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Profile

Rather than heading down Commonwealth Avenue toward Boston University like usual, Álvaro Congosto, 37, opens his laptop to start a Zoom meeting. Congosto, quarantining in Amsterdam, barred from America, begins the first day of remote teaching with his film students.

Before the shutdown, Congosto juggled the art of film both in the classroom and on set in his own endeavors. Congosto is set to direct his first feature film, *A Taste of Chlorine*, adapted from a graphic novel about a love story at a New York City public pool. Simultaneously, Congosto is now diving into the world of remote teaching.

Maura Smith, also a BU film professor, said that film and other artistic media are often therapeutic in times of uncertainty. Smith believes in the importance of film education and filmmaking during this time of crisis.

“Art is really what is getting people through this. In these times of darkness, it can be even more of a light than you think,” said Smith, adding that film gives people an outlet to tell their honest stories of struggle and success.

In 2009, Congosto came to BU, where he achieved his MFA in film under a Fulbright Scholarship, after studying communication sciences in Madrid. Congosto then began working as

an independent filmmaker in Boston and New York and eventually returned to BU as an instructor while making his acclaimed film, *The Suitor*.

Congosto's style as a director combines "psychological drama and magical realism," he said. The power comes from naturalistic performances and real setups with a "dreamy and whimsical" nature. For Congosto, there is "poetry behind the images, but they are not artificial."

The Suitor composer, Mateo Rodo, said that Congosto was never afraid to speak in depth about every aspect of the film, including the score. Congosto's detailed approach allowed Rodo to feel out the pace and the emotion of the film.

Congosto exemplifies "what a director should be—very interested in every single aspect of a film—not only what relates to picture and drama but more technical stuff," said Rodo. As a result, every piece of the puzzle has synergy.

To Padrick Ritch, also a former MFA student and BU film instructor, what first stood out about Congosto was his sense of "visual first, story second." He had command over stunning, dreamlike images right out of the gate. As they progressed, they strived to become "better directors of performance and better storytellers" which would ground those visuals in realism.

“When you see people that you’re close to, that you care about, that you're fans of their work, and are friends with do something, it motivates you to step up your own work,” said Ritch about working alongside Congosto.

Despite their varying situations, all of these creatives agreed that collaborative art feels nearly impossible without proper equipment and existing in the same physical space, making teaching film remotely difficult to navigate.

More than anything, is the toll that a lack of human interaction has on a creative mind. “I need some input from the real world—things that refresh my mindset,” said Rodo.

“You can only create what you’ve lived, what you know, what you’ve seen,” said Congosto.

There is a growing pull between lacking inspiration during social isolation and an opportunity to use storytelling as a therapeutic and educational tool. It is the purest way to make our voices heard.

Congosto feels that, more so than ever, his roles as an artist and teacher are critical. He must ensure that his students get the technical skills they need while also exploring film as an outlet in a time of chaos.

During this crisis, Smith has observed an increase in dedication from students. Students are using iPhones and laptops to create media and helping each other maximize class instruction within the confines of quarantine.

When he's not on a Zoom call, Congosto workshops concepts for his feature film. For Congosto, a feature-length film is a great opportunity to fully flesh out a powerful narrative and explore dynamic character arcs in more depth.

"I think—'I have more time, I can say more things'—not really. You don't say more things. You say one thing in a deeper and more powerful way," said Congosto in regards to feature films.

Congosto believes that the most important thing a storyteller can do is observe human nature. That is how you conduct research. After observing daily life while living in New York City, Congosto decided to make his protagonist a bus boy.

"They are kind of like ghosts that are filling your glass that you can't really interact with. Someone that feels invisible. That's the idea of the main character," said Congosto.

In the same vein, Congosto feels that our current crisis has revealed who is truly "essential to our society." Apart from medical workers, essential jobs include elderly care workers, trash collectors, and supermarket workers.

“All of these are jobs that, in real circumstances, are poorly paid and considered at the bottom of the pyramid, but they are essential. How come we look down at the people who are holding up the system?” said Congosto.

This crisis has shone a light on the people who truly keep society going. This sense of invisibility is something that Congosto seeks to capture with his exploration of the characters in his feature film.

What filmmaking is really about is “bringing different voices and guiding them to tell the same story,” said Congosto. “Everyone feels that they are bringing their own voice to serve a bigger purpose. That is when being in this world becomes meaningful.”

Sources:

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