time in my schedule to do it. Also, that particular scene belongs more to another episode even though it is part of my episode." In the end he let us do it, but he said, "These shows are becoming so ambitious"—not like *Murder in the First*, more like *Game of Thrones* (2011–ongoing)—"and we want to make sure that you guys all have enough time in your schedules to do what these episodes are now demanding." That was interesting.

So they're worried that these very ambitious shows are concealing the amount of labor they involve by spreading it around in ways that don't conform to the conventions of the contract?

Exactly. That they are not giving us enough time to do our work. That was not the case with *Murder in the First*. The DGA rep understood that, and that's why Jesse was allowed to direct that scene. But the rep said, "We don't want to end up in the same situation as the Writers Guild, where people are team-writing TV episodes. We don't want team-directing to become the norm simply because the producers and the networks don't allot enough time to do these ambitious TV shows."

Inevitably there are situations that make sense, either because of problems with scheduling a location or scheduling an actor, or there is not enough time to shoot everything in one episode, so another director might have to direct a scene that is left over from your episode. That happens all the time. That is understood. The problem is when producers don't give you enough time to get everything done. So now this person directs a piece of your episode, then you direct a piece of somebody else's episode, and now we have this thing that is nobody's vision. So it's also an artistic integrity issue. It's about making sure that the person who has been hired to direct an episode—and is going to be given screen credit—has truly done the work.