

Switchboard – An Interview with Ambika Leigh

EDITOR’S NOTE: This interview contains spoilers, so for readers who have not yet seen the film, we encourage you to view it first here: <http://vimeo.com/18301341>.

Q/C: Your award-winning Short Film, “*Switchboard*,” is a remarkable, compelling, and entirely original film about a devastating experience that completely altered the life of a highly successful man, and a synchronistic occurrence that created a moment of gestalt, once again changing the course of his life, this time, for the better. Later in the interview we will discuss the process of how you wrote, produced, and directed the film. First, let’s explore “il viaggio” [the journey] that led you to the path of screenwriting and filmmaking.

What are some of the first forms of creativity you expressed, and at what ages did different aspects of your creativity surface and evolve?

Creative thinking has always been a natural part of everything I’ve done – whether I was engaged in an “artistic” activity or not. I’ve always been drawn to the least obvious choice, the most outside-the-box type of ideas, the most elaborate display of effort, the most radical solution to any problem.

I’ve always been a little “much” - an over-achiever I guess you could say. But specifically focused on busting through commonplace boundaries and finding the creative gem in any given ANYthing. I was, quite endearingly, voted “Most Original” in 8th grade, after serving for the year as class President. Even my campaign speeches were little works of performance art that I became known for, in high school as well.

I was always heavily involved in the arts – theater, dance, music – from a pretty young age, starting more seriously around 10. When I left high school and went off to college at the ripe ‘ole age of 16 (to the same small but creatively and intellectually-rigorous school that Joel and Ethan Coen attended, funny enough), I focused the next two years on avante-garde performance art, “happenings”, African drumming and dance, Contact Improv, Shakespeare for kids and the list goes on and on.

Q: What influences do you think expanded those instincts, desires and actions?

My family was always very supportive of whatever I wanted to do, but I also had my pulse on things, from a young age, that my family never really knew about, much less understood. I don’t even know how I got

involved in certain things myself – I just know I was extremely open to everything around me (perhaps too much at times), and sought out experiences that would take me out of the everyday realm.

I think it was a form of escape (along with drugs and all those other things you do to “find yourself”), but it just happened to have a very positive effect on my life. My creative impulses and desire to be “different” extended to all areas of my life – it was definitely something I was “known for”.

I not only became vegetarian on my own at age 11, but have been heavily involved in a variety of spiritual practices since I was young - starting with regular yoga and meditation when I was 13. My mom used to drop me off at the Y a couple times a week, where I would practice with a bunch of middle-aged New-Age types. There was no trendy “yoga scene” back then – and I think my family still scratches their heads at how I even heard about it.

Ritual, specifically, has always been a form of creative expression for me – I remember spending a lot of time on the grassy side of my apartment building burning things in a make-shift “fire pit”, making up Native American-type rituals and stirring something inside me that to this day, thankfully, remains strongly alive.

Q: When did it first occur to you that you had a burning desire to be a filmmaker, and what was the path that you believe guided you to that realization?

This is a question I always feel fuzzy about – almost rebellious towards. I don’t know when it first occurred to me – I’d love to say it was always there, but I feel like that’s sort of cliché.

I know the desire to CREATE has always been there, and I was raised in front of the TV, and movies were an enormous part of my life growing up. We used to do these “Movie Marathons” on the weekends where we’d go to the local mom n’ pop video store - there WAS nothing else back then - rent a VCR player and 10 movies at a time and just cuddle and watch them straight for 2 days.

I have always been seduced by the magic of movies, but I’ve never been one of those “film buffs” – who knows everything ever made and by whom and when, quoting lines and whatnot. I am horrible with trivia and I just don’t retain a lot of random information, so I think I approach filmmaking from a totally different mindset. Almost inversely - I didn’t decide I wanted to make movies strictly because I love movies (which seems true for a lot of people I have met, particularly in film school), but that I love movies because I love the whole idea of making them. If that makes any sense.

When special features started appearing on DVDs – I became a total junkie. That was definitely influential – it was like heroin to me – to see how things were done and the kind of culture and what goes on behind-the-scenes. I was a sponge for anything like that. And there was just a very strong sense of *belonging* that I felt, even just watching a film set in action from the comfort of my home. It just felt like “home” to me, as if it were already programmed in to my DNA.

Q: What was your professional work experience prior to becoming a filmmaker?

Oh Lord – how far back should I go? I have one of those extremely varied resumes that more resembles a list of options at Career Day (in some cases of things NOT to do) than any cohesive attempt to build a career in any one thing.

I didn't feel like I really became a “filmmaker” (if I'm even that yet) until I went back to school to study directing. So, for the 3+ years in LA before that, I had been working up and down the production chain – from PA to producer – as a freelance editor and videographer, development executive, commercial actor and in varying capacities, helping to build and operate small media companies.

Prior to moving to LA, I was in Boulder for 6 years, where I had started working in production, but I mainly worked as an Event Producer, primarily for the arts (concerts, fundraisers, festivals like the Boulder International Fringe Festival, etc). I've always been the “Jackie” of all trades, and of course, the master of none – but everything I've done culminates in the desire and, I hope, the ability to make it as a filmmaker.

The first big set I worked on was also a huge spark for me – it was 2005 and they brought the Columbia Pictures film “Catch & Release” (with Jennifer Garner, Kevin Smith, Tim Olyphant and Juliette Lewis) to shoot in Boulder. I had the phone number of the Production Manager (a cousin of a friend, as I recall) and basically just called her and begged for a job on the set. I ended up working for 2 weeks as an Extras Casting Associate, which is basically as low as you can get on the totem pole. But I was in HEAVEN, and actually got to be on set wrangling hundreds of extras during filming, while being within 10 feet of the principle actors performing. It was also very inspiring to see Writer/Director Susannah Grant do her thing. There are so few female directors out there that I think it's meaningful that the first Hollywood film I was exposed to had one. (Wow, “had one”. That sounds horrible, doesn't it??).

Around the same time, I started to do more on-camera acting work, and for the next several years I would take every opportunity that I was on set to get to know the crew – what their job was and what equipment

they were using. I never went back to my “trailer”, but soaked up as much as I could about how everything and everyone was working together to make this magic happen. I learned a ton that way.

Q: Which aspects of filmmaking were you initially drawn to, and which aspects of filmmaking do you find most compelling at present?

Not to be overbearing, but – all of them. Literally. Well, with one exception – I’m not a huge fan of lighting. I understand its importance, obviously, but my brain just doesn’t have a firm grasp of it creatively.

I’m pretty sure people don’t fully believe me when I say I like to write AND direct AND produce AND edit AND do sound design AND do production design AND script supervising AND casting AND operate cameras AND I even have a secret desire to be a dolly grip! I think it was when I realized that a Director lives vicariously through these other people doing all of these roles that I decided I MUST become a Director.

But seriously – a Director needs to at least understand what everyone on their film is doing, and the more they are actually skilled at that role, the better they can articulate and communicate and (gasp!) regulate what they want. Conversely, a Director needs to know when they know nothing about a particular skill set, and leave the genius to the experts. I think it’s probably a healthy combo of the two that makes for the best final result.

Oh, and I also really *don’t* like the marketing/distribution side of filmmaking. That I definitely want to leave to the experts.

Q: Talk with us about your screenplay and film “Switchboard.” How did the idea for this original story and screenplay come about?

Actually, this has a very specific story to it. I was sitting at the Starbucks near my place in Hollywood, which is one of the “rougher” neighborhoods I’ve ever lived, trying to hammer out a small kernel of an idea that my friend had about a homeless guy having a great respect and even sentimentality for the objects he would find in the trash. I was watching this guy at a nearby table – he was clearly “crazy”, but also rather clean-cut looking. He was sitting there, pretending to sip an espresso – pinky finger and all – while carrying on a very heated and extremely articulate conversation about some business deal with...someone.

He was SO convincing in his imaginary conversation that I kept looking for his Bluetooth! I was like ‘WHO is he TALKING to??’ Then I looked across the street and saw another homeless guy talking to “someone” and I decided in that moment that these two dudes were talking to each other. Somehow they had the ability to wirelessly communicate – not like telepathy, because they were actually audibly talking – but as if they had a Bluetooth implanted in their brain somehow.

So I started to wonder if maybe there was a whole network of homeless people, that we just thought were crazy and talking to themselves, that were actually all connected via a switchboard and communicating with other homeless operatives, as I saw them, all over the city. ‘And what would these people be doing?’ I wondered.

I decided that it would make sense for them to run a Lost and Found service, being the folks who tend to go through all of our unwanted trash & discarded goods anyway. I came up with this whole underground organization, called the “UWC” – Union of Waste Collectors (also stands for Unassisted Wireless Communication). These people are genuinely happy with their choice to be seen as homeless, and they not only return lost items, but also act as angels to those who are lost. So my crazy little fantasy just developed from there.

Q: Did the story change over time throughout the process of writing, and even filming?

Oh yes. It was months of revisions. In fact, the original draft I did was actually a spy comedy. There was this big multinational corporation called Globatron trying to bring down the UWC, and though there was a character named Barry in it, the story was completely different.

Then I had dozens of people read it and discovered that no one could understand what was going on, and then realized that not even *I* knew what was going. So clearly it needed to evolve in to something more comprehensible. I had no idea where the story was going to go, but as I was writing I just let Barry’s character tell me what was supposed to happen next. I was truly shocked at what kept revealing itself. It was like I was on my own little mystery ride. I was very self-conscious about the story (I still am to some degree) but my heart kept telling me to keep moving forward and trust there was some kind of gem in it.

The story didn’t change really at all during filming. We played with certain lines and background characters and such, but I think by that point it had been read and vetted by enough people and all the prep work was done and it was just ready to be realized in its pure form.

Q: The cast of actors provides phenomenal performances, already resulting in an award for Best Actor at the 2011 Edgmar Short Film Festival. How did you cast the film?

Well my Casting Director, Joe Kibler, and I went through the traditional methods of posting on all the SAG breakdowns, holding auditions and callbacks, etc. But there were a few roles that I handpicked, most notably the character of Gwen, played by the amazing Akuyoe Graham. I knew Akuyoe personally, and was aware that she is both a theater and film actress. I hadn't seen her perform, but I knew her presence was just so powerful that she would be perfect for the role. So I asked her if she would be so kind, and she was very gracious with her time and energy.

We got very lucky in the casting process for the little girl, Brenda, as well. I think Nay Nay Kirby was the 6th or 7th girl we saw on the first day and I was like, that's it, she's Brenda. Done, done and done!

Casting for the role of Barry was the most time consuming, as I didn't want to rush or shortcut the decision in any way. The process really paid off, and I couldn't be happier with the talent, effort and love that Kevin Scott Allen put in to that character. He deserves every ounce of that crystal award he got at Edgmar! I was thrilled to see him recognized. He is truly a special actor, person and someone I am very happy to call a friend.

Q: The set design was phenomenal in its rich visual texture, immediately drawing the viewers in and inviting them to explore impeccably detailed sets where absolutely every object had a fundamental point to contribute to the story. How did you envision this, and how did you obtain and/or create each element of the sets?

The visual design of the film was always very closely related to story. In fact, I wrote the script with design at the forefront of my mind, including detailed descriptions of the type of world these people inhabited. I knew that everything around them had to come from something they found, and I decided that these were a highly creative and even refined group of individuals, who could reuse anything and turn it into something both functional and aesthetically interesting.

There was a whimsy to everything that people said reminded them of visual directors like Terry Gilliam (Brazil, Fisher King, The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet (Amelie, Delicatessen, City of Lost Children). Funny enough, at that point, besides Amelie, I hadn't seen any of their work (I am embarrassed to admit that now, but it's true). I've made it a point to since then, and I am very honored by the comparisons!

I think every detail in every frame of a film is vital to how the audience will experience the story. It's not just how you frame or light a shot, but the combination of all the colors, architecture, lines, objects and where they are placed in relation to your characters that add up to the sum of its meaning. I am very symbolic and detailed that way.

As for how it all came together – I started designing and prepping those aspects of the film months before shooting. I rented a storage unit and for 3 months prior to filming, would go out with my Production Designer, or whoever would agree to join me, and scavenge the streets for “junk”. Because I lived in a neighborhood with lots of other people's junk lying around, this proved to be very easy and we never had to go very far. We also got things like boxes of old VHS tapes and CDs off of Craigslist, for free, and asked crew and friends to bring in whatever old junk they didn't need.

About a month before filming, I started inviting people to come twice a week to the sound stage, where they graciously allowed us to bring all of our collected junk. We'd have a sort of art party where I encouraged people to make cool, functional art from anything they saw in the massive pile in front of them. There were some specific things in mind we wanted to make – like the plastic bottle chair, for instance, but otherwise whatever was made was based on whatever we had found. Just like I imagined the folks at the UWC would do themselves.

I also realized early on that if we could partner with someone who really was an artist that used found objects, we could get them to donate some of their art to include in the film as well. We found some amazing artists, and in the end I was thrilled to partner with Aaron Kramer from Santa Monica who was very supportive and lent us over dozens of pieces of gorgeous art, furniture (like the cork chair) and jewelry – all made by him from found and recycled objects. I was so honored to include him and his work in this project.

There are so many things to say on this subject – bottom line is an enormous amount of energy went in to the Production Design, and sometimes I regret not showing it off more in the actual film. There are things that either never made it on camera, or didn't make it in the edit, that were very cool or that one of us worked very hard on. But, in the end, it's about the story, and while I was editing, I had to get somewhat ruthless as to what served the story or not.

Q. The locations provided the perfect vehicles for each scene, seamlessly propelling the story forward. How did you discover these locations, and what was your thought process

regarding which elements of each location were critical to visually convey messages in the story?

I feel like I got very lucky with finding and securing locations, even though there also ended up being various complications in the end, everywhere we went.

I had done a little filming at Pershing Square Park in downtown LA and I just knew that's where I wanted to film *Switchboard*. The colors, the architecture, the layout of the fountain with the trash cans around it – everything about it. It's a true urban park that combines the grit of reality with the reality of beauty so well. I didn't even really look anywhere else, until about 5 days before shooting started they suddenly pulled the plug on our permit (that had been totally confirmed for weeks prior) because of some conflict with putting up Christmas decorations.

I did have one backup park, but in the end it was way out of our budget to film there, so I just begged and begged Pershing to let us shoot. The woman finally had compassion on me (I literally broke down in tears at one point), and we worked out a compromise. In the end I'm glad I didn't give up because those damn decorations weren't put up there anyway!

Other than the park, most everything was shot on interior sets that we needed to build. So I found a sound stage (it was more of a warehouse really) within my budget where we could build 3 sets on 2 different floors for 5 days, shoot for 2 and tear down for 1. It was like our little home away from home that week, and I have very fond memories of feeling like a family while we wielded all this junk in to a useable set. In the end, the stage resented us for all the junk we brought in their place (even though they were excited by the idea to begin with), and though we cleaned up perfectly and offered to remove all the trash ourselves, they charged me an arm and a leg to remove it themselves. They turned out to be quite nasty to us actually, which bummed me out. But at least the film was already "in the can"!

The other location I needed was the exterior of the UWC headquarters, and it so happened that the perfect spot for that was right next to the sound stage, and they got us permission to use it. So we ended up only having two actual locations where we needed to shoot – 2 days in Pershing Square, and 2 days at the sound stage. It really simplified a lot of logistics and brought costs down, and I couldn't be more thrilled with how perfect the locations were for the story.

Q: As gratifying as filmmaking can be, it is also notorious for being fraught with challenges. Have you become acquainted with challenges in the process? If so, what were some of the hurdles in the stepphase event of producing the film?

During our first shot at the sound stage, where Barry and Gwen enter the reception area of the UWC, we had all these pieces of scrap fabric that hung in the doorway – kind of like a bead curtain. Well, the fire marshal showed up, and determined that the cloth was not fire retardant. So we had to tear that part of the set down and redo it (with the plastic strips that are now in the film), which all in all cost us probably a good hour of filming that morning.

I still don't know why, but the marshal approved all the OTHER fabric that was on the set (there was quite a bit – we had tons of free fabric at our disposal and I even had a specific Fabric Designer known for his creative draping of sets come in and handle this aspect of the build). I think the marshal realized we would basically have to tear down the whole set and redo it in order to be fully legitimate. I still thank that man in my prayers every night.

Another, much more significant challenge arose during the beginning stages of editing when I discovered some footage was irreparably corrupt. I tried for weeks to “resuscitate” it, but as the deadline to deliver the film drew closer I knew I needed to cut my losses and reshoot the footage. Fortunately, all the lost footage was from one scene, and it happened to be the most important scene in the movie (the one in the little girl's room).

So I took the opportunity to rewrite the scene and redesign the set – both of which ended up being infinitely better than the original. There are things I added that I can't believe weren't there to begin with (like the approach to the doorway that says “Authorized Personnel Only”, and Barry looking around at the different objects in the room). I would never have reshot that scene, but I was forced to and it really, truly was a blessing. I don't think the movie would be what it is without having that second chance that I didn't even know I needed!

Q: After rather extensive experiences in production, you opted to go to film school. What motivated that decision, where did you go, and has it helped propel you further in your objectives?

Well, I'm not sure I would say “extensive”, but yes I definitely had considerable more experience than any one I met at the school I went to – which was The Los Angeles Film School.

I remember a number of people were really discouraging me from going, assuming that because I was already working in the industry that it would be easy enough to just go start making movies. In theory, yes, that is true, but it wasn't working for me.

I kept letting working on other people's projects and lack of money get in the way. I realized that if I ever wanted to see if I could really be a director (or a good one anyway), that it would be ideal to take time off completely from work and just devote myself whole-heartedly to it.

Fortunately, I was able to make that happen (with the help of both my family and student loans), and I found this 13-month program at LAFS that seemed right for me. It's certainly not a top-tier film school [with the caché of USC or NYU], and I did have my doubts, but it had the right combination of the things I was looking for – a 13 month program, super hands-on, technical, independent, and more detailed things like being able to own all the work we do there. I knew I could still get what I wanted and needed out of it. And I did. I squeezed that place dry!

It had its challenges – but the teachers and faculty really supported me there and I just put 110% in to everything I did. It was like a yearlong, structured sabbatical, and overall I really loved being able to focus on this dream every single day, all day long. In the end, I soared in my belief that I could be filmmaker. It really was an excellent launching pad for me to solidify my dreams.

Q: Are there other aspects of filmmaking that you have on your radar to work on in the future?

I just want to work on bigger sets and bigger-budget films!

Q: What do you do to maintain balance in your very busy life?

I'm always striving for more balance, as a self-proclaimed workaholic, but lately it seems more attainable, less of a struggle.

I can get very one-pointed and focused if I'm working on a project, but sometimes the best point to stop and take a breath is exactly when you believe you can't or don't have time to. You can take even just 1 minute and if your intention is strong, you can center yourself completely.

I have a daily meditation/prayer/yoga practice that I'm very dedicated to – sometimes it's only 20 minutes a day, but doing it regularly is what helps me be at peace. I've also made more of a commitment to exercise, and that feels absolutely incredible and freeing to realize, yes, I can go and do this for myself for an hour, or even two, and everything will still be there when I get back.

I'm starting to see things as less and less of an emergency all the time. I think it's part of maturing in my skill-set, and not feeling the need to overly impress and constantly over-deliver. My clients will see it when it's good n' ready! And so far, everyone has been happy, which means I can relax a bit more and trust.

Q: What situations and experiences have caused you to “contract” in your professional life in production and film? What resources did, and do you utilize, to “expand” once again?

I find it very nerve-wracking to put my mind and soul on display in creating my own original films. If it's something I've just produced, or edited for someone else, then I'm much less self-conscious about it. But there's something about sharing something “original” that has (seemingly) come from YOUR brain that is unnerving. Maybe I just think my mind is a weird place and I'm afraid others will agree.

I've just had to accept 2 basically opposing principles: that I'm not making art for other people, so I shouldn't care what they think, and at the same time I AM making art for other people, so I shouldn't care what I think. It's two sides of the same coin, and in either case I need to remove myself and all the analyzing and thinking from the situation and just let the art breathe and live and expand and trust that there is a perfection that maybe I'm not even capable of seeing.

Q: Is the experience of contraction important to the experience of expansion?

I think it shows us where we need to expand, and as our expansion evolves we feel less and less a need to contract. Getting up is always my favorite part of falling down!

Q: Is there anything else you have a burning desire to share?

I am so appreciative to have the opportunity to share all of this. I think everyone should have to answer questions like this that relate to their heart's passion. It's just a good exercise. Very fortifying. And humbling. Thank you.

Oh, and also – if anyone reading this needs something shot, directed, produced or edited, my company, On Purpose Pictures, would love to talk with you! To get in touch – for any reason, including much-

welcomed feedback on *Switchboard*, or any ideas/resources for how to get the film seen by a wider audience, please contact me at ambika.leigh@gmail.com.

C: Ambika Leigh's first commercial feature short film, "Switchboard," was in International competition at the 2011 Edgemar Short Film Festival, and was awarded "Best Actor." The jury panel included: Susan Sarandon, John Singleton, Christopher Rouse (Academy Award Winning Editor – Bourne Trilogy), Steve Bernstein (Cinematographer – Monster), Matthew Skrobalak (President of Casting – CBS), Randi Hiller (Casting Director – Iron Man 2).