

SCREEN DIRECTORS GUILD OF IRELAND

LEFT: Lisa Mulcahy and Mary Murray on the set of *Situations Vacant*.



SDGI Director in Focus

LISA MULCAHY TV, drama and documentary director, answers some questions about directing and making her first feature.

How do you communicate your vision?

My approach to making films is no different to how I approach a TV drama. When I read a script first, a certain image inspired by the story will pop into my head. This could be an image from another film or a photo I've taken or a snapshot of some action I have witnessed on the street that represents the project visually or tonally. I love to watch people and how they behave. If it hadn't been drummed into me when I was a child that it's rude to stare I would happily spend my days gawking at people. Airports are one of my favourite places because you have all the elements right there for good drama: lots of people out of their comfort zone and on a tight schedule, faced with potential conflict at every turn.

My vision of the film will develop over time. At the start, before I've seen any locations or begun auditioning, it's all quite loose. I have an ideas folder stashed away in my brain where I throw fleeting images or colours or bits of music or even sound effects – every element that will eventually be a part of the final picture. Sometimes I will have put something there early on that will seem absolutely crucial to the project that I'll have to jettison later on – perhaps it's a shot that we can't achieve because of the budget.

I've just finished my first feature film, called *Situations Vacant*. It's a contemporary comedy about three guys in their twenties trying to make something of their lives and discovering that, at every turn, life gets in their way. It's very funny and also quite poignant at times. It turned out that we couldn't afford a dolly and tracks. There was no point in lamenting that. But there were so many characters (over forty speaking parts) and locations that having shots that were mostly static and uncomplicated

but carefully composed seemed right. In a way, I like limitations, I love the challenge of having to solve a problem and being creative at the same time.

For me, the creative process really kicks in when auditions begin. I love casting and always want to see as many actors as I can (or am allowed to!) and like to use improv as well as scripted material. I try not to get hooked on the idea of a certain actor too early, as often it doesn't work out. Also, you might see an actor later in the casting process who is actually much better for the part. It's important to have an open mind when you are making a film – I don't mean that you shouldn't make decisions or have a very definite strategy but the door to your brain should always be left slightly ajar so that if something unexpected happens which is better than your plan, you're ready to pounce.

Actors do unexpected things all the time. Working and watching them is so thrilling and really a wonderful way to spend your days. There really is nothing better than being on a set where good work is happening and everyone – cast and crew alike – are enjoying themselves and feeling fulfilled. I don't like bad vibes or grumpiness on the set – it's bad for your health.

What makes an Irish director different creatively from other directors?

I don't think the fact that I am Irish makes me the director that I am. Perhaps if I were making a very local story, my affinity with the Irish 'psyche' would help me understand the characters' world but really all stories are about relationships and emotions. You can be from anywhere and go anywhere to make your film as long as you understand or want to explore the human condition.

It's the same when people ask whether it is more difficult being a female director. It's true that there are more men directing feature films and TV drama than women (in Ireland, at least). One wonders why that is, considering that the film and media courses all around the country have as many female as male students. However, I've never considered my sex to be an inhibitor to what I want to do. Perhaps it has been but what good does it do me to ponder that? If people don't want to work with me simply because I am a woman, well, there's not a lot I can do about that.

Is the audience in your mind when you're at work?

I think it is important to know who your target audience is but I don't think of the audience when I'm working. I'm the audience, really. The work has to please me and I can't go off after a day's filming and think, 'Well, I didn't much like that but I think the audience will.' That would be a disaster and the work would be awful.

Also, with comedy you can get a fairly good idea whether your movie will be funny or not while you're actually shooting. If the crew and cast are standing around po-faced while you're cracking up, chances are your movie is not very funny. So, although I have to trust my instincts, it's also important to be aware of the reactions around me. If the crew are laughing and there isn't a rabid madness in their eyes then I'm probably onto a good thing!

What films have had a creative impact on your work?

I always have difficulty when asked what my favourite film is. The first thing I usually say is that *What's Up, Doc?* with Barbra Streisand and Ryan O'Neal is definitely up there in my top five. Immediately people look at me differently – am I nuts? I don't think so. Am I? It's one of the funniest films I have ever seen and believe me, I've seen it a lot.

There are certainly directors whose movies I would not miss – The Coen Brothers, Stephen Frears, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, Neil Jordan, Christopher Guest, Francis Ford Coppola, Alexander Payne and Robert Altman (sadly, no more.) I see that there are no women there. Note to self: go see more movies directed by women, or even better, make more films myself.

What would you like to be remembered for?

I'd like to be remembered for directing Sean Penn and Kathy Bates to Oscar®-winning performances whilst also receiving an Oscar® myself for what would be universally regarded as the best film ever made. ❖