



Sound of Metal lead actor Riz Ahmed, Oscar nominee for Best Actor, with Darius during filming

around people needing to say “yes” to me. Which is a long way of saying that there have been a lot of years with little to no money. However, I do deal with *The Machine That Doesn't Get It*. Hollywood wants to see everything before it's made. If you're talking about an idea, they ask, “What happens next?” They want to apprehend the whole thing before it's written... so we see superhero movies and remakes; they're already written, bottled, and packaged. Hollywood has a hard time with the unknown. They think they can avoid making costly mistakes by asserting control. But that's not how I work. I do a lot of unorthodox and reckless things to facilitate an entirely different process.

Such as?

I shot *Sound of Metal* on 35mm film because it signals energy, the aesthetic is different. Also, it's finite, you can't shoot forever. There's a danger quotient to film. Video makes people lazy. You can try this or that all day... [and that affects] the energy level of the whole set. I wanted to raise the film's energy level, increase the precariousness.

For instance, in *Sound of Metal*, the music performances were filmed live, in a club with an audience. I wanted to signal to the actors that something was at stake; this wasn't about movie magic, this was about the actors' magic. My message was: “If I'm willing to fail and there's no safety net for me, then there's no safety net for you, the actor.” I wasn't just talking. This wasn't about failure as a hypothetical; I had to be willing to risk it all to get the film I wanted.

I also shot the film sequentially, so we couldn't go back and “fix” shots. It was like life; it exists in the moment and then it's gone.

What makes you willing to take these risks?

It's almost hubristic to think you can make something perfect. There is no success without failure. There's no success if you try to avert it. I tell my actors, “This is a place to make mistakes.” A script is a platform that wants to be solid. Just like a parent with a child. You want to be solid, not to control your child. You're solid so that your

child can make mistakes, knowing you won't fall apart. The director and script are there so an actor can fail. If the actor can't fail, there will be no magic, no transcendence. That engagement is essential. The paradox is you can't remove yourself from failure. Failure is something that doesn't match your intentions. It's not linear. It feels bad. We are taught to hate it. That's natural. Yet it molds us. When we allow ourselves to exist in that void, that's where the gold is found.

It sounds like you welcome failure.

It would be disingenuous to say I welcome it. In fact I've always been a perfectionist. I've spent years creatively blocked trying to avoid failure. I didn't hand in one single paper at Putney for that very reason. I'm constantly wrestling with this. Sometimes it gets hard to see. But I've spent my time in the hell of perfectionism. When I lose my way I let certain guideposts help me. I follow intuitive patterns; I've learned to trust even when they don't make sense. I follow synchronistic events that help in that landscape of the unknown.

Do you think your early life set the stage for your courage to be at peace with what most of us would call failure?

No. My family's relationship with failure is complicated. They are eccentric intellectuals and artists who have largely (at least in the context of art) chosen obscurity over scrutiny. My parents (both artists themselves) have also been lifelong spiritual seekers. In a way I look at the life of an artist from this vantage. Filmmaking for me is a continuation of their work. Gurdjieff talked about how we mostly walk around in a dream, asleep to the larger truths. The Putney School touches upon that same realm. It sets the stage where things can be messy and uncomfortable and at its best [gives students] a way to do that safely. It's wonderful to see Putney exploring this notion of failure. It's just such a delicious paradox. When we don't confront our own failure, we create pain. While we try to protect, we harm, we create discord. We think failure is for others. “I'm not a part of that catastrophe!” But then, in every good story—as in life—the villains always think they're right. ■

plans. A phone call from Ruth Charney, my favorite middle-school teacher, came out of the blue asking me to help her teach English. I said “yes.” Working with kids over those years put me in service of something greater than myself. That notion of “service to” is something I come back to when times are tough.

Is it difficult to deal with the industry's “gate-keepers”—those responsible for green-lighting a film's production?

Professionally I haven't done much approval seeking. I didn't design a career