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Spring 2023 Sabbatical Report

Feature Film Development for *Verena + Jo*

For my spring 2023 sabbatical I proposed producing a short film that would serve as a proof of concept for a feature length film. My experience as a filmmaker so far has been in producing experimental/artist's films and documentary films. I have recently critically reconsidered the purpose and impact of my creative work. I am now focusing on bringing representations of LGBTQ+ experiences throughout history to wider audiences. Pursuing the development of a scripted drama intended for a broader, more mainstream audience is a new challenge for me as an artist and film educator. Through the process of participating in professional development opportunities in the field, I came to understand that developing and writing the full feature length film script would be a more direct route to getting the film produced, rather than putting resources into producing a short film. My scope of work for the sabbatical shifted accordingly.

I am pleased to report that I have made significant professional and creative progress with this project throughout the sabbatical period. I am collaborating with a highly regarded industry producer to develop the project, and I have completed a full draft of the script. The first draft of the script placed in the top 10% of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowship for screenwriting in a field of over 6,600 scripts. My script has also been invited to the second round of consideration for the 2024 Sundance Screenwriters Lab programs, which is an incredibly competitive application process.

With a working title of *Verena + Jo*, the film is based on actual events from World War II. Throughout the war, teenage Dutch resistance fighters weaponized their femininity to seduce and then assassinate Nazi officers. This film is based on these actual historical events, but the story has been expanded and fictionalized to express a story of queer love in a time and place where this love was subject to harsh punishment. As a transformative relationship grows between Verena and Jo, Verena also explores new layers of gender identity. The story is set during the last year of the war, and our characters are dreaming of a future together, free from fascism and prejudice. All the while, the Nazis are stepping up brutality against the resistance workers. The characters experience losses of family members and comrades, while taking great personal risks in the pursuit of justice. Verena and Jo extract intel from young Nazi men to pass to the Allies and become essential operatives in the liberation of Holland.

In October 2022, *Verena + Jo* was selected to participate in a film development lab at the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image in Frankfurt, Germany. Development labs are internationally competitive professional development opportunities, where filmmakers who are in the early stages of their projects can pitch the project to industry decision makers and receive mentorship from established filmmakers and producers. I was invited to meet with staff from Film London, a non-profit organization focused on supporting independent film. Out of the hundreds of filmmakers they meet with at festivals throughout the year, the staff of Film London invited me to pitch my film at their industry pitch event in January 2023.

The event is called Upstream, and it gives filmmakers the opportunity to present their project to an invited audience of hundreds of media development executives from UK, European, and international production companies and streaming platforms. From this pitch, I connected with an established industry producer who is now attached to develop the project. The film will be produced by Stewart MacKinnon, an Executive Producer and co-creator of the Amazon series *The Man In the High Castle*. Stewart has produced many feature films and series in his decades in the industry.

I began working with Stewart immediately on story development for the script. I also enrolled in a UCLA extension screenwriters workshop. From January until March I learned and workshopped the story with a variety of working professionals in film.

Also in January 2023, I participated in the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts artist residency program in Nebraska City, NE for 4 weeks. I was selected from a competitive international application process. At KHN I researched the film story and wrote the treatment, which is an industry standard document that serves as an overview of the film's story.

In March 2023 I participated in the Ucross fellowship in Sheridan, WY, which is another artist residency program with a competitive international application process. At Ucross I completed the first draft of the script, and also worked on a body of studio art work related to the film story and historical context. Many filmmakers create moodboards to convey the visual look and feel of a film. Moodboards are collections of images. I collected images of locations from the script, costuming, significant images of Holland during WW2, actors who might be a good fit for the main characters, and influential film references. I printed these as image transfers, which I was able to transfer to a type of translucent "paper" that is made from recycled plastic called Yupo. I created a large scale moodboard for the film on a 30 foot roll of Yupo, with gouache paint detailing.

In May 2023 I participated in the Lighthouse Works fellowship on Fishers Island, NY. Lighthouse Works is another internationally competitive artist residency program. At LHW I continued revising the script for submission to the Nicholl Fellowship and the Sundance Institute programs. I also created two more 30 foot long moodboard paintings with images related to the film. I created sculptural works that related to scenes from the script. These were presented at an open studio event on the island.

My progress toward sales of the script and the rights to the production of the film was necessarily slowed to honor the rules of the Writers Guild of America and Screen Actors Guild strikes from May 2023 until November 2023. I continue to collaborate with my producer on developing the script, with a goal of pursuing sales and production opportunities in early 2024. The film is a period drama, which requires significant financing to produce. The process for getting the film out into the world will start with pursuing European and UK state funding as the foundation of the financing, then pitching the film to streaming platforms to complete the financing toward production.

Because of the time and energy I had to give this project with my full attention, I made incredible progress. After extensive research, I was prepared to write the initial 120 page draft

of the screenplay in just over a week. I reconnected with my background in studio arts and found a new process to create work in my field – creating visual work alongside screenwriting. I also discovered that I genuinely love screenwriting. I anticipate I will continue this practice for years to come, and hope to teach a screenwriting course at SSU in the future.

I am excited by this new turn in my creative work. My students are already benefitting from what I have learned about this side of the industry. This fall 2023 semester marked the launch of a new BA degree program at SSU in Cinematic Arts and Technology. We currently have 20 majors, and the program continues to grow and attract new transfer students. As the program manager, it was essential for me to learn more about the world of scripted production. As a result of the time I had during sabbatical to learn and explore a new facet of the field, I can now provide guidance to students interested in career paths in scripted production. I know I will continue to gain invaluable insights into the industry as I pursue getting this film project produced and out into the world.