



Michelle Krusiec interview: Her journey in ‘Hollywood’ and filmmaking

In her two decades in the entertainment industry, Michelle Krusiec has worn a variety of hats. Director, actress, producer, writer, activist, stage performer. But now, Krusiec is taking a heavy focus on the director’s chair, creating her first short film *Bite*.

Best known for appearing in *Hollywood* on Netflix and the film *Saving Face*, Krusiec has as diverse of a filmography as you can get. From indie web series to big budget films, Krusiec has done it all. But just as diverse as her acting catalog is her roles in TV and film.

Producing the TV series *Nice Girls Crew* and the film *The Bone Box*, Krusiec also directed and produced the web series *Scenes from a Real Marriage*. But it’s *Bite* that is truly taking Krusiec’s career to the next level. We spoke with Krusiec about her new film and her various projects over the years.



Tell us about your history as a filmmaker. How did you start your journey?

My entrance into filmmaking is by way of acting. In 1996, I was cast in an early docu-style travel series called *Travelers* where I traveled around the world for the Discovery Channel.

That job is where I learned some of the best filmmaking ever, because we were documentarians. Much of my early filmmaking imprint is derived from on the ground writing, producing, and directing in the moment based on real time interactions.

I then moved to LA and began working as an actor. Acting gave me a language for not only understanding my craft, but it helped me understand set life and set politics, power hierarchies, and how you navigate confidently around a set.

I always knew I would transition into directing, but I wanted to do it when I knew I had something to say that was not just about myself, but of how I could relate the deeply personal to others.

You've worked in front of the camera, behind-the-camera and as a writer . . . what came first?

Great question. My first memory was of dance. I had always wanted to be a dancer. Physical expression was always in my bones, but it wasn't something that was fully nurtured in my household. Writing came very shortly after that. I was very sheltered as a kid, I was never given much to do, so I read a lot.

When I started acting, I was very inspired by writer-performers like John Leguizamo or Spalding Gray, and even now when I watch Dave Chapelle, that style of storytelling is what I'm drawn to the most. Phoebe Waller Bridge is another tremendously talented writer/performer.

But if I see devised theatre like Pina Bausch's work, I'm also arrested by the raw expression of this kind of physical relationship with the audience. So I'd have to say if I could keep a foot in both physical performance and literary, I'd be very very pleased.

Tell us about how the knowledge of each of these creative roles has rounded out your filmmaking process?

Having been an actor for over 20 years has been some of the best training a director can have. It has taught me to have extremely sharp script analysis and it's taught me to listen to my instincts and sense when something is truthful or not. It has also taught me resilience and no one can teach you that. I've had highs and lows and I've managed to keep returning.

Writing for me is very personal. I'm constantly asking how I can bring more intimacy into my writing so there can be universality. As a director, I'm only learning myself where my strengths are, but I'm interested in bringing stories that feel visceral yet new to our cultural landscape as a BIPOC. My experience as BIPOC and female is what informs my leadership and how I hope to create a set that feels collaborative and safe.

Who are your current influences?

I never went to film school so I'm watching everyone right now in my Directing Workshop for Women at AFI. I find myself more drawn to international directors like Ozu, Andrea Arnold, Park Chan-wook, Lynn Ramsay who all have such distinct filmographies.



I don't know who my influences are yet, but there are directors who talk about the meaning of their work in a capacity that inspires me to do the same: Ava DuVernay, Mira Nair, Bong Joon Ho, Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón.

What five TV shows do you think everyone should watch this year?

Pose, Ramy, Kim's Convenience, Pen15, When They See Us.



What was the one movie you saw that made you want to go into film?

Whale Rider.

How was working with Ryan Murphy? What did you learn from the experience?

Ryan is the kind of creator where if you're at a restaurant, he's the dish that goes by your table and you ask, "what was that! What are they having?" He knows how to capture your attention and he has an extraordinary sense for what whets your appetite.

From his set, I learned that you find the most talented and truly diverse crew, you keep them very well fed, you challenge them to be as creative as possible within their field, offer them consistent work and they will bring their A game every day.

Tell us about your short film *Bite*, what has been the hardest part of development/pre-pro?

Bite is based on the night my mother had a little breakdown when I was sixteen. I'm developing and producing/directing it as part of the Directing Workshop for Women at AFI. We were about to crowdfund just as we were going into the quarantine in March. This pandemic has obviously been a challenge for everyone.

I'm trying to fundraise, but it's not easy given how financially strapped everyone is and with our ongoing civil rights movement, everything is in turmoil. We're also trying to stretch our tiny budget to include strict COVID safety measures.

All of it is keeping me out of the creative zone, which is where my concentration should be at, so it's been a struggle to work with the restrictions while not letting the restrictions work me. On top of that, I have 2 kids and I mention this for working female directors who are also mothers, because the harsh reality is it feels impossible to make time for our creative work.

I'm not having the quarantine other people might be having where you're wondering what to stream next. I'm having the quarantine where I can only work maybe 2 hours a day with undivided attention from my family and a partner who is also working. It's a tough lesson on focus and mental gymnastics.

Where did the concept come from *Bite*?

Bite is an extrapolation from a larger narrative feature about a young woman who discovers African dance and it liberates her. It's mostly autobiographical and I wrote the short for a certain actress who I had in mind for the part. My hope was to use the short film as a way of getting the feature made.

What music inspires you to create?

Every kind of music. Since I wanted to be a dancer, I am so sensitive to music and scoring. Right now, I'm listening to Philip Glass *Knee 5*, *La Jeune Fille en Feu* (Arthur Simonini), Agnes Obel, Bibio.

Talk us through your creative process.

I don't know when my process "begins," but usually I am struggling with some question or conflict in my life and then the work or project appears that allows me to work with that material.

That material might be handed to me or I might be generating it. I then pore through the script or I write it based on the personal material and I find a dream that activates my subconscious.

The subconscious gives me a ton of imagery and I recreate that imagery with a series of discovered physical gestures that help ground me into what those images actually mean to me, because the subconscious, it's elusive, so the gestures keep me connected to the original impulse.

And I have to do a ton of exploration with the images so I understand why my imagination picked those images, and I have to connect to them in a way where my subconscious is teaching me what the images are about. Once I understand, I write to those images, using them whenever possible to create the bones of the script.

And then I use those images additionally as a director and I try to preserve those visuals within my film or help translate those images and that story into my project (whenever possible). Sometimes the question gets worked out, sometimes it leads me to my next question.



What tips do you have for new filmmakers?

I think the most important tip I can share is what I've already said, if you can find what makes the story personal to you, then that makes you the right person to tell the story. Tell the story that is specific to your understanding of a moment or an event and then build from there.

What part of filmmaking do you geek out about the most?

Right now, I'm kind of geeking out over storyboarding. I know that sounds really crazy, but I can't draw at all, but the challenge of trying to relay what I'm seeing is actually kind of making me tickled. I think it's because I have secretly wanted to be a painter and storyboarding is helping me learn how to draw, so weirdly I'm scratching an itch that I didn't know I had.

Although, I'm not someone who's married to storyboarding, because I do think it's important to take in what's unfolding on set, but I like having made the film in my head first and seeing where it takes me on the day.



You're very hands-on with your projects. How hard is it wearing all the hats?

I'm a natural producer, but I don't love the logistical side of producing and I don't think I'd be interested in producing someone else's project, but I really don't mind wearing so many hats. The one detriment I can see is that when it comes time to direct, you really need to stop wearing all the other hats and just direct and it's not easy to just do that.

I do feel I need to get into a meditative sacred space to direct and it's kind of like going on vacation, it takes a few days for me to accept that I'm on vacation. With directing, you have to account for the transition into just wearing the one hat and if you arrive too late, you do lose precious time. It's really important to find not just great producers, but great producers for your story and who you are as a director.

If you could only watch one movie for the rest of your life, what would it be?

Amelie.

What's your next project?

I'm writing a series about Anna May Wong.

Have you worked with mentors in the past? How would you recommend people go about finding them?

Karyn Kusama is one of my mentors, but she doesn't know it. Maybe she does, but I've chosen her. We worked together on *The Invitation*.

I hope she doesn't read this article, she might tell me she doesn't have time to mentor me. I think people get a little freaked with requests for mentorship, because people are intimidated about the time it takes and people just don't want to let other people down.

One of my other mentors is Kim Gillingham, she helps me work with my subconscious through Jungian dreamwork. Mentors are really hard to find. When you find someone who feels like they could mentor you, don't ask them.

Just focus on building a relationship and in a casual way share with them some of your work and ask them for very specific feedback. If you find they respond (even if it's a long time in between) then continue to feel them out on how much time they can give to you. You'll know when you can ask for more or not.

And do your homework, if you've met a mentor, read their articles, interviews, books, learn as much from them that way first, that's free advice. I have a ton of artists I regularly read up on because they inspire me. Mentors will come naturally, don't force it.



What has been your biggest failure?

My biggest failure was thinking that Hollywood was going to do something for me. Hollywood will do nothing for you. You have to create and generate work. I created work very early on, it got shopped around to some of the biggest executives in town and then my team and I waited for someone to do something with it.

Terrible strategy especially when I had IP. I should have kept writing and generating my own work. As a woman, BIPOC, I was not encouraged to be a multi-hyphenate, because it was just a different time, but it's part of the racism and sexism in Hollywood. That was a big fail on my part to not continue writing and developing my own voice when I started out with one.

I discovered that I gave that up on my way to thinking that Hollywood was going to give me a "big break." Perhaps that might have happened for others (I'd argue it's pretty rare), but my journey has been about cultivating my own voice and that's where I've found my value. And no one can take that away from me now.



What's your filmmaking mission? Name the most important thing you want viewers to experience when watching your movies.

I'm interested in telling stories where BIPOC are at the center of their narratives. I always want to tell compelling human stories, but on the larger stage, I hope my work is seen as pushing the conversation forward in terms of social justice and empowerment.

I've always been someone who wrote about race and identity, even when I was a kid, representation was very important to me and I will continue to explore those narratives in as many genres as possible. On a personal artistic level, I hope that when I make a project, people can see themselves inside them.

What has been your biggest success?



Knowing from an early age that I wanted to be a storyteller and learning how to sustain my career even during times where I felt I was lost, I was always curious and hungry. And where I may have stumbled, I was always unafraid to keep asking myself what's my purpose, where is my path and how can I grow.

If I have succeeded at nothing, I succeeded in knowing that I was worse off not returning to the work, and so I would always do the work.

Can we expect to see any episodic television from you anytime soon?

You can see my latest work as an actor in *Hollywood* on Netflix playing Anna May Wong. In my directing work, I've written a half hour comedy TV pilot and I was hoping to complete my

What's your five-year plan?

This pandemic has been a metaphor for when you don't know what the f--k is going to happen next, you realize five year plans aren't that effective. I hope to be alive. I hope the world has not imploded. I especially hope we have a new president in November 2020.

I hope that my family is safe enough that I can continue to have the privilege of creating as an artist and storyteller. And I hope that the people who are dying right now, and/or have been killed, are honored with actual change in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

What indie filmmakers should be on our radar?

Diane Paragas, Jayil Pak, Cristina Dunlap, Ashley Monti, my fellow cohorts at AFI DWW.



Your character in *Hollywood* has faced many challenges and starts important conversations. What did you want the audience to take away from that performance?

When I watch Anna May Wong's films, what I see is her immense talent and the impossible ways in which she was repeatedly marginalized. Yet in spite of it all, she made the best of them.

She always made me want to know her story, her journey, and on Hollywood, I was committed to bringing that particular quality to life. She brought a magnetism and complexity to everything she did, and I wanted to amplify just how much depth she had as an actress and how Hollywood barely scratched the surface with her.

Who would compose the soundtrack of your life?

Underworld.