

How I Got From Hudson To Hollywood
By David Nicksay

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Good morning!

I recognize a lot of you from last night. Thanks for coming to the film. Those who couldn't be there, sorry you missed it, but don't worry: March 4th at a theater near you. Spread the word.

I imagine some of you thought, when you first heard that a movie producer was gonna come speak, well, that's a surprise, but I assure you that nobody here is more surprised than I am.

I haven't been back to campus since I graduated, and I guess I had never thought of myself as someone who would be back as a speaker representing a profession, or an industry.

Maybe it's the fact that we're here in the Chapel, at a formal assembly. I don't know, but it just seems like we're surrounded by tradition. Following tradition wasn't my strength when I was a student here, and frankly, following tradition hasn't been my career pathway either.

It seemed to me when I was here that life was laid out with certain behaviors preferred. To succeed, I should take a well-balanced liberal arts course load, go on from Reserve to a respected college or university. Maybe hit graduate school as well, prior to taking a significant position with a lot of future potential in an established corporation or firm.

If I could have done that, I would have. But I was not cut out to walk that walk. Some people are, I was not. I felt the need to be different, to explore uncharted territory.

This was particularly true of school. I rebelled against school. My rebel choices led me, for better and worse, down an alternative path. Along the way, without my realizing it, I got my education a bit at a time. I learned a lot of lessons in unlikely places, lessons that ultimately prepared me for Hollywood.

So today, I will tell you my story, and perhaps my journey, along that Other, Nontraditional Path, might be interesting to you, if only to show that there are options out there, about how to live, and how to work.

I said I was a rebel, but that really isn't saying much. When I came to Reserve, it was the sixties. All of us were rebels. We were protesting against pretty much everything: the Vietnam War, the draft, racism, materialism, people over 30.

My protests started small. Like the dress code. I took to wearing anything not specifically prohibited. Jackets with floral patterns. Paisley ties, love beads, moccasins -- anything to test the limits. I must have looked ridiculous, but I was sure proud to be a nonconformist.

Later I took to mouthing off, either on the editorial page of the Record, or at an antiwar rally, or at the speaker's lectern here in Assembly... once I made a speech from this very podium, complaining about bureaucracy and red tape and feeling cut off from the real world, and the admissions dean was so incensed he stood up, right there and sang "Make new friends but keep the old, One is silver the other gold" at the top of his voice in order to drown me out, and then stomped out. Sure enough, I got called into the Headmaster's office that afternoon. I was convinced I was going to be expelled. Instead, after scolding me, Mr. Briggs asked me what I wanted. He was out to prove the administration could respond to the students.

So I asked for something outrageous: I wanted independent study pass/fail classes my senior year; to my amazement, he approved. Well, not all my classes, just Studio Art, but it was still pretty cool.

I think that Headmaster Briggs realized that I was behaving partly out of conviction, but mostly to get attention. So he gave it to me.

I always looked forward to the rotation of seating assignments in the dining hall. Maybe I would get lucky, and end up at a table with a cool faculty member. Well, my senior year, every month, I got assigned to the same table, the Headmaster's. He was serious about keeping his eye on me.

And that's just what I needed, really. Underneath my bravado, I was just scared. As a freshman, I was the youngest, the smallest, the least athletic. I always feared I was out of it, not cool, that I was a loser.

I suppose it was fitting that years later, I would find myself choosing a script called *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*. I loved a young comedian, Jim Carrey, then brand new on a TV show called *In Living Color*. His humor captured this feeling. "Loser." When I met with him to star in *Ace*, he was extremely shy, almost didn't speak. Now I wonder: maybe he too felt out of it, not cool. I guess everyone feels that way sometimes.

It wasn't just the headmaster who paid attention to me, either. I wrote an editorial in the Record, saying, basically, that school was just a bunch of BS, and our job was to survive, to outlast school. And lots of students were like, 'yeah, right on!' But my English teacher, Mr. Chapman, held me after class to discuss it. To my shock, he didn't dispute my statements; he thought I hadn't gone far enough. "You missed the point, Mr. Nicksay, your job is not to survive, it is to prevail!"

And I learned something important from all this. These teachers understood that I was scared, and were generous to me. They had compassion; they helped me out.

This quality, strangely enough, is the absolute cornerstone of filmmaking. My favorite character in BE COOL is Eliot, played by The Rock. Some actors might have concentrated on the silliness of that character, but Rock committed himself fully to Eliot. He believed in Eliot, and understood his desires. In the audience, you can't help but believe in Eliot too, and relate to him, even if you aren't Samoan, even if you haven't memorized the dialogue from BRING IT ON.

This past weekend I filled out my ballot for the Academy Awards. When I vote, I have learned to look for this kind of compassion and empathy. If an actor can understand his character, be generous, and humanize that fictional person to entertain, or move me, that is my definition of good acting. This year for instance, I loved Hilary Swank and Morgan Freeman in Million Dollar Baby, and Jamie Foxx in Ray, and Leonardo DiCaprio and Cate Blanchett in The Aviator. Each of them was brave enough to show me the fear inside their characters. They allowed me to walk in those shoes, and learn something about life, and about myself in the process.

And they do it so simply. That's what continues to amaze me. The simpler they are, the more I can make contact. They just look at each other, and listen; they don't act really, they just are.

They make it look easy, but it's not; it's really hard.

One of my early Hollywood mentors came into the office one day, all worked up. "It's absurd! I just drove past a film crew on Beverly Glen. There was truck after truck, then generators, then lights. Finally I drove by the front of the house, and everyone was on the lawn. What were they shooting? A close-up! Does it really take all these people just to shoot a close up?"

The answer is, actually, yes. Everyone on that set has a job to do, something to do with that close-up. From the makeup artist who has matched the scar on the actress's forehead to the way it looked in last week's shoot, to the costumer who has made sure the collar lies flat, to the greens guy making the flower bed look nice in the background, everyone is contributing to that image. Even the driver who picked up the actress at 5:00 am and had coffee ready in the car, to the production assistant who greeted the actress at the set, and had a cheerful good morning to offer. Everyone has contributed to creating the atmosphere, so at the moment the camera rolls, it's possible for the actress to be simple, to expose the inner life of her character, to be.

In this way, every crew member is acting in every shot. They are putting a piece of themselves on screen. I worked once with a prop man. After shooting a close shot of the dinner plate, or a clock, or a gun, he'd say "Thank you for my close-up." All the good technicians are like that.

It's all about teamwork. Film is a collaborative medium. You can't do it alone. That's something I began to learn here, by singing in the Glee Club, and doing plays, and team sports. The whole can be so much more than the sum of its parts.

I learned more about teamwork later on, in a much different environment, you might say it was my graduate school in collaboration -- Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus.

The circus runs a training school, Clown College, in Sarasota, Florida every fall to teach prospective clowns how to do the job.

I had gone from Reserve to being in the first class at Hampshire College. Hampshire was designed to shake up the normal college curriculum. All classes were pass/fail. Mostly independent study. My kind of place! And it was great for a couple of years, until I got the itch to experience the working world of showbiz. I thought I needed street cred, real world training.

What better place than Clown College? I figured the other students would be amazing, grandchildren of Buster Keaton, like that. "Perfect! I'll go there for a semester, then return to school to finish my degree!"

Well, as it happened, the other students were like me, refugees from tradition. But I loved it nonetheless. I learned juggling, tumbling, stilt walking, clown gags, elephant riding, and how to fall on my face. More precisely, how to fall on my face *funny*. At the end of the course, they offered me a job. Hmm...travel 48 states, live on a train car, perform as a clown in front of thousands of people, earn \$125 per week -- or go back to school?

No contest, and for the next two years I rode the circus train, performed in the Greatest Show on Earth, and had a fabulous time.

I will never forget walking out in the dark on the floor of Madison Square Garden, watching 20,000 screaming kids twirl red and blue flashlights; the air is literally filled with electricity. I take my place for the opening. I can smell the popcorn, and the tigers, waiting behind me inside the big cage. The Ringmaster shouts "Ladies and Gentlemen, children of all ages, the Greatest Show on Earth." The lights burst on, the band starts playing. Showtime!

I remember the elephant I rode every show, named Banana. Her specialty was to shake her head from side to side, like she was crazy. In the middle of the big elephant number, they had a rock and roll section, with about 6 elephants dancing in center ring. There's Banana, shaking her head to the music.

So I'm a little worried the first time I ride her, what happens if she starts shaking her head? I knew how to stiffen my leg, and put my foot against her front knee. She lifted her trunk as she threw up that leg; I rode up and landed softly on her neck. Off we go, charging down the track. Sure enough, on our last trick, she leans her head way down,

and just before she shakes, she kind of shrugs, and I settle back into a hollow between her shoulders. Suddenly, I'm balanced, and she can shake all she wants without me falling off. I just rock with her, and came to realize: she taught me how to ride her. I would bring her an apple or a carrot now and again before the show. She was my pal.

Now, I had never even seen a circus growing up, so this all seemed really exotic to me. The circus world cracked open my brain, and changed every preconception I had about how life works. Here I was, part of a swirl of different people -- acrobats from Bulgaria, jugglers from Spain -- like a giant family, but not like any family I had known. Everybody lived together, on the train or in trailers, but everybody spoke different languages. Some times mom was the center ring star, dad took care of the truck and the rigging, or the animals were the performers, the breadwinners, not the humans. The kids knew they'd carry on the circus legacy; that was their constant. Everything else -- home, school, country -- was always changing.

So I learned another important lesson: other people are not just like me. I thought I understood diversity. Well, the world is a lot more diverse than I realized. It takes all kinds to make a show.

I met my future wife on the circus, a showgirl. Another runaway like me, but from a technical job at Pacific Bell in San Francisco. She danced, rode horses, did the aerial web number. We both taught school between shows, she to Sascha, a seventh generation circus boy from a family of aerialists, Swiss mother, Spanish father, I to Pinky, an eighth generation German girl whose parents trained big cats and horses. There I am, still in my clown makeup, "4 5's are 20, 5 5's are 25." Pinky thought it was normal, but I couldn't help but laugh. See, some teachers really are clowns.

Every so often we'd see this young kid from DC, working back stage. He was the son of the owner of the show, and he spent a year working in every different job on the show, just to learn everything from the bottom up. Eventually, he took over the circus, and still runs it today.

It was hard at first, learning to clown. The audience is a tough teacher. I remember running out in front of a circus audience the first time, scared out of my mind.

I did my little routine, looked up for applause, a reaction, some laughter. Nothing. I moved down the track, tried again. Still nothing.

Do that enough times, you start to adjust. I learned to relax, to begin by connecting with the audience. I would try to make eye contact, maybe exchange a wave with a kid, or whistle at an elderly woman, then trip and fall on my face. I would break the ice, get a relationship with the crowd, then go into my gag. And I had to learn to always be ready, in case anything went wrong. The slightest glitch -- equipment not working, animals not ready, or in the worst case, someone is hurt -- the Ringmaster would whistle for the clowns, and we'd go running in to the arena to distract the crowd.

My clown partner and best friend was a Mexican American who called himself Zapata. He had started as a concessionaire, selling cotton candy, but he spent more time clowning in the stands than selling, so they finally gave him a shot in Clown Alley. Zap came from a circus background. His grandfather had been a clown, and his father an aerialist. One of Zap's prized possessions was an original oil painting of himself and his grandfather in their clown makeup. They had never worked together, so Zap had the artist combine images from two photos to unite grandfather with grandson in paint.

Zap and I did a gag called the Washerwomen. The two of us, wearing outlandish dresses, would enter the ring from different directions, each with a basket of laundry, ready to use the one wringer washer. We would fight over the machine. I'd slap him, he'd trip me, and so on, until he would chase me all around the ring. Finally, I'd grab him, shove him in between the giant rollers of the wringer, and squeeze him thru. Zap would actually dive down inside the machine, while I would pull out a flat image of him off the roller. It looked like he was going in 3D, but coming out flat.

Zapata was amazing, cause day in day out, he would find something new to do in that gag. I was always conscious of driving the story forward, getting to our next episode of conflict. But Zap? I might look over at him to find him playing out a scene with a piece of laundry, say a dress that reminded him of a night on the town. There he'd be, frumpy housecoat over big red balloon boobs, doing the tango with a frock, lost in his imagination. He was completely caught up in the intimacy of a personal moment. He taught me that the most funny and touching material is simple, easy to recognize, and drawn from real life.

He was also always trying to do other comedy too. In every city he would find the comedy club, and go on an open mike night, to try his hand at standup. He was convinced he could break as the next big Latino comic; he didn't care about fame, he just wanted to be on the program, to have a featured spot.

After my 2 years on the road, we went in different directions. Zapata headed down to South America to clown. I did a stint as the Assistant Dean and Head Instructor of Clowning back at Clown College, and then chose to leave the circus for Hollywood, to try to get a job in the movies. The assistant stage manager at the circus was a guy from Long Beach, California, and when he heard I was striking out for LA, he pulled a little piece of paper from his wallet. It was the phone number of the Directors Guild of America, which runs a training program for Assistant Directors. He had applied, and been rejected; he'd been saving the number, just in case...But instead, he gave it to me, to use if I wanted to try. Just a random act of kindness; one that made all the difference in my career.

When I got to LA, I discovered that you needed a 4-year college degree to apply to this program. 'But,' they said, 'if you are going to have a degree by June, you can apply this spring...' I had left college after 2 years; now I needed to graduate in one semester. So I called up Hampshire. "Hey, remember me?" "Circus boy!" Anyway, I claimed I'd done a lot of - guess what? - independent study in the circus, and amazingly, they took me back.

In one busy spring I wrote a screenplay, directed and acted in a play, wrote a thesis about P.T. Barnum's marketing techniques, and got my degree.

During Spring Break, I fly to LA to take an 8-hour battery of tests that constitute the Director's Guild entrance exam. I get out of the car, look around at the two dozen check-in tables, and the hundreds of other people, and say, "Which one of these tables is for the DGA exam?" "All of them."

That's when I realize I'm not the only one trying to get into the movies.

But as it happens, I score well enough on the aptitude tests – questions like: "Think of 50 uses for a straw other than to drink fluids. You have 30 seconds. Go!" – anyway, I score well enough to advance to the interview process.

So, there I am with a dozen middle-aged men around a conference table, asking me questions. I'm nervous. I have now staked my whole life on this opportunity. It just has to go well. Then one guy with a cigar asks, what will I do if I don't get into the training program?

"Well," I say, "I'll find out the home addresses of everyone at this table, and I will come knock on your front doors, until somebody gives me a job in the movies."

Silence. 'Course I'm thinkin', "What a STUPID thing to say!"

The guy with the cigar clears his throat, "That would take chutzpah. You think you got chutzpah?"

"Well," I said. "I think I've got --." He cuts me off. "No, do you have chutzpah? You know what chutzpah is? Let me tell you what chutzpah is."

Now I realize I'm in for it.

"There was a young man," cigar guy continues, "who argued with his parents, bitterly. After they went to bed, the young man snuck into their bedroom with an axe, and brutally murdered them. Police came; he was caught red handed. They brought him before the judge the next day.

"The judge said, 'Young man, do you have anything to say for yourself?' 'Your honor' the young man replied, 'Have mercy, for I am an orphan!' "

The whole table laughs, and cigar guy winks. "So, you think you have chutzpah?"

"Well," I said, "I think I have the quick wit to say what the young man said to the judge in the courtroom, but not the cold heart to do what he did to his parents the night before."

I guess he thought he was gonna trip me up. He didn't know he was dealing with a circus clown. We're always ready for the unexpected; blow the whistle, I'm there.

I started my training at Universal Studios, as an apprentice assistant director, whose job is to coordinate the movements of all the cast, crew and suppliers on a film set. I learned to fill out the daily work requirements on a document known as The Call Sheet, which tells everyone their call time, meaning what time to show up, and also the work to be done, the location of the day's work, etc. Seems like kind of a stupid name for it, so obvious, but the movies are full of funny little phrases, holdovers from the past. My favorite is when we decide to roll camera only, no sound. We shout, "MOS" which means, "MitOut Sound." A lot of the early directors had come over from Germany, and that's how they spoke. "MitOut." And it survives to this day. Another one is the next to last shot of the day; it's always called the Abby Singer. Why? It's named after a legendary assistant director, Abner Singer, who was always wrong. He'd tell everyone, this is the last shot. Invariably, there would be one more. So everyone in the industry now calls the next to last shot, the Abby. Another great one is a lighting term. One of the smallest lights is called a baby, and sometimes you need to put a small tube on the front, to make a focused spotlight. It's called a snoot. So you get these guys yelling, "Throw a snoot on the baby, that makes us ready!"

I discovered that the subculture of the movie crew is very similar to that of the circus. There is an instant bonding, and a sense of being separate from the world around you, as if there were a different set of rules of the universe for movie people. It's a cool feeling, like you belong to a club or something.

I made my way from one job to another, often bumping into the Assistant Director then working for Alfred Hitchcock. This guy would always ask me, "What have you learned today?" So I got in the habit of always having an answer ready, in case I saw him. And I came to realize that every day, if I paid attention, I could learn something new, and I have continued trying to do that ever since. Some times the lessons are small, but they all add up. People surprise you. Most of them have experience that isn't obvious – my circus past is a good example – and they are happy to tell you about it if you only ask!

I guess this was sort of my way to be like that young circus owner I had watched do all the backstage jobs to learn the ropes. I would just keep asking, how do you do that? In that way, I tried to learn all the jobs on a movie set. I especially wanted to know the job of the guy above me, what was the next job for me. I think probably it has been that curiosity, as much as anything else, that has created opportunity. And when the opportunities came, I was ready to move up, one rung at a time, until I reached the level of producer.

My duties now are to supervise the nuts and bolts of shooting the movie. That means I figure out how much its going to cost, evaluate potential shooting locations, hire the crew, get the equipment, schedule the order of shooting, and manage the day to day process of getting the film in the can.

I have had to fill in the gaps in my education from time to time. I've taken a lot of writing classes, and studied Shakespeare, and so forth, to better understand what makes good stories. I think if I could do school over again, I would take more literature classes, not only to understand stories, but also to understand people.

My training at Reserve has turned out to be my foundation. I didn't appreciate at the time how important this training would be. I mean, I didn't have any way of knowing then, that after leaving here, I would never take another English class. The skills I learned here – how to read and think critically, how to write clearly, how to avoid being corny (Mr. Donnelly, thank you, I'm still working on that one) – these skills have carried me through.

Having a skill helps when you want to get your break. Doesn't have to be fancy. For instance, it can be very helpful to know how to make a dynamite cappuccino or how to brew a killer pot of green tea. Whatever it is, if you do it really well, it will be valued.

I know a guy named Pete the Greek. Pete is a craft service person, which means he serves all the other crafts, or crew members. Now that means making the coffee, or rather cappuccinos, and tea, and all the other snacks and goodies on a movie set. Now Pete is really good at this job; he always makes an effort to please everyone.

About 12 years ago he did a picture with Travolta; John noticed Pete, admired his thoroughness, and hired him to be a personal chef. Nowadays Pete flies all around the world with him now, working on movies and anything else that comes up. Whenever I see him – “Pete, where you been?” “Oh, just got back from the Mediterranean, heading to Australia next week!” He's got a good gig. He has become much more than a chef, he is a trusted part of the inner circle, a part of the family.

Stars are like that. They value skill, but even more, they value and reward loyalty. I've had the good fortune to work with a lot of stars. And I'm sure you'd like to hear some funny stories about them ...

But I won't tell any of those. You see, celebrities deserve some privacy.

They have a raw deal. Think about it. They can't go out in public without having a million photographers pester them all the time. They are normal people (mostly) who just want to do their job, and then be left alone in between, allowed to be mortals, flaws and all, without being judged for every mistake they make.

The most important issue is simply safety. Reese Witherspoon's driver was very proud of his new vehicle, a brand new H2 Hummer. Reese really liked the big ride. But when the tabloids published a picture of her getting out of that car, Reese knew it had to go; it was too easy to spot, and might now be a target for kidnapers. She wasn't worried about herself, but her kids might be endangered if they rode in it. So, back it went to the parking lot, to be replaced by something more nondescript.

You see, their concerns are different from ours. You have to be flexible, and remember that there probably is a very good reason for their behavior. So how do I deal with stars? Simple. Treat each one as the most important person in my life. I just put them first, and remind myself at all times that I am helping set the stage for a good performance in the close-up.

Being aware of each actor's process is vital. Some need a quiet set, where distractions are minimized. Others, like Robin Williams, Mel Gibson, they like it boisterous and fun, so they can be loose. It's good to remember not to take it all so seriously. After all, it's only a movie.

And when I see behavior that I might not understand, I remember how I was treated when I acted out. I try to think what might they be afraid of or worried about, and then I try to address that directly. The main thing is, I try to take a tip from the good actors -- be real, be myself. People can tell when you have an agenda, or your mind is on something else, so I concentrate on looking them in the eye, on really listening, on giving them my attention.

I guess if you were to take away anything from this tale, that's probably the one I would ask you to remember.

Be yourself. So many people are just trying to be like everyone else, trying to fit in. But when everyone looks and acts the same, who stands out? The person who is unusual, that's who, extra-ordinary. It's okay to be afraid. Admit you're scared, then do it anyway.

Zapata taught me the most valuable lesson of all. I'd been in Hollywood for about 5 years when he called from Brazil. He'd been touring in South America for a while, when he got sick. His face was partially paralyzed, and the doctors he'd seen couldn't agree on a diagnosis. I told him he could stay with us, and get medical attention in LA.

Turned out he had a rare t-cell lymphoma, a kind of cancer of the blood. Within the year, he died, just a couple of weeks after his 30th birthday. I was with him at the end. Not a week goes by that I don't think of him. His death taught me that nothing is more important than your friends and family. You owe it to them to live your life fully.

The rest of it? Don't take it so seriously. After all, it's only a movie.

By the way, Zap did finally get his featured spot. His prized painting of himself and his grandfather is now in the Smithsonian.

So that's my story, how I got from Hudson to Hollywood, following a nontraditional path. If you are a traditional person, great. Go that way. But if you feel sometimes like I did, that you don't quite fit, then think of me, and relax. It's gonna be okay, cause there are lots of ways to get where you're going.

Thank you.