

The Editor's Cut - Episode 026

Sarah:

Hello, and welcome to the Editor's Cut. I'm your host, Sarah Taylor. In today's episode, I talk with Ricardo Acosta, an editor based in Toronto, Canada, but he started his editing journey in Cuba, where he studied and worked at the world-renowned Cuban Film Institute in Havana. Ricardo is an alumni of the Sundance Institute, as well as a teacher and advisor. His outstanding work and keen sense of human condition has contributed to the success of several award-winning films that have premiered in film festivals around the world, including Venice Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, and Cannes. In this episode, we discuss Ricardo's role as a story rescuer and his work on Shooting Indians, Herman's House, The Blessing, and I Am Samuel.

[Podcast Intro]

And action!

This is the Editor's Cut.

A CCE podcast.

Exploring the art-

Of picture editing.

Sarah:

Ricardo, thank you so much for joining us today on the Editor's Cut. You are currently in Toronto joining us via the internet, so thank you for sitting down with us.

Ricardo:

Thanks to you and very happy to talk about my experience. I really like your program very much.

Sarah:

Oh, thank you so much. We're going to discuss more things about ethics of editing, documentary specifically. But I want to give the audience a bit of a summary of your career journey and where you started and how you discovered editing was your passion.

Ricardo:

I wrote something for the Canadian Cinema Editors about how I became an editor and I don't know if I should read that.

Sarah:

Sure, if you want to. I remember reading that. It was so poetic and beautiful. If you'd like to read it, go ahead.

Ricardo:

I think I should do it. Yeah, I will try. First came the broken dream of becoming a classic ballet dancer. I was 10 years old and I was fixated with classical ballet. My mother and I agreed that I would go to the

National Ballet School audition. For weeks, I rolled my feet on a wine bottle in search of the perfect arch. Audition day arrived and my mother and I were getting ready to travel to Havana. My grandmother asked my mom, "Where are you going?" My mother answered, "El Nino wants to be a dancer and we are going to the audition at the National Ballet School." Long silence. Angela, that was my grandmother's name, look at me slowly scrutinizing my body, my nervousness, my dream, "A dancer," Angela exclaimed. "A classical ballet dancer. Have you any idea of the danger you are exposing El Nino to?" She asked my mother.

Ricardo:

I was left alone in the living room while Mama and Abuela argued behind closed doors in my grandmother's bedroom. "No, no. Mama, don't do that to him." I heard my mother scream. The door to the bedroom opens, my mother comes out crying and pushes me into our bedroom. "Mi Amor," she says, "Abuela doesn't approve of you going to ballet school. You know our situation right now, we are living under her rule and I have no other place to go with you and your little brother. I can't afford to fight Angela. We have to wait. Maybe there will be another time, you will dance." I cried and cried and cried until my shattered dreams got so wet with my tears that it melted into nothingness. I took refuge in reading poetry, metaphors were my pills for pain, my tickets to travel, my weapons to fight.

Ricardo:

Time passed and I became a young man studying art history at the University of Havana. Throughout those years, I had been an amateur ferocious actor, director, and theater was my way of expressing myself and conversing with the world. One day my lover, [name] was an editor at the Cuban Film Institute told me of a brand new class that the institute was launching in search of new talents to join the world of filmmakers. I went to audition. I impressed the committee with my poetic approach to storytelling, the moves and mannerisms of my dancing body, the passion of my history, the history of my delivery. They were infiltrated with the possibility that maybe, just maybe, this strong ambitious man who looked like a dancer could be one of the new talents that they were looking for.

Ricardo:

They welcomed me at the Cuban Film Institute. You want to be a director, a photographer, a sound designer, a producer? No. Editing was my choice. Why? Because it is the intersection of movement, history, art, poetry, soul, politics, emotions, and humanity. Because it is the ultimate scenario where cinematic choreography is born, the rest is history and it is still unfolding. That's what I wrote.

Sarah:

It's so beautiful. It's a touching story. How did you then end up in Canada, Toronto doing documentary work and being known as the Story Rescuer?

Ricardo:

This is a long story. I knew from the beginning that editing was the work where I could write, basically. I don't know why my mother always put me to bed reading me poems. She was a little bit eccentric and I really appreciate her. But then I came to Toronto after being here a few times and I knew that Toronto was a city where I have friends and was having a very inspiring artist scene in the early '90s. It was a place where I could reinvent myself and heal and start from scratch. I have a lot of desires and needs to do something, so I arrive and I connect with a few artists. The first films that I edited were with Ali Kazimi, it was his film *Shooting Indians: A Journey With Jeffrey Thomas* about an Iroquois photographer.

Ricardo:

Of course, when I came here I was faced with that question that was kind of strange for me at the time. "Are you a picture editor or a sound editor?" I would go, "What, what is that?" I was formed and raised to be an editor, someone who approaches the story with all the elements of it. That's why, for example, soundtrack, the moment of scoring music in the editing suite is so important for me. Not something that you put in a lame way but something that really adds another layer of emotion to the story. Of course, I immediately say, "No, I am a film editor. If I have to choose, a picture editor of course."

Ricardo:

I worked on a few things but I have the luxury of from the beginning to be able to continue working with artists who were working outside the conventional work. Then reality TV arrived and those shows started coming in. I have nothing against people who work in reality TV, but I cannot do it for myself because I find that it sometimes very problematic with the way that things are manipulated in the name of the show and things are orchestrated and how ethics are so elastic and flexible and how the subjects are twisted and sometimes disrespected. I believe that you should be doing something that you enjoy and that you also understand and respect and feel validated and happy with, and that was not the area. I was very clear about no, it's going to be this way.

Ricardo:

Also, documentary versus fiction. I have nothing against fiction, but I felt that the work that I want to do and the conversations that I want to have with society are more reflected through the genre of documentary and that's where I feel at home in many ways.

Sarah:

Then you got your chops as a documentary editor and then you became known for your storytelling skills and were often brought in to rescue the story in many feature docs. I want to talk about how that came about. How do you approach coming into a project that has already been worked on by somebody else?

Ricardo:

It's difficult.

Sarah:

I can only imagine.

Ricardo:

Sometimes it's difficult and sometimes ... First of all, you have to come with a lot of humbleness. At the same time knowing that you are coming in not to follow something that may have been that it's not working. To be honest, brutally honest, and to come in understanding that it's not about you, it's about the story. It's not about the director, it's about the story. What for me is important is to really understand the relationship that the director has with the footage. What is the story that is behind it? The layers of tension that are sometimes put on top of it in the way that it is told. To us, very important questions depending on the material.

Ricardo:

For example, in the case of Ali Kazimi, he was making a film about an Iroquois photographer and he had been working with very brilliant editors who were all people who I adore. Because Ali was being too serious about how he was approaching Jeffrey, the photographer. When I entered working with him, I asked, "What is it that you have that makes you the person to tell this story versus somebody else? What is your unique connection with this? In which way do you connect as a person with this story you are trying to tell?" For me, it was like an Indian from what is called India in South Asia looking at another kind of Indian. The name of *Shooting Indians* comes from that. I felt like unless you put yourself in as part of this journey and enter the story from a humble and honest place of what seduced you and interested you about Jeffrey, so that in many ways brings you back to your own process, to your own journey. That can't be done by anybody else. What is your uniqueness?

Ricardo:

It's complicated sometimes with a director, a producer of a movie and I would not recommend that in most cases, but when it's good and when it works, it could be beautiful. It's another way of owning a relationship with the story. When he saw that possibility, he empowered himself and the inner voice. His relationship with the subject became different. Now, he became a subject in his own movie. It's a film that is very beautiful. Whenever I see it, and I show it in my master class, we both really feel that it was done yesterday. I think it has to do with the layer of honesty that we are seeing. But then I realize, we need to really then address the whole film. When you change one scene, other scenes may have to be changed. Sometimes it is better to start from scratch than to try to fix something. I don't know if I answered your question.

Sarah:

No, I think you did. It just shows how there's so many levels that you touched on. You go in being humble and it's not about your ego or you as a human, but you're looking for the essence of the story, of the subjects, and then even touching in on the director and the fact that you have an awareness to say actually, you need to be part of this film too, really shows this insight that you have on the whole process of storytelling and you can catch and see what's there. It sounds like even when you wrote your story about becoming an editor, you clearly from a young age, have had a sense of art and story and the essence of being human. I feel like it's instinctive, but how did you realize that that's what you need to do to make these documentaries honest? To make, like you said, that this film still resonates today and you worked on it in the '90s. How does that work for you? How do you know that that's the way you need to pursue the story and the editing?

Ricardo:

I don't know, Sarah for me, every story has an emotional narrative, even if it's about a building or an object, which is different than being melodramatic or sensationalist or opportunistic about using pain in an exploitative way. Every story has a pulse, a subtext and a spirit underneath. I don't know how to say it, but for example, in *Herman's House* ...

[Clip from *Herman's House*]:

I can only about four steps forward before I touch the door. I'm in the cell for 23 hours a day. I'm used to it and that's one of the bad things about it.

*

I'm not a lawyer and I'm not rich and I'm not powerful but I'm an artist and I knew that the only way I could get him out of prison was to get to dream.

*

What kind of house do a man who is out there dream about? I don't dream about no house.

*

That kitchen looks really great. I wanted it yellow, which is like totally '70s, he's been in solitary since 1972.

*

In the front of the house, I have various plants and gardens. I would like for guests to be able to smile and walk through flowers.

*

Jackie, this is the one for the 30 years. Yeah, this is the one he's in now.

*

The majority of my life, it's been in a cell in a cage. The majority of my life.

*

Solitary confinement is solitary confinement. Yes and no. Some people deserve it and some don't.

*

This guy has been in prison three times my life. How can I be like this dude here where he's just at peace.

*

I need help. I'm doing this by myself, Herman. I need help. I know. This is the [inaudible 00:15:27], kiddo. All right? I hear you.

*

It was never my hope that he would have to rely on his house to get out of Angola.

*

Whether I live in the house or not, it makes no difference. It is the symbol of what this house is all about.

Ricardo:

We also have made a choice, a very important choice based on the fact that I was dealing with a story that was a fragmented population of many phone calls that were from five to 15 minutes long interrupted by the voice of the penitentiary in between Herman and Jackie. Those phone calls were going to happen whenever they allowed him to talk, not when you wanted or you expected. But it is

very important that we did not have access to Herman. Herman also at that time, has been 35 years imagining our world and living in solitary confinement in a six by nine cell.

Ricardo:

One day I have this very strong premonition and epiphany that was coming from a place of frustration and anger that said, he had to imagine us for all this time. I think the audience would have to imagine him and dream of Herman because we are not going to show the audience how he looks. At that point, I went from spending two months or three months paralyzed looking at footage or listening to phone conversations and not knowing how to touch this, how to address it, how to enter, how to talk to the material. Until I realized okay, it's this way. Then it became a political act but also a sensorial relationship with the audience.

Ricardo:

I love when you tell stories using the senses. I like to say that today the audience is extremely privileged and there is this expectation that the audience don't have to think. Everything has to be told and then showed, which is the other way around for me. There is this tendency that everything has to be given to the audience because they are entitled to it, and I don't think it's true. I would say that when you walk into one of my films, you are taking ... It's now on your own and I respect that you want to see it, but you're on your own with your own emotions with experience and take responsibility for it. The idea of a film where you don't show the subject also brought this huge question, which was beautiful, how do you do that?

Ricardo:

Then it became this aesthetic challenge, which was okay, let's do it with animation, but no illustration. Let's do it with what I call abstract impressionism circa 1960s. Let's do a homage to the National Film Board animation studio. We knew what we wanted. We didn't want anything sleek or trendy or chic or all that kind of being hip that is so current. We want something that also relates to it. It was that act of finding a way in, which we were able to talk to the material and to Herman. That was for me the turning point, the moment in which I was able to enter the story.

Ricardo:

I have to enter the story as an editor. I cannot exist as a disconnected person that works from nine to five. The story becomes a child and the characters are part of it and I have to take care of them. I do not have to say, I don't think you go through the same experience when you are working in fiction. Perhaps, it's a different process. In a documentary when you have 400 hours of material and 20 or 60 subjects and only four can make it to the story, it's a lot of casting that you have to do. In that casting, you are casting with your respect, with your honesty, with your sensibility, with also understanding the little story and the big story.

Ricardo:

Herman's House is a beautiful example for me of how I cannot force the process. At the beginning, I was paralyzed and I was paralyzed because I was just being a passive receptor of that material. Then when I found my way in, then we started seeing the movie and the rest is history. But one thing that was very

important and we also knew that we could not work with anybody that would not understand or respect our choice, who was we will not show you Herman. Some people from CBC to others came "just if you want it, here's the money, basically. But you have to show Herman." We would say, "No, you are not for us and we are not for you because that's a different movie." Or they would say, "We have in Jackie. We're interested in Herman." That's a different movie, go and make it yourself. These are the kind of conversations that I don't know, I'm very privileged in the sense it's the kind of conversation that you have when you work, of course, in a film for many, many years.

Ricardo:

Then the Ford Foundation came and they came because they understood what we were trying to do. Then we were super lucky because we knew that we were in good hands. Then the Sundance Foundation came - The Sundance Institute - but those are the people that we needed. We needed people who respect and who nurse our creative process.

Sarah:

That's so important and then getting that ... I think as editors we all get those moments where you're kind of paralyzed. You're like, where is the story, what are we doing? When you get that spark of creativity, or you find that whatever it is that you need to find, I sometimes say the creative genius comes through, then you've got to run with it. The fact that you both stood your ground and said no, this is the way that we need to creatively tell this story. This is what the story is. It's just cool, I don't know, I think it's just really inspiring that can be done. That we can stand our ground and we can still, as editors, have a say because we are such an integral part of the process of creating the film. Thank you, thank you for sharing that.

Ricardo:

I think it's important for me, I really feel that we have a lot of power and enough passion that we can put in our work. It's part of our gift and our responsibility also. We are there to take care of the story.

Sarah:

You mentioned to me the film you are working on called *I Am Samuel*. You talked about the ethics of storytelling and also the care of the subject. Can you talk that a little bit, about how that story evolved, and how you actually helped make sure that the people who participated in the film were safe.

Ricardo:

This is a very beautiful question and experience for me. Peter Murimi is an amazing Kenyan artist filmmaker who lives in London, who is a very gifted journalist and photographer. He was making a film about what will be the first story about a gay Kenyan man from the working class who decided to come out to his family, to his friends, to society in a country where you have a penal code that criminalizes homosexuality. That's very difficult to do and very courageous to do. The complexity of the story is that Samuel, who is the main character, has a lover named Alex. Samuel has parents who live in the countryside and he is in Nairobi, the capital, trying to make a life and living.

Ricardo:

When they showed me the rough cut that they had and they were editing for while with another editor in London, I have what I will call a physical reaction. I just felt that the film was told in a way in which

Samuel was a hero and his father was a horrible person. But I could not buy it, and I talked to Peter and to Tony, the producer. Why? What has he done to hurt his son? The issue with the father is the father was a Jehovah Witness pastor. Other than being not in accord with his son's sexual orientation, not understanding homosexuality, which is not a crime, it's a state of mind that you can have. That doesn't necessarily automatically make you a bad person. I myself, didn't understand myself for a long time. That's also part of who I am today.

Ricardo:

I asked the question, what has he done to hurt his son? He said, really nothing. Why are you profiling his father as a bad character? What I see here is a man, you're seeing a father that is using the tools that he has, the weapons he has, which in this case is religion to wrap it around his son so he doesn't get hurt. I would do the same if I would be a parent. When I sat down, he looked at me and said, "I have been trying to say this but my editor was not listening. This is important for people to know. He was an experienced person in that editing suite and I was a director making my first feature film documentary. At some point, it felt like I had to bend to this other power and the way he was taking the film."

Ricardo:

At that point, he asked me, "Do you want to work with me?" I said, "I would love to because I feel that there is an injustice being made here. If I can help to fix it, I would love it because there is nothing more painful than to profile people when you yourself don't want to be profiled." To profile a subject it's in the wrong way. It's something we can do, we have the power to do that as editors and directors working in documentary. The difference for drama, fiction is that those characters are fictional characters. You can kill them, maim them, abuse them, do whatever you want. But you cannot do that to a subject, they are human beings. Their life is super important.

Ricardo:

I went to London and started working with him for over two months and we now have a new film that is the same footage but it's different. Different story, different spirit, and in his film that we have now, his father happens to be the most progressive character and the only subject who evolves in the film. Somewhere at the beginning of the film he is someone who is coming out and he looks at the world like I did when I was his age, everybody is wrong and I'm right. His father is the one who goes from dealing with his own masculinity crisis with his own values to somehow making peace with his own ethics and values but also with his love. I also choose a way of telling this story from a place of love and not from a place of exploitation.

Ricardo:

The other thing that I thought was important and beautiful is how the director and the producer knew that Samuel was making an incredible contribution to society by sharing with us his coming out in a country where you can be burned on the street for being gay. I find it problematic when we go out and we ask people to do and say things that put their life in danger but we don't actually create any mechanism that will protect them from being hurt after that. I think that's a problem. There are cases in which it has been very problematic because the person, the subject has been hurt after.

Ricardo:

In this case, the director knew that by the time *I Am Samuel* will be done and the film is out and premiering, Samuel will need to be somewhere else, away from Kenya, so he could be safe in case there

will be any retribution. I am happy to say that all of this is in place and he is going to Germany to study. His partner is already in Germany. They both will be at university for a while. The movie is very beautiful. I am very biased about that. And I feel very proud that we were able to understand something, which was this is a story in which it's not me coming in and imposing my values of a city boy living in Western society.

Ricardo:

If you want to understand the issue of sexual orientation and coming out in Africa in a traditional family, you need to count with the family. Because there is no way you're going to solve the problem, just by being on your own. Your parents count a lot and I needed to respect that and not to edit and tell the story as if I was Samuel, but to have some distance to also protect his father from Samuel's arrogance. I'm dying to be able to share this film with the audience. I think it's going to be a film.

Sarah:

I really look forward to seeing it. I think it's so beautiful that you do take so much care of the people in your films. I feel like often we kind of forget, or not even that we forget because I even know for myself, I cut documentaries and I've done some short docs where the documentary really impacts my life and makes me feel like I've become a better human from the things I've learned. But I don't the people, those people that the story that I told, I don't actually know them but I feel that they're now so integral to who I am. I think it's a really interesting place to be as an editor in the doc realm where you get to learn so much about somebody and yet they have no idea who you are, but you do still need to respect them as humans. I don't know, it's just such a fascinating position to be in, in life sometimes.

Ricardo:

I like to say sometimes in my master class I talk about the bad characters who are the most special characters in a film, the ones that I have to protect the most because it's so easy to cartoon them, to be unjust, to just abuse their integrity, this humanity. I don't think it's right. I think it's also much more powerful to see how repulsive they may be or not if you show it the way that's a little bit more, has more flesh, more depth and not just as a dot. There's a tendency to do that, to punish the scenes you don't like. We have to be careful with that. It's a conversation I have with many of my fellow editors sometimes. You are not a judge, you're a medium right here to shine on somebody else's story, not to punish them.

Sarah:

It's so much, inspiring things. I feel like in society right now it is so common and so easy just to paint everybody, okay you're the bad guy, it's so black and white but we're all human, so we all have bad and good and there's so much gray in the world. I think by the films that you help create, we show that there's so many sides to everybody. I think it's just beautiful.

Ricardo:

Also, because Sarah I think it's very easy to make a story to preach to the people who are already converted.

Sarah:

Totally, yeah.

Ricardo:

The real challenge for us, the real artistic, the real accomplishment is when you can affect a little bit the perception, the emotion, the feeling, the way they think on the ones who are on the other side of the issue. The power of the stories that we tell is to become difficult conversations but to become a forum, not to be a monologue about us and how great or how victim or whatever we are where there is no room for dialogue, where there is no room for the other person to look at you and for a moment feel different. It's very important to remember that. That's why I always try to say conflict and ideology which I was abused by as being raised in a Communist country, are not tools I would use when it's about people's lives.

Sarah:

Have you worked on something where you've had to struggle with your own morals and values to try to shape the story of say the villain or the bad guy so that you actually yourself had to step back and be like hey, this is kind of against who I am but I still need to tell their story.

Ricardo:

Yeah, I have. I think in every film there's a moment where you feel you know in *Marmato* I had a character that was a Canadian prospector. It was such bullshit in the way he expressed himself, his colonialism. He was brutally honest and he was genuinely interested in those people to exploit them, whatever, but he was. In the film, we have a scene where Lawrence is inside the mine with the miners and he said to them, he said, "I don't want to be lying. What's going to happen here if you don't sign and you don't agree, one day they will come and they will bulldoze your houses and you will be out of here." For me, I respect him so much for that gift. There's a difference between an activist saying they are going to call members of their houses and take them out of here or the villain saying to the victims, they will come, bulldoze your houses and take you out of here. That is what I call in terms of dramatic narrative storytelling, a gift.

Ricardo:

That's what I need. Without his confession, everything else could be my own conspiracy theory. He gave us an incredible gift to make the story powerful and concrete. For that alone, I respected him. There were moments in which it was just ugh, but the reaction I had from friends was, why are you giving him so much time? You are making scenes with him that are kind of eerie, it's like he's one of my heroes in a negative way. He's a protagonist. In his repulsiveness, he is also giving us something very important for the story, so I have to be generous.

Sarah:

I just love the way you look at it and the way that you let yourself just observe and be there for the characters. Even if it's against you or not, something that you would do, you still honor them for who they are. As you said, they become your hero. It's fascinating and makes me think of different ways to observe the footage that I have in my suite and I'm sure the audience will agree. Do you ever find that you bring too much of yourself and your heart and your soul into your work and have to step back in order to protect who you are and protect yourself? Not so much because you're telling a story that's hurting you or something but because you can just put so much of yourself into your pieces or is that

part of how you work? That you need to put your whole being into the work you're doing to make it be amazing.

Ricardo:

That's a very good question, Sarah because I don't know the midterms. I'm passionate. Poetry for me is very important, emotion. I always said that for example, the historic dot of an event in a history book when you find it there, I'm telling you the emotional history of the event. What happened to the people who lived that event, how they were affected. That's what really makes history interesting for me. Not just the disconnected, rational narrative. It's really when you mix the witnesses of that story that the story becomes meaningful for me because then you understand it. It's about the lie and the consequences and the suffering and the waiting and the acrimony of the two brothers who live one on one side of the Berlin Wall and the other one on the other side. It's not about what the Berlin Wall signified, that's just a line. That's something you can find anywhere. But what you cannot find anywhere is what happened to those two that could happen to you too if another wall is built. For me, I have to be able to connect. Yeah, involvement is problematic sometimes, I get too involved.

Ricardo:

I remember once Karen Merdez from the Ford Foundation now, at the time she was at Sundance, said to me, "I love you because the way you protect your storytelling." I said, "Yes, I accept the dialogue, I accept the feedback, but what I don't accept is when you start abusing my story in the way you do not understand it or disrespect it because then I will push back. Because I know here to take that, I want an elevated discourse.

Ricardo:

That's why for me it's so difficult to decide who do you invite to a screening. Sometimes people go to a screening and what they want to tell you is that you got it wrong. Let me tell you how to make your film. It's like hold on a second, back off. It's my film, not yours. That perspective needs to exist. I have to be involved. For example, in *Herman's House*, I never cry during the storytelling of the film. Then the day that Herman died, I cried for too long, I cried for almost a day, I couldn't stop crying. I realized I was crying because someone who was very close to me has died. It was almost like a father.

Ricardo:

That happened when Asencion from *The Silence of Others* died. I felt very touched by him, very, very touched. All the emotion, all the control, the feelings I hold back when I was editing that difficult sequence of 11 days of exhumation, finding the body of the father. All of that, I released at that moment perhaps. Because we do establish a connection, it's about humanity. I don't know, I have the specialty of always dealing with very complicated issues. Maybe I should start making movies about flowers.

Sarah:

It might be a little bit lighter but I don't know, the flowers die sometimes too.

Ricardo:

Exactly.

Sarah:

You touched on something, I could step back into a personal experience for myself where I worked on this, it was just a short piece, but I really felt a fondness for the character. She was this beautiful woman and she was teaching us some traditional Cree basket weaving. Anyway, she was beautiful and I really enjoyed what I learned from her. During the process of this bigger project, she ended up passing away and I was so emotional and I kind of felt like hearing you tell that story made me realize like I didn't ... I kind of felt weird about it. I was like, why am I so upset? I never even met this woman. But I was helping her share her tradition with the world and it felt like it was so important and then she also taught me so much. We are in a really lucky spot as editors and as filmmakers to bring those stories to the world but also to ourselves. We get the privilege of really getting to know somebody on an intimate level without actually knowing them. I don't know, it's just so interesting.

Ricardo:

It's very interesting. You're a medium. I think it's really important to have empathy for the people who have put themselves in such a vulnerable place to give you a part of their life to play with.

Sarah:

Yeah, totally.

Ricardo:

I think it's good to cry for whatever is the time.

Sarah:

How do you approach telling stories of underrepresented people and what are you mindful of?

Ricardo:

I think it's very complex sometimes. Maybe we should talk about *The Blessing*.

[Clip from *The Blessing*]:

If you have no respect for the earth, it'll take your life. You don't just go digging it up and destroying it. These mountains are sacred. Last night I prayed, please do not forsake me mother earth. I walk in two worlds.

Ricardo:

The Blessing is a story of a Navajo father who works in a coal mine and he has four children. The directors were after me for almost a year when I was in Spain editing. When I came back to Toronto, I finally watched their story and they were so persistent, so persistent. I saw something that was very conflicting that I could not get away from it. It was very problematic. I felt like it had a lot of potential. They flew me to New York and I told them what I thought. I said, "I don't think your movie is about the coal mine. The coal mine is a monolithic object in the background of the life of these people. What do you have of these people? What happens if we flip the values of this story where the coal mine goes where it belongs in the background, the people come to the foreground?"

Ricardo:

It was a magic process. I really respect directors and producers who have the courage to go after whoever they consider the best advisor that they can have who is also capable to know when a movie is in trouble, don't know exactly how to fix it, but we are going to find that person that will help us to fix it. That's a gift. It has nothing to do with being weak, it's the opposite for me. Then they start showing me all this footage and all this footage and then the film became about something else. What was so important in that story was that I like to present the movie as this is the story of a single parent of a middle class, single parent father who happens to be a Navajo. That's the way I want the audience to see it. I don't want the audience to see the poor Navajo that live in a coal mine. No, that's the cliché. That is the way that we have badly represented them.

Ricardo:

The other thing that was important for me was I realized that they gave him a GoPro and to be honest with you, I didn't know what to do with that footage. I felt like I don't know what to do with this. Then one day I started looking at the footage and I went like, wow. He's giving us access to a kind of beauty and honesty and tempo and color of his personal life that is not filtered by the presence of our cameras, our crew, our visit, our time with them, our privilege. I said to the director, I think he needs to be a collaborator and not just be a subject. That was very powerful for us. Only for me to understand that, then the way I found how to use his footage through the film, you have different texture but also who compliments what we are saying. It was a very difficult balance. I don't know how we got it. If you saw the film, you can tell me if you think it works or not.

Sarah:

I thought it worked.

Ricardo:

Thanks. It was a way of giving him respect. Those are things that for me are important, super important. When we talk about cultural appropriation and other issues that have to do with who has the power when we're sharing the story, those things are important. I am against the idea that stories can only be told by people who belong to a community, because then we will be living in a world of walls and indifference. Stories need to be told from a place of awareness and collaboration and respect and empowering the people that you are also storytelling about if they need to be empowered.

Sarah:

Another thing I want to touch on is to me it sounds like you were helping to write these films, but often editors don't get the writing credit. What are your thoughts, and I think I know what your thoughts are, but what are thoughts on editors getting the writing credit for the writing that we're doing in the suite.

Ricardo:

This is a very important ethical conversation about what is the collaboration and who does what? In retrospect, I think I have been a co-writer of pretty much all the films I have helped to craft because that's the kind of editor that I am. That will be one reason that you will work with me. Where do you write a documentary, when you have 400 hours of footage? You write in the editing suite. That's why I

also talk about in one of my classes is, is documentary the fiction of reality? Surely it's the fictionalization. It's something that you invent, and de-invent in one day. But the difference is that as a documentary filmmaker I'm working with reality not with fiction. But to pull down a five-hour event into a beautiful four-minute scene that has a heart, that is three dimensional, there is no, that word I hate so much, wallpaper, it's really an experience. I have to work with all the elements of storytelling. So I'm writing. Writing is not to write for parts.

Ricardo:

Also, when you structure, when you define what are the different narrators of the story, what are the values of the storytelling, what are the storylines? That is writing. And I'm very much an active collaborator who put in all my gifts, and all my drama sometimes. And the sad aspect is for a long time, I didn't ask myself. The directors and the producers would take it for granted. We have the credit of writers. Sometimes producers who will not even write, they just will correct the grammar will be co-writers and it is not. For example, something very beautiful that happened in *The Silence of Others*, Robert Bahar is the producer and the partner of Almudena Carracedo, the director. He called me one day and said, "Rickie we need to talk about the writing credit." I said, "Writing credit, what's up?" He said, "We had four writers." "Who are they?" "Almudena, you, Kim Roberts, and me." I honestly start, I have tears. I feel so emotional because I never had a situation where a director or producer have that quality of saying we all want to honor what we did.

Ricardo:

They were nominated for the Alma Awards for Best Screenplay and we won that against fiction films. That was also very wild apart from of course winning the Goya which is Spanish Oscar for Best Documentary. But from that moment on, every film that I work on, I discuss at the beginning of the film about the writing credit. A writing credit I cannot take for granted. If you give me some paperwork, a paper cut and I am just a pair of hands, cool, that's not my writing credit. But if I am going to work in a process where I put in all my complexity as an artist, we know that the film gets to be richer in the editing suite. I think it's fair, respectful and important that it is recognized. That is discussed and agreed upfront because again and again and again every day there are editors who are not given that credit when they should have it. This is not something that we need to do alone. This has to be done with the complicity and the respect and the collaboration of the directors and producers.

Sarah:

Yeah, that producer basically gave you permission to actually ask for that in the future, the fact that he came to you and said, you're one of the writers. Then you're like, wait a minute, I am. It gave you that agency to say, I am a writer. I think you telling that story can allow other people to step forward and say actually, this is the way I work. We are collaborating in the suite.

Ricardo:

I think it's important. I don't see Nick Hector as anything else but a writer. Cathy Gulkin nothing but a co-writer of every film she worked on.

Sarah:

For sure, yeah.

Ricardo:

That's why I also teach young editors when they work with me, what do you bring to the story? What are the tools that are part of your gift and your responsibility? This whole business about the writing thing needs to really be discussed. Not for a passive/aggressive way of oh, it's my credit. It's really understanding what's your contribution. It's a conversation that needs to happen more and more.

Sarah:

I might start doing that myself, thank you very much. I think one of the things that even if you're starting that conversation with somebody when you're first working with them shows that you are collaborative, work like you want a collaborative working relationship. I find for myself when I'm feeling like I am in an authentically more even-leveled collaborative situation, the film is always heightened because we are both putting fully ourselves in. I think if you start having conversations like that at the beginning, you're going to get those moments I feel a little bit easier, maybe. You mentioned working with younger editors and stuff and I'm curious, what kind of tips would you give young editors or just editors in general in the documentary world?

Ricardo:

Demo reel. I think that it is disrespectful, insulting, against what we do.

Sarah:

You can't show how you tell a story in three minutes.

Ricardo:

Somebody will call you and say, do you have a demo reel? No, I have the right to say, I am sorry that is not a question to ask. People need to know that. Since I'm changing that level, does that mean the conversation is becoming less important, less sophisticated, less valuable. You are devaluing, disrespecting your craft and your gift. No, no to demo reels yes to: do you have time to watch the work that I have done? Let me give you three samples. To know that it's okay to say no. Also, very important too, you as an editor are also entitled and encouraged, I think, to ask questions, to interview the director. It's not one way, it's both ways. I think that it is very powerful and very important that you talk about story when you are looking for a potential job. That is story talking, that way in which we realize if we are clicking or not, there is already a connection, there is an energy that will be a good omen to what can happen or not after.

Ricardo:

It's important that you also ask questions, that you also interrogate, that you also know that you are there as a collaborator, not as a staff. I also don't like the word product. I don't do products, I make films. Clients, my directors are collaborators are artists are people who I respect and they respect me. We work and I don't have a *client*.

Sarah:

That's interesting you say that because I often say, I have a producer coming over or a director coming over and it sometimes feels funny to say client also in the edit suite. You spend so much time with somebody, they become your friend.

Ricardo:

I can understand they're my friends. I also think that for me it's important to understand what is feasible, doable, right, respected, and a mature schedule for making this film happen. You spend six years filming and you are giving me four weeks for editing. No, I don't want to work with you. If you don't have the respect for the editing process and fight for it, then it's going to be a disaster. I know that we are drawn and you want the job and if they say to you eight weeks, stories don't get to be made in eight weeks. Some of them do but I'm talking about really thinking about with time and because a practice has been implemented doesn't necessarily mean that it's the right practice. It's healthy to really have these conversations or even to say, well I have this schedule but let's agree that we may be over by three weeks, and have that preliminary conversation.

Sarah:

To be realistic.

Ricardo:

To be realistic and to know that workaholism is not going to make you better. It's important that you also know what are those films that you can be good for or not. I'm not the right storyteller or the right collaborator for every story or every filmmaker, absolutely not.

Sarah:

I think that's something that comes when you have experience too. I know for myself, when I was younger, I just took everything. Then I'd work with people that I was like, I'm not comfortable with and then I got to a point where I was like, why am I in that situation, I can say no, and to be allowed to say no is something that takes practice.

Ricardo:

It takes practice, it's complex.

Sarah:

But it's important.

Ricardo:

It's definitely important. I also think that you need to be able to take control of your editing suite because it's your temple, not them. Everybody always is a visitor, but it's your temple, it's your house.

Sarah:

Yeah, for sure. That totally makes sense.

Ricardo:

It's very important that that also is respected. I don't know, the point of knowing as an editor, you are someone who is there to inspire, to ask difficult questions, to come out with amazing solutions, to have fun, to collaborate, to be passionate, to fight really for whatever you think is the right way to go. Sometimes when our egos, that we all have, get in the way, have the capacity to say, ego, let me alone. Send the ego for a walk. For a long time, I have been having the pleasure of working, having as an assistant editor someone who I think is very talented and is John, Chris, Jordan. Ever since then, you don't have to grade editors. One is David Casella who is fantastic and I adore. We are very different human beings, very different. We compliment a lot.

Ricardo:

I love it that he has been able to experience his creative process in those two environments. I love the idea when I'm working in a scene, I will just go and tell Jordan, "Let me tell you what I am doing." For me it was very important if he was going to be my associate editor or my own assistant who I saw that had all the potential to be a great editor that he understood the reason why that scene was that way and no other way. He loved that kind of conversation, which for me was a way of grooming - not of giving him some of the experience, I don't know. Those things are not rushed, I think they come from a place you don't own, they are within you. But the way I put a scene or not, is something I don't even know when I'm starting to work on it, but I need to channel it. I love sharing that with an assistant editor.

Sarah:

I think it's so important because we don't get that very often anymore the way our industry is to even have those moments.

Ricardo:

Yeah, we don't. I had the privilege of being an assistant editor in the time of 35mm prints. I will be sitting there absorbing and observing and once a while [my editor] will say, "What do you think Ricardo?" I will go blah, blah, blah. That was an amazing class to be in an environment where I was being taught how to tell a story but also what is the role that you play as a storyteller when you are an editor. The moment we become passive/aggressive and we start saying, oh sure, I will do that. That's the moment that we start doing the wrong thing with the story.

Sarah:

Yeah, and I think we've all come to that where you get frustrated.

Ricardo:

It's painful, very painful when you do it. You know that you are just punishing you and the story and it's toxic. Also, to be able to know when you need help and to have a brilliant mentor or partner or another editor that you consider someone that you respect that you can share your work and show your belly, share your vulnerability and that person is not going to hurt you or the story. That's going to give you very meaningful feedback. I have those and they are different for every film.

Sarah:

That is so important. It is really scary to sometimes share that, especially if you know it's not working because we all want to be perfect. We all want to be the best, and the more we share in those hard moments, the better we can be, all of us can be. Even watching somebody else's work and giving constructive feedback in a gentle way makes you a better editor too.

Ricardo:

Absolutely, and for me I am the product of my privilege, of my community of friends, editors who I share my work with, that share their work with me. I learned that with many years of collaborating with being part of the Sundance documentary program and being in a lab as a fellow and being in a lab as a mentor, it's a great circle. You're on both sides of that. It's the beauty of knowing that in that circle, in that moment, the people who are giving you advice are doing it in a very respectful way, but they are all also brilliant storytellers. Those are advice that not necessarily you have to take. They're powerful because they empower your process, your critical process of thinking about what you're doing, how it can be better or worse. I don't think we have a lot of that in the Canadian context.

Sarah:

I don't think so either. I think we need more of that, for sure.

Ricardo:

This amount of solitude that we spend alone, not having any support. I do a lot of work more and more as a story editor, as a consultant, I don't know what to call it anymore. I work for both, for the director and for the editor, and I did that on many films. For me, it's important to work for both. Sometimes the editor needs to be alone and the director doesn't know how to do it, and I will say hey, back off. Let me work with him. The editor doesn't know that he can say or she can say, "I need space." I feel very proud when I have been able to do that. I probably have more advice but those are my....

Sarah:

Everybody is going to want to come and visit you and learn from you after listening to this episode I think. Thank you for sharing so much insight into your process and your thoughts on what story is and how important characters are and how important we are as human beings. I found it really inspiring, so thank you for taking the time to share with me today and to share it with everyone who is going to listen.

Ricardo:

Thank you to you, Sarah. We will see each other some time in Toronto.

Sarah:

I hope so, yes.

Sarah:

Thanks for joining us today, and a big thank you to Ricardo for taking the time to sit with me. I'm happy to let you know that *I Am Samuel* is having its world premier at Hot Docs International Documentary Festival. Check out hotdocs.ca to find out more. A special thanks goes to Jane MacRae. The main title sound design was created by Jane Tattersall, additional ADR recording by Andrea Rusch. Original music

provided by Chad Blaine. This episode was mixed and mastered by Tony Bao. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and tell your friends to tune in. Until next time, I'm your host, Sarah Taylor.

[Outro]

The CCE is a nonprofit organization with the goal of bettering the art and science of picture editing. If you wish to become a CCE member, please visit our website, www.cceditors.ca. Join our great community of Canadian editors for more related info.