

MM

# MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN

A CAREER IN PORN LEADS TO *FINDING BLISS*



LEELEE SOBIESKI CHANNELS MOVIEMAKER JULIE DAVIS' EARLY FILM CAREER IN *FINDING BLISS* (2010).

People are always asking me, “How did you break into the movie business?” The question always reminds me of this great article written by John Sayles, which I read back in college when I myself was desperately pondering how I’d ever “make it.”

The point of the article was that everyone makes it in his or her own unique way; there is no blueprint to follow. For many, that’s completely overwhelming. However, Sayles’ point was that you have to make something happen on your own terms, using your own specific strengths.

“Make something happen” meant it was up to me, not others, to make my dream come true. Yes, it would be hard. After all, making a movie costs a lot of money, and you’d better have a great script that can be made for little money if you’re going to get actors and crew to work on the cheap. But it was possible.

And possible was all I needed.

So I moved out to Hollywood a week after graduation and tried to “make something happen.” That consisted of answering every ad in the back of *Variety* for any job that had anything to do with movies. Unfortunately, I didn’t know anyone in the business, so I couldn’t get a job as a PA, even if I worked for free. My Ivy League degree meant nothing; in fact, it was detrimental. (Only in Hollywood, right?)

**“THERE IS NO BLUEPRINT TO FOLLOW.”**

After a long year of becoming a full-time office temp and movie extra, I decided to go back to school to make some connections. I applied to the American Film Institute’s directing program. I was put on the waiting list but asked to come to their editing program instead. Anything was better than spending all day circling ads in the trades, so I spent a year at AFI, where I learned the Avid and got friendly with

my classmates and the tech support people who worked for the school. This helped me immensely, because now I had all the free equipment I needed to make some short films!

I used my actor friends as cast and classmates as crew and made my first short for less than \$100. In the process I learned how to direct actors, set up shots, fix my mistakes in the editing room, mix my own sound, make rounds on the festival circuit and ultimately book a theater to show the piece projected on a big screen for an audience. Mr. Sayles would be proud.

Now what? AFI was over and I desperately needed a paying job. A neighbor who had seen me lugging editing equipment in and out of my apartment mentioned a job opening at the Playboy Channel, where they were looking to hire an editor for their promos. Hmmm...

I went to the interview: The office was beautiful, very corporate and ultra-professional, not a naked girl in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief; after all, this was a *real* job where I could hone my craft in the editing room while saving enough money to make my first low-budget feature. It was a job I could proudly tell my parents about!

It wasn’t until I was hired and stuck in a dark editing room, surrounded by a stack of tapes with titles like *Witness for the Penetration* and *Anal Invasion*, that I realized exactly what I was going to be doing. As the first tape played I realized it wasn’t just a harmless little Playmate Centerfold video; no, it was a triple-X, hardcore porn film that I had to edit into a soft-core promo for the “classy” Playboy Channel. I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole—a very dark, seductive and morally repugnant rabbit hole.

I was sweating as the movie played, partly aroused, partly disgusted and very depressed. This was it? My dreams, hopes and ambitions to do something meaningful with my life... And here I was, watching a hunky lifeguard save a girl from drowning by giving her mouth-to-vagina resuscitation. It would’ve been funny if it weren’t so damn pathetic.

Immediately I thought of Sayles, his voice chanting in my brain. I had to make lemonade out of lemons—or at least write a screenplay about my job editing porn. And I did.

I started writing the script for what

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THE REAL-LIFE DAVIS

would become *Finding Bliss*, the story of a hopeless romantic and aspiring moviemaker who edits porn to pay the bills, all while trying to make her own indie romantic comedy.

I couldn't quite finish the script because I didn't have my plot fully developed, but in the meantime I wrote another script, *I Love You Don't Touch Me!*, and made it for exactly \$68,000. It got into Sundance and sold to Samuel Goldwyn. I had arrived!

Well, not really. I got the big agent and all the studio meetings, but I never got hired to direct.

So I wrote another spec script, *Amy's Orgasm*, and raised the financing through an audience member I met at a film festival. Still super-low-budget, I was behind the camera again, telling a story that meant something to me, and the film had a small theatrical release.

But I still wanted to tell my story of editing porn, so I went back to the original draft I had written in 1997 and started rewriting. Of course, I had to come up with a real plot, which my own life didn't exactly have, so over the course of seven years I wrote and rewrote the story, setting it up as an original series at Showtime, then writing it as a movie for Showtime, then having it die at Showtime when the network changed hands followed by a year of getting it out of turnaround at Showtime and pounding the pavement for four more years to raise independent financing to make this movie that I had been wanting to make for so long.

Before you write a script you're supposed to ask yourself, "Why am I the person to write this story? Why me and *only* me?" If you can't answer that, then you probably shouldn't write it. The longer I struggled in the film business, the less I seemed to know. But I knew that I was the one to write this particular story—I knew what it was like for a young woman to work behind the scenes in porn, something that so deeply polarizes the sexes, that evokes such strong reactions in women and, yet, is consumed by so many people all over the world. I knew I was the one to write this story because I had experienced deep and funny dramatic conflict—porn turned me on, turned me off, turned me inside out and upside down.

After all the years that had gone by, all the rejections of this particular story, all the false starts, all the interested investors who seemed to drop off the face of the earth the day after promising to finance the film—I felt like god was telling me not to make this movie. But I don't really believe in a higher power. I believe in John Sayles and those magic words that had served me so well: *Make something happen*.

So I took the only offer available to me: Shoot the film (which is supposed to take place in the sunny San Fernando Valley mecca of porn) in the dead of winter in Spokane, Washington, where a local production company would put in goods and services and financing in exchange for the foreign rights, which triggered other financing, etc.

I never would've expected to shoot *Finding Bliss*, my Hollywood-centric porn comedy, in the worst snowstorm in Washington's history. But, hey, sometimes you just have to make something happen. Thank you, John Sayles. **MM**

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