

Paying It



ALI WEINSTEIN

How a director learned from her producer how to get things done for a first-time filmmaker



LULU WEI

Forward

By Susan G. Cole

IT'S JUST ONE BIG PIT, I MARVEL TO MYSELF.

Sitting in Mallo, a coffee shop near Toronto's Bloor and Bathurst corner, I stare out at the chasm that was once the iconic bargain emporium Honest Ed's and Mirvish Village, a block of indie galleries, businesses, and restaurants. Two small buildings still stand on Bathurst on the fringe of the construction site, demolition survivors, owned by landlords who refused to cave to Westbank, the developers now building mammoth twenty-six-story apartment buildings.

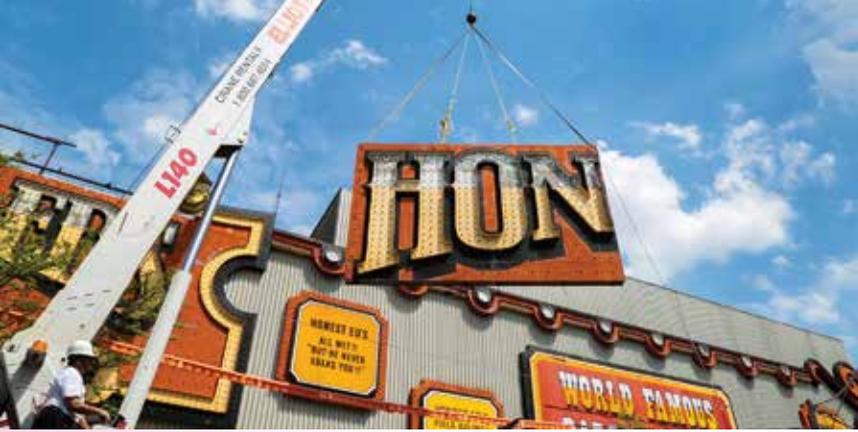
Filmmaker Lulu Wei looks out wistfully too as she talks to me about her first feature, the new documentary *There's No Place Like This Place, Anyplace*, set to air on CBC and eventually at the Hot Docs festival. She used to live in one of those two forlorn buildings with her girlfriend. When Westbank's development was first announced, she started shooting interviews with Mirvish Village's business and gallery owners, recording their emotional reactions to the fact that their days there were numbered.

The film eventually blossomed into a story of both some of Mirvish Village's most fascinating characters and how Westbank was engaging with the community as their plans took shape.

Just steps away from the dramatically morphing site, on the corner of Lennox and Bathurst, sits Central Technical School, where the rapidly expanding church C3 sets up every Sunday so its congregants, mostly millennial believers who could pass as hipsters, can come

PHOTO BY SARAH BO STUDIO

PHOTO BY MAY TRUONG



Left: *There's No Place Like This Place, Anyplace* (dir. Lulu Wei, 2020);
Below: *#BLESSED* (dir. Ali Weinstein, 2020)



PHOTO BY LULU WEI

PHOTO BY JOCELYN REYNOLDS / GAT PR

to Jesus. Ali Weinstein spent years observing, interviewing and, most importantly, filming the church in action for her documentary *#BLESSED* also at Hot Docs and set to air on CBC.

Two movies, Toronto-based, set fewer than a hundred meters apart, made by millennial women. But that's not all that connects the two docs. It was Weinstein who wound up producing Wei's *There's No Place Like This Place, Anyplace*.

Prepping for her foray into production, she was fortunate her *#BLESSED* producer was Cornelia Principe, who has twelve production credits, including the celebrated *Prey* and *The World Before Her*. Principe had her eyes set on C3 as a possible doc subject and was looking for a director. She sought out Weinstein after seeing her first documentary feature *Mermaids*, a delightful cinematic dive into the near-cult world of people, many of them with troubled pasts, who don the mermaid tail to participate in shows and events. Coincidentally, Weinstein had already developed a fascination for C3 and was researching the church for her own artistic purposes.

The C3 church was founded in Australia in 1980 and expanded worldwide beginning in 2000. C3's Central Tech location is Toronto's third iteration. On its surface it looks pretty hip, devoted to its own pop music, yet it's a congregation with deeply conservative values, expert branding techniques and a strong commitment to fundraising, over and above tithing its congregants.

"I had read the article in the *Globe* about C3 with the headline 'Hipsters of the Holy,'" says Principe. "I was walking by and went in out of my own curiosity.

I'd never seen anything like it. I'd seen *Mermaids* and I thought Ali would be someone who could look at this world without judgment. She also brings a young perspective that I don't have."

"I actually didn't know Cornelia so when she approached me it came out of the blue," says Weinstein. "I wouldn't have made the film without her interest."

Weinstein's connection to Wei came about quite differently. When she first met her, Wei had already shot those interviews with many of Mirvish Village business owners. "I was so grateful to her," enthuses Weinstein, "because everyone was so sad that Ed's was closing and I was wondering who was going to make that documentary and I hadn't heard anything."

Neither had Wei. "I was so surprised every time I was filming an event and no one else was there documenting it," she recalls. "It's such an important block and everybody was talking about it about it. I kept thinking, 'Is someone else making this movie? I don't think anybody is.'"

Wei's connection to Honest Ed's and the iconic block where it stood is deeply personal and so were her reasons for making the film. "I wanted to create a time capsule so people in the future would

see what the community was like, especially Markham Street. I was sad that my kids and grandkids wouldn't see what this was about."

Weinstein is the product of a non-believing household—she describes her father, filmmaker Larry Weinstein, as fiercely atheist—yet still, she felt oddly connected to the C3 congregants.

"When I went to the services, everyone was so beautiful and well-dressed and so heavily tattooed I felt like I was out at a Dundas and Ossington bar," recalls Weinstein. "I'm fascinated by how people create meaning in their lives. I am a part of a generation, like everyone in this film, which is, frankly, lonely and lost. I've always been really curious about people who feel very religious and I wondered what allows people to have this sense of conviction."

Principe's commitment to finding a balance between commercial and exposé represents one of her key creative contributions to *#BLESSED*. Wei also worked hard not to create a political screed against evil developers, which is why her film pays attention to Westbank's consultations with the community.

"On the one hand, I loved Honest Ed's and my apartment. Watching Ed's be demolished was heartbreaking," she remembers. "But I didn't want to just make an anti-gentrification film, where it's us versus them, a David versus Goliath documentary. I'm sure if Westbank had been building condos I would have made a different film. I'm happy they're bringing rentals into the neighbourhood. Then again, who's going to be able to afford them?"

In both movies, the docs' interview subjects play a key role in creating texture and balance. For *#BLESSED*, Weinstein went often to the congregation's small Next Steps work groups, which serve an important function: "You get sucked in quickly and you feel like you're part of a team," she says.

There she met some of her most fascinating subjects, including Conan, a firm non-believer who nevertheless finds kindred spirits in the church, and Amy, who left C3 because it doesn't tolerate people in active queer relationships.

The segment with Amy succeeds in walking that line between commercial and exposé. I was appalled, but I'm guessing Pastor

WATCH
a selection of
Lulu Wei's work:
luluwei.com

READ MORE about
Ali Weinstein in the *POV*
feature "The Freshmen":
bit.ly/freshmenPOV

CORNELIA PRINCIPE



PHOTO BY KATHRYN PALMATEER

“Producing gives me a creative outlet... and it allows me to do more than one thing at the same time.”

Sam, who heads Toronto’s C3 church and who figures prominently in the film, would stand by every minute of it.

Where Principe helped keep Weinstein on her balanced directorial path, Weinstein as producer was more involved in assisting Wei with her story and in figuring out what to do with all those interviews.

Says Weinstein, “It became clear to me that, while Lulu’s interviews were fantastic and might make a great web series, for a feature, we had to choose who her characters would be and create a story together.”

It was Weinstein who helped Wei establish the characters she wanted to focus on, including Gabor Nagy, artist and owner of Gallery Gabor, and the charismatic Itah Sadu, who ran A Different Booklist on Bathurst, south of Ed’s but within the Mirvish purview, and is now operating out of a temporary space just across the road.

“The amazing thing about Itah’s story,” says Wei, “is that finding a temporary location for the store was stressful. But instead of laying down and letting life take her, she got a seat at the table with Westbank and got involved.”

Emblematic of her empathy is the way Wei deals with Brandon, a member of the demolition team, a three dimensional character, who seems to feel as much sadness about Honest Ed’s being razed as Wei.

“Brandon’s parents used to shop at Honest Ed’s and he talks about how he’s tearing down his parents’ memories,” says Wei. “I got to know him and others and they’d always greet me and give me a play-by-play about what was happening.”

In a way, that was problematic. Wei admits that she may have done too much filming of the demolition and construction and how the site kept changing. “Ali was helpful in advising me that I should not worry about what I hadn’t shot, that I did not have to keep filming the site every day and that I should concentrate on giving the film some shape.”

Nonetheless, Weinstein didn’t always love every aspect of her producer role. “I’m not always the best with money and I felt the weight of suddenly having that kind of budget. There certainly are a lot of details that are

taxing and not that creatively fulfilling. But now that I’m closer to the end of the process, I take that back. There’s gratification in being able to collaborate with someone else by being in the passenger’s seat and helping to navigate and support that person’s vision.”

Of course, money is central to the producer’s role and though she was helpful to Wei, she’s not that enamoured of the process of getting financing. When I ask her how much it cost to make *There’s No Place*, she’s quick to answer: \$436,000. How much did it cost to make *#BLESSED*?

“I don’t know,” she laughs. “I’ve never seen a budget. It’s nice

not having to look at that stuff.”

Weinstein appreciates the fact that she learned a producer’s value from her relationship with Principe. “She’s really good at it. Cornelia gets shit done. She contributed creatively to *#BLESSED*. Her input was huge and I needed that mentorship, not just because it was my second feature. She helped steer me into what we should focus on when I was spiraling a bit and while we were shooting and editing. When you’re directing, you have so many doubts about how your film will be received and whether you’re being true to your characters. So I imagine it’s common to have a therapist relationship to your producer.”

Wei, who trained as a cinematographer, talks more about the process of making a first feature and how important it is for a producer to connect a new director to the film world and the people who fund it.

“Making *There’s No Place* from a cinematography background, I never thought about what was needed to make a feature,” Wei admits. “I didn’t know how the documentary world works. Story-wise, I’d been following people and didn’t know who the main characters would be or how to shape it. Funding-wise, I didn’t know what was out there.”

She did, however, successfully apply to Telefilm’s Talent to Watch program, listing Weinstein as her producer, which kick-

started the film’s financing. The Telefilm triumph led to Toronto Arts Council funding and the project started snowballing, peaking with a commitment from the CBC.

“Ali helped me with the business affairs I had no clue about so I could focus on the creative,” says Wei. “I originally thought I’d make the movie myself and I was really happy I didn’t so I could make a film I was proud of. When you’re alone, it’s difficult to make that happen.”

As for Principe, she has directed her own movies but producing remains her primary passion.

“I love taking an idea and a director and team and shepherding it through to the end,” she declares. “I have directed in the past. Directing is all-consuming and you tend to not be able to work on more than one project at once. Producing gives me a creative outlet—I’m always involved in creative and story, talking through things, watching footage—and it allows me to do more than one thing at the same time.”

Unlike just about everybody else in the movie business, from editor to actor, from writer to cinematographer, Principe’s not one of those filmmakers who’ll utter that familiar refrain: “I want to direct.”

Truly refreshing. ■

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WATCH

Cornelia Principe’s Hot Docs Audience Award winner *Prey*: bit.ly/preytvo