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Ken Feinberg At The Cannes Film Festival

The Cannes International Film Festival has almost nothing in common with the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles and Hollywood, and yet, people tend to treat each other in the same way: every man for himself. When someone takes time out of their schedule to speak to you, knowing that you are not going to buy their movie or advance their career in some way, that person is someone who is worth talking to. This was the sort of situation that led me to Ken Feinberg, writer and director of two films currently being shown in the Short Film Corner. He didn't find our fortuitous meeting in the near rat race inside the film market out of the ordinary. Feinberg, an AFM and three-time Sundance veteran, has found Cannes to be much more relaxed and receptive than the Los Angeles crowd; he reasons that if you come all the way to France, you must have something more to offer. To be fair, Feinberg is friendly with everyone he meets, and it is perhaps because of this trait that he has found Cannes to be so receptive to him. "There's a reason this guy is sitting here," he said, leaning over towards a man at another table to illustrate his point, "There are no strangers, only friends I haven't met yet."

This philosophy emanates from everything Mr. Feinberg does: aside from being a filmmaker, he is a relationship counselor who has been pursuing Kabbalah studies for three years now. In his pursuit of these "mystical studies," he has discovered an important idea that has been lost in today's society. According to this idea, life is made up of three levels: the beginning, where we learn and grow, the middle, where we do and accomplish, and the end, where we give back of our wisdom, this third idea being the one that is the most lost today and the one that Feinberg most emphasizes in his storytelling. Both the films he is showing in Cannes, Seven Generations and Hearts and Souls, are based on this mentality.

Seven Generations, a 9-minute short about Cherokee Indians, was actually based off of a much longer novel written by Feinberg himself called The Other Side of Now. The film, shot on Cherokee land in Talking Rock, Georgia, focuses on a section of the story, which recounts the life of a basketball player who is knocked back in time to relive his past lives. Seven Generations is the story of one of these lives. Even not knowing the history of the film, one can see when watching the scene focusing on the man's life as the son of a shaman that it is not a stereotypical story of Native Americans. Even the dialogue seems modern, stemming from the original premise. This idea also, however, comes from Feinberg's impression of the shaman he met. Feinberg seems to have a gift for understanding and connecting with people, and this trait was obvious as he recounted his meeting with the Cherokee shaman: "[The shaman was] full of life, full of inner character. [He seemed] connected to the Earth." The shaman in his film took on many of these traits, receiving most of the humorous lines, and also acting as the connection between the two other characters: his own son and the daughter of the chief of a warring tribe. "He'd been trying to get them together for lifetimes..." Feinberg explains of the shaman, who can see into the future and is trying to solve hate with love, a concept that seems lost on most people of our time.

When asked why he chose this particular segment of the novel to develop into a short, Feinberg told the story of the main actress, Nalini Sharma, who asked Feinberg to cast her in a film that she could use to work her way into the acting scene. They decided to shoot the whole film as opposed to just one scene, but for a little while, it seemed as though it would be impossible: there was no one to play the male lead. The very last actor to walk into trouts seemed to be physically perfect for the role, and Feinberg, recounting the story, cited his reaction, "Oh my God. Can he act?" The actor, has now moved on to working in Los Angeles, and Feinberg has high hopes for the film as well: he is looking to make the novel into a feature.

Feinberg's second film, Hearts and Souls, opens in a cabin in Covington, Georgia (coincidentally, the same one used in My Cousin Vinny), and immediately emits the feel of a fairytale. In fact, the modern story recounting a grandmother's attempt to reconcile her grandson and his estranged wife is loosely based off of the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood. This film addresses the same themes as Seven Generations, but in a more realistic scenario. As Grandmother Wolf's desire for the couple to reconnect becomes realized, we are greeted once again with the familiar themes of life and death, the connections between people on Earth, and the circle of life.

Feinberg, an obviously very spiritual man, addressed the difficulties he faced while filming as signs. During the filming of Seven Generations, the DP expressed his worry that there was too much fog for a clear picture. Feinberg, however, decided to shoot anyway, and upon viewing the film, one can see that he made the right decision: the shots are beautiful, especially the almost mystical ones of the shaman (played by Feinberg's father) surrounded by fog on the foothills. Hearts and Souls as well posed some problems during production. During taping of the film, which was shot in the wintertime, the crew was worried that the scenery would not be green enough to portray the spring environment of the film. Feinberg's producer jokingly told him that directing might not be in the cards for him, but on both days of filming, the sun came out, and on the day of the outdoor scenes, the temperature rose to 70 degrees. Feinberg countered to his producer that this was, "God's way of telling [him] to direct."

Both films retain many of the same themes, such as an older character passing on their wisdom to the younger. Feinberg especially emphasized this word, "wisdom is key." He went on to note, "When I make a film, my essence enters it [...] to teach people how to make relationships better." Using his films as a canvas, Feinberg attempts to paint an image of his philosophies, such as his ideas regarding life and death. Feinberg seeks to express a deeper understanding of what life is about. In explaining the theory to me, he used the metaphor of a man driving a car. When the driver exits, he leaves the car behind but continues living. In this way, a man leaves his body behind, but his energy and spirit continues. According to Feinberg's philosophy, there is more to life than "typical Hollywood retreads." Searching for the words, Feinberg tried to explain what he meant. "A lot of films are about distance... my world is about world peace." He seeks not to distance the audience from his films, but to teach them. He knows that life mimics movies: especially in today's society, much of what we learn about life in general is pulled from what we see on the silver screen. Feinberg wants to portray the fact that one can enhance his own life and the life of someone else simultaneously. "A lot of films give hope, but not the how..." he explains. Feinberg, in his filmmaking, ventures to make films that will give an audience this illusive "how."

For more information on the artist and his films, visit:

www.sevengenerationsfilm.com

www.kenfeinberg.com

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