**Duncan and Elena - 4:24:19, 4.35 PM.mp3**

**Sarah Riddick** [00:00:00] Hi, I'm Sarah Riddick and I'm cohosting this episode of How We Write today we have two filmmakers with us.

**Duncan Coe** [00:00:07] I'm Duncan Coe. Yeah, I'm a filmmaker and a screenwriter.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:00:14] I'm Elena Weinberg. I am a producer, director, and I produced and directed the screenplay that Duncan recently wrote.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:00:20] Along these lines I wanted to give you a moment to share with us your latest writing project, which is really taking off right now. And well-deserved, I think.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:00:29] Thank you.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:00:30] So, yeah, do you want describe your current film that's out right now?

**Duncan Coe** [00:00:33] Yeah so we just finished production on our first feature film. It's called A Room Full of Nothing. We shot it here in Austin, Texas—wrote and shot it here in Austin, Texas. It's been about a two-year endeavor from start to finish now. But we're not done. We just had our first festival screening and Beverly Hills at the end of March. And we've got more festivals on the horizon.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:00:57] Yeah. So A Room Full of Nothing is a feature-length relationship dramedy. It's about a fine artist and an actor who are married. They both kind of have a No Good Very Bad Day, like bad reviews on their stuff, and accidently will away all of humanity so they're the last two people left on earth.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:01:19] That is a heavy writing challenge.

**Duncan Coe** [00:01:21] Yeah. Yes it is. It's heavy. It's heavy because the premise is a little heavy. But I mean, we knew that we could just come off of a web series that we'd done, two seasons of a web series. Two ten-episode seasons, about a hundred minutes total. No, yeah. A hundred minutes each season. And we knew we wanted to do a feature film. We knew we didn't have a whole lot of money to make a feature film so we want to make it as simple as possible. And so the idea was: How can we make a movie with, like, one person in it? End of the world.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:01:51] Oh, brilliant!

**Duncan Coe** [00:01:51] But it's hard to make a movie with one person unless you're like Tom Hanks and you do Cast Away, which we couldn't do. So we decided—I decided my scheming process—make it a couple as the last two people on earth and how does their relationship fracture, as like everyone around them is gone. What is their relationship to nature, themselves, and all that. So that's sort of where the premise came from. How do we make a movie with as few people as possible and as little money as possible and that sort of informed the writing story? Yeah.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:02:23] Wow that's so cool. So I teach rhetoric, as you two know, and yeah, a lot of what I try to do when I teach is how people work the problem of: I have this thing I want to convey, but I have these constraints on that project, and I have this audience I want to persuade at the end of it. So you had a pretty big financial constraint that led to some really cool creative outcomes, and I did not know that going into this story. So, in my writing mind I would start with like, oh my gosh, how does that kind of problem get resolved?! Which you do not have to say in this [interview] process. But it's so interesting to know that what actually drove this was just an initial, like, "Let's just go for this" as a way to work that particular problem. Not the narrative itself, but how do we make a narrative in response to what we're facing.

**Duncan Coe** [00:03:08] Yeah, because our end goal was a movie. You know, the end goal wasn't a script. The script was a means to getting into production and getting into a festival. So it's sort of I guess it's a unique process in that regard.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:03:21] Yeah, there are different approaches to, like, screenwriting and being in the sphere of screenwriters and actors and filmmakers and stuff like that. And there are, like, the big-budget scripts that you write and you, like, submit to screenplay competitions and you get accolades on and, like, maybe eventually you make that once you have, like, gained some attention on it. And then there are scripts like this where you're like, "I'm writing this TO make it." You know?

**Sarah Riddick** [00:03:47] Yeah. And so you were rewarded for this, too, which is great. I'm glad you talked about what drove this project because it was persuasive in the end. Do you want to talk a little about the award you just got?

**Duncan Coe** [00:03:58] Sure, you want to talk about it?

**Elena Weinberg** [00:03:58] Sure. Yeah, so we premiered at Method Fest in Beverly Hills in March. So—depending on when you're listening to this—very recently or not, and we were . . . we were surprised to be up for two awards at this festival. Duncan was up for Best Screenplay, and we were up for the Maverick Award for Quality in Low-Budget Filmmaking, and we won the latter. So Duncan didn't win the screenplay award, but you know.

**Duncan Coe** [00:04:27] I lost to Edward James Olmos' son, so I consider that a win.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:04:31] We were in good company.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:04:34] Aw. So, let's back up a little bit to really, like, the arc of this project and developing it and then, even more probably, just talking about writing together. So you started with this need you had to respond to: I want to get a film out there, but I have these constraints. So, like, first you have the idea my first year of the idea that you walked up to, but that itself is this raw idea. So can you talk through a little bit of the process of developing this just from "I think this could work" to [it] ending up as a film?

**Duncan Coe** [00:05:04] Yeah, so we had we had done the web series, and we knew we wanted to do a feature film. We knew we wanted to do it cheap. As few people as possible. So I started writing. I mean, the idea of the story is that they will away everybody in the universe accidentally except for themselves. And so that sort of sets up the second and third acts of the movie. So I knew that the first bit was gonna have to—you were gonna have to show them living in the world that they hate before everything disappears. So that part was going to be more of a traditional story I guess for, like, my film story: the set-up, introducing me to the world, and everything that eventually changes in the second act.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:05:40] The inciting incident. Blah, blah, blah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:05:43] Yeah, the inciting incident. And so, I also— I sort of obsess about about format, especially in screenplays and being, like, a new screenplay writer. Making sure that I get the format. Because if you don't, you can lose people. And so I was like, very much I knew that that moment—the inciting incident was gonna be when everybody disappears. And so I knew that moment. I didn't know the end, and I didn't know the beginning. So I wrote that first. And then I went back and filled in the beginning, and that was just more of a sort of, like, traditional dark comedy, I guess was my style of writing. It was a little sardonic, a little sarcastic, I guess, because that's just my personality. And I probably wrote that first act a dozen times. Because I never liked any of it. And so there was it was a story about an architect living in Austin, and then it was a story about a barista living in Austin, and the story—it was a bunch of different stories that I just scrapped all of them.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:06:44] And then you went a little bit more personal.

**Duncan Coe** [00:06:46] Yeah, and then I was just like, "Oh, I'm just gonna write it about myself." And so that's where the main character came from.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:06:51] Yeah. You star in the film. And so, I interpret writing to be a very broad thing, as we've talked about a little together. You've got multiple types of writing here. You have scriptwriting here, you have directing—you have acting, too! You're having to write in motion and, like, how you're going to perform this character. And so, yeah I guess, could you speak a little to what it's like —even, you're given a piece of writing and as an actor you'd interpret it and deliver that writing in a certain way. I mean, I see that as its own kind of writing process and what that's like here like you're creating a character that is distinct from yourself but also is informed by you, [given] that you wrote it. Some parts, like you just said, are part of you. The sense of humor, perhaps, that drives these scenes.

**Duncan Coe** [00:07:37] Yeah, it was never the intention for me to star in the star in the movie. We had always intended to cast somebody else in it. And, as independent filmmaking does, two days before we're going to shoot that actor fell out. So two days before we started shooting, I took over. And so up until that point I had planned on, we had planned on co-directing it. We'd done all the production—pre-production—leading up to the shoot. I had written the script so I knew the role.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:08:18] And you got your degree in acting, so it wasn't like you were just, "I guess I'm gonna act now!"

**Sarah Riddick** [00:08:25] \*laughs with Weinberg\* Yeah, [to Coe] you're really underselling this here!

**Duncan Coe** [00:08:25] And when we had shown versions of the script [to] some people to get notes early on in the process, several of them had said, "Oh, so you're playing the lead character, Barry." And I was like, "Oh, no. No. I know this guy [is] basically just me, but I'm gonna step back and play the director role on this and leave the acting it to somebody else so I can focus on making sure that it's done well."

**Elena Weinberg** [00:08:58] I think that comes with . . . it's like the trifecta. Like writing, acting, and directing. And we did still co-direct the film. But, Duncan knows a lot more about, like, the technical side of things, and I know a lot more about, like, the emotional acting side of things. I also got my degree in acting. And so while Duncan worked with our director of photography, kind of mostly in pre-production and a little bit during production, on making sure, like, we were visually telling the story the way we wanted to—having me there to work with Duncan and Ivy, who had worked together before and had played across each other before, which helped, I think probably, helped you with finding that character and finding the parts that were yourself and finding the parts that were not. Because if I hadn't been there, I can only imagine how difficult it would have been, directing yourself in your first feature film. While you're like, the lead, you know what I mean?

**Duncan Coe** [00:09:56] Ben Affleck did it. Why couldn't I? \*laughs\*

**Sarah Riddick** [00:10:01] I like that you're talking about the collaborative aspects of writing and giving each other feedback in a way that's constructive, and that you have different areas of specialization and expertise, perhaps, and that you can help each other with that as the writing continues to evolve and be revised and get more polished. And so, this is for both of you in some way. First of all, actually can we back up a little bit for a moment and talk about what the timeline is for at least just this particular project, if that helps, or what it is to, like, start from the idea, to get it to a polished script, to get it to production—to just go through it all. For someone who might be interested in doing this themselves.

**Duncan Coe** [00:10:41] Yeah, so the seeds of the story started getting planted in my brain at the beginning of 2017. I wrote out some scenes and then deleted them. And wrote out some more scenes and deleted them. And then around summertime we had heard about a film-funding competition on Seed and Spark.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:11:03] Yeah, sponsored by the Duplass brothers.

**Duncan Coe** [00:11:04] Sponsored by the Duplass brothers. And we sort of knew that this was gonna be our one opportunity if we were—if we wanted to do something now, this was the best opportunity to take to get the movie funded. So that summer 2017 Elena was in L.A. producing a play for two weeks, and she said, "I'm gona be gone for two weeks. When I get back, you're gonna have a script done."

**Elena Weinberg** [00:11:27] A draft. A draft.

**Duncan Coe** [00:11:27] "We are going to use this script. You're going to use this script to raise funds through this fundraising competition." And so she left for two weeks, and I got two thirds of a script written. As you do. And then . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:11:41] I mean, I will say that's probably faster than most people.

**Duncan Coe** [00:11:45] Yeah.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:11:46] A lot of—I have friends, I was actually listening to a podcast that a friend of ours was on a few months ago who went to the same competition that we did. And she was talking about how like she finally . . . she finally filmed Draft, like, [number] 18 or something, and we filmed Draft 4.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:12:05] Wow.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:12:06] So, I mean there's good and bad things about that. I think we filmed the right draft, but, you know, there is always . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:12:13] Drafts are hard, though, because what was her Draft 18? Because there were a hundred iterations of my script. I just only ever showed it to anybody three or four times. So we showed, we filmed the fourth version that we all agreed on. And before that there was a third version. But between version 3 and version 4 there were probably ten different versions of the script that nobody ever saw. And I probably never saved.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:12:37] And you're, like, a self-editor.

**Duncan Coe** [00:12:38] Yeah, so I'll write a line and then edit it and then write two more lines and then delete and edit and then four hours later I'll have one scene. Is that a draft?

**Elena Weinberg** [00:12:47] Oh I don't know. But that's . . .

**Sarah Riddick** [00:12:49] I think so. I mean when I write, I have kind of two levels of drafts for myself. There will be the tiny, little line changes I make. But when enough time, enough minutes have passed that I have made those line changes, I'm like, "Ah, I've gotta re-title this draft. Something has happened that's more than a paragraph." But, yeah so maybe a single tweak is not. But I'm with you on [that]. I think every time you're making one of these changes you are in fact creating something new that could create an entirely different effect.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:13:16] And that kind of informs the way that we work together as well. Duncan has been a perfectionist forever, and I am in some ways, too. But like I'm of the mindset of like, "Let's just get this done and do it." Because if you don't do it, like, if you don't keep practicing, you're never gonna get better. And so when we first started—we're self-taught filmmakers—when we first started making films, we made what we now called a "12-month project," where made one short film a month for an entire yea. And we just, like, taught ourselves filmmaking. Obviously not in a perfection sort of way, but I think that that helped to . . . [\*addresses Coe\*] I mean, maybe you can tell me if this helped you or not, but Duncan works really well on deadlines that, like, somebody else sets for him. So like, I get to be that person. So during that process, I was like, "Look I don't . . . you have a week to write a short film. If it's, if it's crappy I don't care. But we're going to film it. Like, I'm gonna make sure that we film it." And so like, we did that twelve times in a year. And by the end of that year he was, like, comfortable actually making his work. Before that, like, we had never filmed anything. Like, he had done a play or two that was put on stage. But that goes away. So if that wasn't perfect, like, there's no physical evidence forever.

**Duncan Coe** [00:14:36] Yeah. My problem was—and it still is. It's not something that I've overcome. It's just something I've learned to deal with. [My problem was] I needed everything to be perfect out of the game, and if it wasn't perfect, then it went into a drawer. And so, yeah. That's just my, that's my, like, judgment brain saying, "This isn't good enough to show the world." And that's something I struggle with all the time. But then you know we go to a lot of film for indie film festivals, and I'll see a movie and I'll be like, "How did they get away with, like, that crappy shot? Or that terrible dialogue? Or bad sound?" And if Lena Dunham can get away with it in her first feature, then we can get away with it in the shorts that we're making that nobody is gonna see. And the process of just getting it done and putting it out there sort of snowballs.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:15:22] Until you're finally making work that you're proud of.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:15:25] I'm so glad you're talking about this. Because. I always try to teach writing from a place of understanding that, whether you like it or not—or even that you might not realize it yet at this point—but your ego in some ways seems to be wrapped up in this. Like, especially when you get that red, marked-up "rejection letter" it feels like from the person assessing you. Which is something you're talking about in life, right? Like, you're trying to make this community believe we should fund you; we should accept you; you're good enough to be here. And if you put the first wrong thing out there, is it all over? But I love that you found a way to just get going on it. Because that is what writing is. You just have to get going, and it's not gonna be good necessarily at first. I have my students read an article called "Shitty First Drafts" that tends to loosen them up a little bit about it. It doesn't mean you don't try [writing]. It doesn't mean [the writing] doesn't mean a lot of merit. But, a lot of people don't ever take that first step because they're afraid of rejection and not being good enough.

**Duncan Coe** [00:16:17] And we're sort of obsessed with that Ira Glass quote, which I'm sure you maybe have shared with your students, where he talks about nobody's first draft is good. All of the writers he knows that he's in circles with who are on New York Times bestseller list—their stuff isn't good. Their taste is good, and they know what good looks like. They're just not at the point where it's good yet.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:16:37] But at some point your taste will . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:16:40] . . . catch up with your skills.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:16:40] Or your skill will catch up with your taste, and you will finally make things that align with your taste.

**Duncan Coe** [00:16:47] Yeah, and that you're happy with . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:16:49] . . . if you just keep going.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:16:50] I love that.

**Duncan Coe** [00:16:51] Timeline, though. So, so [I] wrote it that summer.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:16:54] Oh yeah, I brought up the deadline thing because that contest was like a, "Okay Duncan. Like, we have to do this. So like write this so that we can do this."

**Duncan Coe** [00:17:03] Because we knew that in September we needed to be raising funds for the movie, and we had to have something to raise funds for. We couldn't raise funds for an idea.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:17:10] Some people did. Some people in the competition did, like, write for, raise money for pre-production but we weren't. That's not what we wanted to do. We wanted to make a movie.

**Duncan Coe** [00:17:19] So we wrote. We raised the money that September and then February 2018 we shot it.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:17:25] January - February.

**Duncan Coe** [00:17:26] January - February 2018. Shot it, spent the next eight months editing it, and it got done . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:17:32] literally, like, a week before that festival.

**Duncan Coe** [00:17:34] Yeah. So I finished, I finished editing it in February 2019, and then we got it all processed to be at the festival in March. So, almost two years.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:17:50] Well, a year and a half.

**Duncan Coe** [00:17:50] Yeah.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:17:51] Started in July of 2017. Wrapped up in February 2019.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:17:57] And so part of that is the [process of] getting the script ready to start filming, right? And then there's the part—I'm thinking writing, maybe more so revision—when you're actually filming and what you were just talking about together with having . . . collaborating a bit on how to make adjustments or perhaps, Elena, like helping him on the acting front and the way that you see things. And, so if we could talk a little bit about how you see the writing process going through filming and also in—what is it? Post-production is that it? \*Laughs\*.

**Duncan Coe** [00:18:31] Yeah, editing the movie.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:18:32] Yeah! So, a lot of people might not be familiar with really what's happening during that time. You know people, we hear "on set," but we don't know what's going on "on set". We don't know what's going on on those computers afterwards when you have all the material.

**Duncan Coe** [00:18:44] Well, set might seem like this really . . .really great idea to some people. Like, "Oh being on The Avengers set must be really awesome," seeing all these people work in the most refined craft. Or you know seeing, like, Tarantino do his work. But set is a lot of waiting around. It's a lot of sitting there while the camera's setting up, lighting guys are setting up. It's hurry up and wait. So you'll be filming for sixty seconds, and then for thirty minutes you're setting up for the next shot.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:19:12] But I think storytelling-wise I was so grateful to have you and Charlie there. Like, I don't feel like I could have directed this alone, even if it was like my script that, like, I physically wrote because it's such like . . . filmmaking is such a visual medium that like you don't have without the words that you put on the page. But like, there are definitely things that are, like, descriptive in the script that, like, we've filmed that I'll be, like, "Oh, in the script that [part] says 'Phyllis is painting a piece of art that looks like the water that Barry jumped in earlier.'" And like, I know that that's what that painting was supposed to be, but, like, I don't know if we told that story in that moment. And for me that's, like, just because it was our first film, and we couldn't do everything perfect. But then there are other things where, like, we spent a long time in pre-production talking to our director of photography Charlie—who went to UT—about, like, the size of the shots that we wanted and, like, what aspect ratio we wanted to film in. And like, Duncan was really obsessed with this—I mean, again, I don't know the technical stuff— \*Coe laughs\* maybe it was something like on an 85, super shallow blah blah blah . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:20:31] Yeah, 'cause storytelling in film is very technical, too, so you have to, you have to know what lenses you're using, what frame you're setting the actors in—because that informs the information that you're giving the audience. And so you have to consider that as telling the story because, I mean, simply changing the lighting from cool to warm can change the entire atmosphere of the scene.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:20:55] But yeah, so there's this like one style of not that we were talking to Charlie about in pre-production and throughout production, and it was like what we are calling "The Handmaid's Tale Shot." So like, if you imagine, like, any of the promos—like, even if you've never seen the show, you can imagine any of the promos of Elisabeth Moss, like, sitting there. And it's like a wide-angle, super close-up on her face, like, almost warped, and it gives this, like, sense of like, you're like inside her head, like, as she's breaking down. And there were times when it was like we would say, like, "We want it to feel like that." And that was something that again—because I have very little technical knowledge—I would go to Charlie during production and Duncan and be like, "I want the scene to feel like this." And they could say, "OK that means we want to shoot it on an 85." And like, "We should probably put it in this area of the room because, like, the depth of field will inform that." Blah blah blah. And it's just, like, a really interesting way of telling a story.

**Duncan Coe** [00:21:57] And I think there's—there may be a misconception that I have to be super original in film but everybody steals from everybody. And all the conversations we had in pre-production about what we wanted it to look like was, "I really love this shot in this movie. And I think that will be perfect for this. So let's try to do something like that." So it would be like, "I really love this shot in Moonlight where they're spinning around the character, and the mother's voice is sort of, like, detached from our body, and it does this really cool effect. I want to emulate that in this scene.".

**Elena Weinberg** [00:22:25] And then we kind of used that in, like, Phyllis' breakdown scene in the backyard.

**Duncan Coe** [00:22:29] Yeah, so. Steal from the best.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:22:32] When you're filming, how much of the process is—I imagine a lot—how much of the process is these kinds of moments of saying, "Now that we see it in practice, we're not creating the effect we want. How can we adjust it?" Like, what you're describing, 'cause that I think is important revision work.

**Duncan Coe** [00:22:49] Oh, that's every—that's every set-up. You'll do the first take, and then you turn to everybody and go, "What worked? What didn't work?" So, "Camera, what worked? What didn't work? How can we adjust?" "Actors, what worked? What didn't work? How can we adjust?" "Art Department, what's working? What's not working?" So . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:23:07] "Director, are you getting the feeling the that you want?"

**Duncan Coe** [00:23:08] Yeah. So the first take is always . . . the first take is for the actors. The second take is for everybody else.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:23:16] Totally. Well, and there's also, like . . . we took a very organic approach to production where, like, we—probably to our detriment—didn't shot-list anything. So we came in with a schedule, but we didn't, like . . . a lot of people, a lot of smart people \*laughs\* will come in and have a list of like, "Okay, this is the scene we're doing today. I want to shoot a big dumb wide, mediums, and close-ups. So our shot list for this scene is seven shots long. We're probably also gonna need an insert of that book." And like, \*laughs\* we just didn't do any of that. We just went in every day of being like, "Okay, where are we in the space?" "Where do we, like . . . how does this feel?" And, "Let's figure out how to put those building blocks together in the moment." Which I think, for us, was a great choice because it, I think the movie feels really organic and messy in ways that it should feel messy. Because it's about like, "What is art without an audience? and "How do you survive in society without society?" You know, and stuff like that. And we play with different mediums, like black and white and animation and in traditional filming and stuff like that. So that worked for us, but I don't know that I would necessarily, like, advise a new filmmaker to go into a shoot with no shot list. \*laughs\*.

**Duncan Coe** [00:24:35] Well, and it's sort of going back to the original premise is that we knew we needed to make a money for . . . make a movie with as little money as possible. And that sort of informs the way you shoot, too, because we couldn't afford huge, elaborate set-ups that needed to be this cinema verité style that's really sort of run-and-gun and organic. And that, that informed the story, too, because—you know, not to give too much away—there's a lot of it set in nature. And that sort of helps you just push that narrative along in that milieu.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:25:06] Yeah, and like, Charlie did a really smart thing. He suggested a really smart thing that we ended up adopting, [which] was like: while their world was stable, everything was on sticks, and everything was really still and . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:25:20] . . . sort of static . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:25:19] . . . static and then as, like, they start breaking down, it starts going handheld and . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:25:27] . . . and less clean—intentionally less clean. Shots weren't framed perfectly, and that you, as an audience member you may not know the technical language of why something doesn't feel right but you know it doesn't feel right. And so we intentionally made things not feel right so that the audience would also get a little disjointed at the same time. And so that was definitely an intentional choice. And also it just made it cheaper to shoot. \*laughs\*

**Elena Weinberg** [00:25:51] Yeah, it's like we didn't— we didn't have to rent a dolly because there were no dolly shots, you know.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:25:57] I love that. It just, it reminds me so much of something I try to convey to my students where I teach them, we teach them these basic rhetorical concepts: ethos, logos, pathos. Part of its like a sense of trust and credibility of the speaker; [that's] ethos. Part of it's logical appeals—logos—and the other part's, like, giving audience reasons to feel something. And a lot of times I think students are used to, "I have to use these words. I have to actually convey explicitly this [word]." And I say to them, "No no no. Because by the end of it I should understand that you understand it, and maybe your audience is experiencing those things," and that's what you're describing here, right? Like it . . . there's no text on the screen that says, "And now we are gonna get shaky." \*laughs\* But they feel that by the end and why that mattered.

**Duncan Coe** [00:26:44] \*laughs\* There's no point, there's no subtitle on it that goes, "This is catharsis. You should have an emotional reaction to this." No. \*laughs\*

**Sarah Riddick** [00:26:54] And so, something else that you were talking about that I just love. I mean, not only do you have, what, you had the four big, polished drafts by the time you start shooting. But then it sounds like every take becomes a draft that gets torn up a bit. And . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:27:05] Mmhmm.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:27:05] Well, and there's the whole . . . In film-making there's, there's the—I don't know who coined this or where it came from—but there's three stories. There's the writer story, the director story, and the editor story. The story that we as audience members see . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:27:17] \*laughs\* Duncan was just all three of those people.

**Duncan Coe** [00:27:21] And there's— \*to Weinberg\* and they are three different stories, too.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:27:23] No, totally! Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:27:24] And the story that we end up seeing as audience members is the editor's story that's informed by the director's vision, which comes from the words that they were given by the writer. So yeah, there's, it's always changing and the other stuff . . . There's scenes that we cut while we were shooting. We would be like, "You know, we've got this scene that we're supposed to shoot today but we're, you know, we're in a crunch for time. We actually really need to shoot this other scene, which is more important. Can we cut it? And will that . . . will we be losing things in the story if we just don't shoot them making their coffee in the morning?" or whatever it is.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:28:00] And that's something that's really helpful. Having your writer on set. I mean not every movie is going to star the writer. In indie filmmaking it is a lot of times like a writer-director situation. So the writer is gonna be there but, like, as you move up in the world and as you're, like, working on different projects and stuff like that it's not always the case that the writer is directing the work.

**Duncan Coe** [00:28:25] It's also not always the case that the writer is even present during filming.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:28:28] Right, exactly. And it is helpful because I could turn to Duncan and say, "Hey, like, at the end of the day, like, your name is on the script. How do you feel about cutting the scene?" \* to Coe\* You know.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:28:42] So, once you've filmed, it's wrapped, as you say. Do you say "Wrapped!" at the end of filming? Yeah? Okay.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:28:47] Yeah, "That's a wrap!".

**Sarah Riddick** [00:28:48] I'm learning so much through you.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:28:49] "Time for a martini!".

**Sarah Riddick** [00:28:49] Now you have to process this, which again is revision, right? You're still writing the thing, you're putting it together, you're synthesizing all your material, and I'm guessing you have to make still some creative choices to [go] to where you wanna go.

**Duncan Coe** [00:29:03] Yeah. The best advice I ever got about editing and shooting is that you shoot so you have something to edit. What you're doing on set is getting as much footage as possible so that when you get in the editing room you have a story to put together. And so then, yeah—you start over from the beginning.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:29:24] So again, timeline-wise, how long did you shoot? Yeah. How long do you shoot—if I'm okay with asking that . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:29:29] Yeah.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:29:29] . . . and how long does it take—or even just ballpark in general—to edit something once you have the material?

**Elena Weinberg** [00:29:35] So we planned a fifteen-day shoot. We had some major weather issues at the beginning of the shoot and had to add two days. So the initial shoot was a seventeen-day shoot, and then we did some pick-ups a few months later, after Duncan had assembled the first. He—\*to Coe\* what had you done—like, two or three edits before we did pickups?

**Duncan Coe** [00:29:55] Yeah, yeah. So, yeah, we shot the first seventeen days in January - February, and then I spent about two months just putting together a real rough and dirty version of the movie . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:30:08] . . . that our creator gave notes on.

**Duncan Coe** [00:30:10] A lot of like placeholders for stuff that you know would be like, "I really think we need the shot here." Placeholder. Or, none of the sound was mixed at all. It would look amateurish to incredible degree if we showed that anybody today.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:30:25] Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:30:25] And then we sort of got together and are like, "OK, this is the stuff we need to— we have to fill in these gaps," and then we spent \*to Weinberg\* four days?

**Elena Weinberg** [00:30:35] Well yeah, it was like four or five days but not like full [days]. So full production . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:30:37] It wasn't consecutive, it's . . . . Nothing, none of this happens in, like, a chunk. It happens . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:30:42] Well, production did. Production was seventeen days in a month period. Pick-ups was, like . . . So like, on set—production-wise—a typical day is a twelve-hour day. So when you say like, "Oh, we're doing seventeen days," that's like seventeen twelve-hour days. During pick-ups, it was like, "Okay well, we have to, like, pick up all these different random things so it's gonna be like five days this week. But like two hours [per day].".

**Duncan Coe** [00:31:07] Well, yeah, it's like, "We gotta go downtown Sunday morning at 6:00 a.m. and shoot for two hours and that's all we're gonna do that day.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:31:13] So it sounds like a lot of pick-ups but, like, really it was just like a lot of things had to happen at the same time in the morning so we had to do it multiple days. And then you, we did that right before . . . In August of 2018 we did a works-in-progress screening with Austin Film Society that we showed to members of the film society to give us notes on. That was like our—that was our last cut before the final cut. So that was, like, between March and August was the initial part of editing, and then Duncan spent between August and February of doing the final cut and getting it back to our DP to color it and hiring a sound guy to . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:31:54] . . . do the mix.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:31:54] . . . mix the sound and.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:31:55] \*in unision with Coe\* hiring a composer. \*Weinberg only\* Which is a completely other form of writing.

**Duncan Coe** [00:32:01] Haven't even talked about that!

**Sarah Riddick** [00:32:02] Yeah!

**Duncan Coe** [00:32:02] Because they inform the emotional beats.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:32:04] Yeah, in a way that we just can't . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:32:06] . . . that you can't do from not having music. So.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:32:09] Yeah, I'm so glad you brought that up because I was just about to take us there because the first thing you think of when you think of a writing discussion when it comes to a film is the lines being said. But it's just not that. It's how long is a scene shown to you. It's also how it was—like, as you've been describing a bit—how was the camera placed. Like, what are you actually seeing? At what angle? What effect is that creating? [What about] the sound behind it? So yeah, if you could talk in any way that feels right to what experience is like, of making those moves. Even just tiny, split-second decisions that affect what we're seeing or hearing.

**Duncan Coe** [00:32:42] Yeah, I mean one of my favorite shots from the movie is there's a scene right after right at the beginning of the second act. And when I say a "second act" in film, I'm talking about three-act structure. The second act is right after the inciting incident. So, the world has changed for the protagonists, and they have to sort of pursue a new goal, pursue a new path to reach their adjusted goals. And [in A Room Full of Nothing] Phyllis thinks that her husband Barry has disappeared. And so she starts having a little bit of a freak-out. And she comes out of the bathroom, and she's in her empty house. The camera is behind her, and she's looking at her empty house. And I just love the way that our DP has framed [it]. You're looking at the back of her head, so you can't see her emotion. But as soon as she turns her face, and you can see her eyes—\*jokingly\* which are the windows to the soul or whatever you want to quote from Shakespeare or whoever it was. Right? He said it. As soon as you see her face, and the desperation on her face, you understand the intensity of the situation for her and for who it is for that character. Not just the story.

[00:33:57] This shot, by the way, is the "Handmaid's Tale shot" that he's describing that we talked about in pre-production.

[00:34:02] And so she's . . . you're looking at the back of her head, and she's looking to the right, and then she . . . it's a simple head turn from the right to the left. But the camera isn't following her face through the front. And so for moments you can't see her. I don't know, I just . . . I felt, I felt like that really gave a sense of, like, dread and uncertainty and . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:34:22] Yeah, the framing and choices inform the emotion. And there's no lines.

**Duncan Coe** [00:34:24] And we did it several different ways, too. We may have done six takes of that. And not every single one of them was framed the same way. And not every single one of them was timed the same. And her emotional delivery wasn't the same in every single one of them. But that's what you do. You sit there and you say, "Okay, this take: we, we weren't getting a sense of, like, eeriness that we really need for the scene. What can we do to get that? Because we know that that's what the scene is about. It's about her loneliness. It's about her fear of being by herself. And, and her connection to him. How can we get that? We'll do another take." And you'll be like, "Nope, that's not quite it." And you'll do another take, and you'll just keep making micro-adjustments from take to take to take. And you do that a hundred times a day.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:35:09] And then when you get into the editing room you watch all ten of those takes and within, like, the timeline of what you've already edited you pick, like, "Is this really the right one? Or do we go back to one of the earlier ones?" And the editor makes that choice. So in that way, like, it really is the editor's story.

**Duncan Coe** [00:35:25] Yeah. And in editing, too, there's scenes in the very first version of the edited film where I had one take on a scene. And then, we felt like it wasn't working so we put a different one in, and it's like, "Oh yes. That works perfectly. That's—that's what we wanted to see!" And then we'll do another version of the edit version, too, that still works perfectly. But we've changed something else in another scene. And then Version 3: we change that. And now this one isn't working so you go back to the original takes. So, it's just cutting stuff in and out the entire time until in the end you've seen the movie a hundred times, and it works.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:36:03] I mean, and speaking to of, like, the writing process in editing—like, literally, you're writing the physical script still as you're editing. The cut between the Austin Film Society cut that we showed and our final version is a twenty-minute difference. We went into that screening knowing that we wanted to cut twenty minutes but didn't, like, we were, we felt . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:36:26] "There's nothing we can cut.".

**Elena Weinberg** [00:36:27] Yeah, we felt so close to it that we were like, "We don't . . . There's nothing we can cut. \*jokingly\* This is just gonna be a long-ass movie. I mean, people are gonna fall asleep. It's fine.".

**Sarah Riddick** [00:36:34] \*laughs with Coe\*

**Elena Weinberg** [00:36:34] But then after that screening, we got notes back from people. And something that the team—I'm just gonna, like, toot my own horn on this one a little bit—but something that my team said that I was really good at was going in and watching the movie and finding like one to three lines in a scene to cut that previously it was, like, "Oh, well this is like a two-page scene. So this is just going to be a long, two-minute scene." But I'd go in and be like, "What if we cut, like, Barry saying this than Phyllis saying this?" So we actually cut from like, "Hi, how are you?" to "Here's a cup of coffee." I don't know. Not the lines, obviously, but you know, like, when you're thinking about what we—what Duncan wrote—and then what we filmed, like, your reaction is to be like, "Well, those are the lines that we have to put in this movie. That's the whole scene.".

**Duncan Coe** [00:37:21] Because it's what's on the page.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:37:23] Yeah. "That's the whole scene." Like, "We have to put the whole thing in there. There's no way that this conversation could work any other way." But then, you think about like, "Oh, well, we actually, like, talk in circles in this scene a little bit. And if we took out these three lines, and we go straight from"—I don't know, one of the scenes was that when we're . . . when y'all are by the creek. The "When did you get some morbid?" scene.

**Duncan Coe** [00:37:49] Yeah.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:37:49] I'm trying to think of what the line is before that. But, you know, there was like three or four lines, and then Phyllis says, "When did you get so morbid?" But it was like, "Well, what if we just take those three lines out, and we go straight from whatever Barry said to 'when did you get so morbid'"?

**Duncan Coe** [00:38:02] And that's where the scene starts. And so that's where the scene should start, you know? You don't need. You don't need the "Hi, my name is Barry. Hello, I'm Phyllis."

**Sarah Riddick** [00:38:10] \*laughs\*.

**Duncan Coe** [00:38:10] "Now we've met each other, and we can start the scene." No. The scene starts—at least, my personal style and preferences—the scene starts in the middle of the conversation.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:38:19] So that to be said you're gonna always . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:38:22] And you don't always realize that when you're writing it or when you're shooting it even . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:38:25] Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:38:25] . . . and not until you get into the editing room and you're like, "Well, there's a good 45 seconds here where nothing's happening.".

**Elena Weinberg** [00:38:30] Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:38:31] "And the audience gets the relationship by what you're showing them and not what you're saying.".

**Elena Weinberg** [00:38:36] All that to be said, you're—at least, we were—still editing the script in the editing room.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:38:45] And still taking on feedback and collaborating with people, which is just great. I mean, that's what this all is. It's not gonna be perfect, but it's all useful. Like, those lines that you cut got you to where you needed to go. They gave you so much of a foundation that you could cut, like you were saying. So all of it's worthwhile; it just not—it might not show up at that point.

**Duncan Coe** [00:39:01] And I hated when I was in school—I got my degree in rhetoric from [St. Edward's University]—I hated sharing stuff with . . . I didn't like getting notes from my fellow students. I thought they were \*jokingly\* all dumb and they didn't understand and they didn't get me and my vision and my art. And I . . . every single time I got notes back from someone else, it's like, "I'm just gonna throw these away and never look at this paper again.".

**Sarah Riddick** [00:39:23] Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:39:23] But you can't do that. Filmmaking is an entirely collaborative process. There are no filmmakers out there that do everything by themselves. Quentin Tarantino isn't the one sitting there making sure everybody's got coffee on set. It just doesn't work like that. And it's an entirely collaborative process all the way down to getting notes. And so in the scripts we . . . Elena read the scripts; she gave notes; some of 'em I hated; we butt heads a lot.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:39:49] Mmhm.

**Duncan Coe** [00:39:49] You know? Almost burned the house down because we were so upset at each othe. And so it's a very, very important part of the process. All the way into the editing room we would show every major version of the edit to our entire team so it was . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:40:05] Well, our, like, small creative team.

**Duncan Coe** [00:40:07] . . . or the core team.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:40:07] Not like all forty people that worked on the movie.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:40:08] \*laughs\*

**Duncan Coe** [00:40:10] Yeah. No, no, no. Elena—Elena and myself watched it. Our lead actress watched it because we trust her and her notes. Our DP watched it. One of our producers watched it. And I think . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:40:20] . . . and Danielle.

**Duncan Coe** [00:40:20] And another of our other actresses who we really trust and . . . 'cause she's intelligent and she has been in the business a long time.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:40:27] And she does like wardrobe and makeup and hair, too, so she like . . .

**Sarah Riddick** [00:40:31] \*laughs about bird that had begun chirping\* Welcome to the interview, this bird!

**Duncan Coe** [00:40:31] There's a little grayjay.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:40:34] Okay, sorry, what were you saying?

**Elena Weinberg** [00:40:35] No, Danielle, she did a lot. She came on as, like, a small role in the movie, like, before that people disappear. And she also did hair, makeup, and wardrobe. But then like during produc—we went to college with her so we've known her for a really long time—but during production she became such an asset to our team that we were like, "Okay, well, you're actually part of the core creative team." Like, "You're here with us until the end," which we weren't anticipating, but I'm glad that she was there.

**Duncan Coe** [00:41:05] \*referring to bird chirping\* You got a little songbird narrating here.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:41:10] \*imitates bird\*

**Sarah Riddick** [00:41:10] So I wanted to wrap up with—this is something I've thought about actually a lot in my life as I've seen other people pursue different kinds of writing careers. I always thought I knew—and I believe I still do—but I had a vision at a certain age of which kind of writer I thought I was going to be. And that's evolved for me a bit. I thought I was going to be a creative writer in poetry and fiction [and] creative nonfiction. And I think part of that, too, was—I mean, that was me [and my interests]—but my own schooling and public schooling, like, it focused on that kind of writing. It didn't showcase something like film writing or screenwriting or writing plays or any other type of writing. And so I didn't realize it was available to me on some level. I love that so many people do discover that. And so I was wondering how you came to realize this was the kind of writing you wanted to do.

**Duncan Coe** [00:42:06] It started a long time ago for me. We both went to Wimberley High School. Wimberley's about thirty minutes south of Austin. And it . . . for a long time was renowned for its theater program. And we didn't really have a summer vacation because every summer we were performing two full-length Shakespeare plays. Back to back. And during the rehearsal period for that, in the middle of the day we would go and we would do classes. And it would be, like, a dance class or . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:42:37] . . . swordfighting.

**Duncan Coe** [00:42:38] . . . or swordfighting class or there was a portion of it that was writing classes, and we would write short skits and perform them for each other. And that was when I first started writing for the stage. And then going into college . . .

**Elena Weinberg** [00:42:51] Well that program also probably informed, like, the collaborative way that we both enjoy working because not only were we, like, high school kids performing in these Shakespeare shows, but we were required to make all the costumes and build all of the props and sets, too. So we spent twelve hours a day in school—well, in school we did those things, too, but not twelve hours a day. But, like, during the summer we literally spent a month—twelve hours a day—building an entire production from the ground up with like . . . like, our hands were doing it. We had adults there to, like, guide us. But it was never like, "Oh well you're an actor! So you just walk in and say your lines and then leave." Like, we have always been a part of the like . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:43:36] . . . doing everything.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:43:37] . . . doing-everything creative process from the beginning.

**Duncan Coe** [00:43:38] And that translates really well to indie filmmaking because you are—you are the director, but you are also the person setting out bagels in the morning so that people have breakfast.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:43:48] \*laughs\*.

**Duncan Coe** [00:43:48] That's how it works. And so then, going into college: English writing and rhetoric and theater were my majors. And so I did a lot of technical writing. But I had a couple of creative writing classes—a poetry class and a screenplay class. And so I started writing plays in college. And out of college I was acting. I got tired of acting. Went back to my writing, and I had already been in commercials for a long time and in the sort of indie film world, and so I just went into screenwriting.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:44:20] And that was kind of informed—at least for me, selfishly—was, like . . . As an actor, I am . . . I don't fit, like, a box. Like, I look like the . . . If we're talking about, like, a teen drama, like [a] CW show, I look like the head cheerleader, like, vapid-girl stereotype/trope or whatever but like my personality it's like the . . . Lindsay from Freaks and Geeks. \*to Riddick\* You know?

**Sarah Riddick** [00:44:50] \*laughs\* Yep.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:44:50] And so like I've never, like, looked like what I'm best at, I guess. So it's really hard to cast me. And I figured that out pretty early on—that, like, if I wasn't making work for myself I probably wasn't gonna work. And so that is . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:45:07] . . . [how] the Tower web series came about.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:45:08] Yeah, and I wrote the web series with three women and I am never . . . I'm not a screenplay writer. I don't—well, I don't identify as a writer in that way. I don't like physically writing on the page. For that one, it was like, I wanted to create something with some friends while Duncan was writing our big feature or whatever. And I prefer different forms of writing like directing and collaborating and stuff like that. So that was aside from A-Town, it was like, "Hey, Duncan, will you write some stuff for me so I can perform it?" \*laughs\* You know? That's how we got into it. Er, that's how I got into writing.

**Duncan Coe** [00:45:44] And that, well . . . and there was a break for me, though, because after college I was burnt out on acting, and I was burnt out on [al]most everything creative, so I got a desk job. So for three years I was working basically tech support. And I was miserable, and I hated it. And I would come home in a pissy mood every single day because I had to deal with stupid customers who didn't understand anything, and it got to a point where Elena was like, "Hey, look. When you get home, just sit on the couch for like an hour, watch TV, and unwind."

**Elena Weinberg** [00:46:17] \*laughs\* I was like, "Don't talk to me because you're just not pleasant to be around."

**Duncan Coe** [00:46:20] And I realized at a point that it's because I wasn't doing anything creative. So that's when we started writing short scripts again, and I didn't want to just write the scripts. I wanted to write something and make something and do something—be creative and put it out there. So that's where we started making short films, and then that became a web series. And now it's become a movie, and it really will become another movie and another and another.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:46:41] But to answer the initial question, I think we got into this because of theater.

**Duncan Coe** [00:46:48] Yeah, theater. And our upbringing.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:46:49] I really appreciate you sharing the whole arc of it, too, though because it's not necessarily a straight—without—pause journey. It takes . . . You have to listen to yourself and try different things out, and that's what you've done.

**Duncan Coe** [00:47:00] Oh, and in there I was—I freelanced as a technical writer for a long time, and I was good at it but I didn't like it, you know? But you gotta pay the bills somehow.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:47:09] Yeah. And so, I guess, that's the thing. You didn't know—I mean, it sounds like you always had this inclination and you listened to it and you pursued it—but you've also done some other things, too, which has really shown you what your passion really is and what your skills are that you want to keep honing and what you want to contribute to the world.

**Duncan Coe** [00:47:25] Absolutely.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:47:26] I love all of this. And so for anyone who might be considering starting this kind of thing, feeling like, you know, "From the outside, how could I ever start being part of this community?" Do you have any closing words of encouragement or advice to those people?

**Duncan Coe** [00:47:42] Go look at Mark Duplass' Twitter feed because he is the best hype man for people who want to start and need a place to start.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:47:52] Actually, watch his . . . he did a keynote speech at South By [Southwest] in 2015, I think. 2015 or 16. A few years ago. It's like an hour long. It is . . . sometimes I just watch it when I, like, need to ugly-cry because it's, like, inspirational and, like, practical at the same time. Like, it's some really good advice.

**Duncan Coe** [00:48:14] And I think the best piece of advice is, "Nobody's gonna come knocking on your door, saying, 'Hey, we've discovered you . . .'"

**Sarah Riddick** [00:48:19] \*laughs\*

**Duncan Coe** [00:48:22] "' . . . because you did nothing.'".

**Sarah Riddick** [00:48:23] Yeah.

**Duncan Coe** [00:48:23] You've got to go out, and put yourself out there, and do the things. Even if they're not the best things, like the most polished, finest work of prose or poetry that's ever been made. It's not gonna happen. You're gonna . . . but: put it out there, put it out there, put it out there, and you'll get better and better and better.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:48:39] And the tools to make what you want to make are already here. Like, we live in the, like, biggest technology boom that the history of the world has ever seen. Your iPhone shoots in 4K. Like, shoot something. If you're—if [filmmaking]'s the kind of writing you want to do, make it on your iPhone. Cut it in iMovie on your phone, and then upload it YouTube. Like, it's . . .

**Duncan Coe** [00:49:05] And, bam. You're a filmmaker.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:49:06] Yay! Well, thank you so much for talking about all things writing with me.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:49:09] Yeah!

**Sarah Riddick** [00:49:11] This was great. And good luck on all of your future projects.

**Elena Weinberg** [00:49:14] Thank you.

**Sarah Riddick** [00:49:14] I'm sure they're gonna see all the success and more that you're experiencing now. Congratulations.

**Duncan Coe** [00:49:18] Oh, absolutely. \*laughs\*. Woo! \*claps\*

**Elena Weinberg** [00:49:19] Hopefully. \*laughs\*