

NETWORKING WITH WRITER-DIRECTOR Nzingha Stewart

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By

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Beverly Hills' Sofitel. Late afternoon. Beautiful spring day. Outdoor cabana.

Nzingha Stewart. Calm, but focused. Jeans and white t-shirt. Heels. The attire of a creative entrepreneur.

Day of meetings. Just left: Reginald Hudlin and his partner. There's interest in one of her scripts. She's working it.

The credentials. Award-winning video director. Worked with the likes of Common, Missy Elliott, and Jay-Z. Branched out to documentary film with Michael Jackson: "Our Icon" which aired on BET. Writing and directing an upcoming Lifetime movie produced by Gabrielle Union called "The Vow." Executive producing the upcoming adaptation of playwright Ntozake Shange's "For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf" which will be released through Tyler Perry's empire.

Stewart creates opportunity. She shares her path with the Atlanta Post.

Transitions

I didn't always want to go into film. I felt stifled or thought that I would be stifled by movies. I didn't think I could do a video like Bilal's "Soul Sista" in black and white with African models in the film industry. But that's not necessarily true. And well, now, I could never get away with doing a video like that. The artist wouldn't get the budget.

Becoming a Writer

I didn't think of myself as a writer. I had an idea and from that idea, I kept thinking of scenes and thought that maybe I could write the script. My manager at the time told me that I wasn't a writer. He said that I was a director and that I shouldn't fiddle beyond that. Another friend, a black woman, read the script and told me not to listen to him. I left him and signed with her. She sent my script, which was called "Puss," to Overbrook and they got in contact with me very quickly. I thought it was going to be totally easy. It was not that easy. Nothing happened with it. I gave up on it and thought nothing would come of it. But after that, I got a deal with NBC to write a pilot. Then I got another deal to write a teen genre script.

Expectations

I arrived in LA about five years ago. I thought I had a strategy but it didn't go the way I wanted it to. Yet, it worked out better than I thought. I thought "Puss" was going to get made and that I'd just be in LA taking meetings. Luckily, some of the scripts that I was working on started receiving attention and somehow I started writing professionally. If I would have just come out here to direct, I would have stopped writing. I've been so successful with writing that it should have been part of the original plan.

Growing

I go to Writer's Guild seminars or any seminar available. People comment that I'm the only one attending who has sold anything. Why aren't there more writers attending even if they've sold something? Until you've written "Casablanca," you can't tell me that the stuff in the movie theaters is the best you can do. You have to keep getting better. I can't think that because I'm a working writer I don't need to learn anything else.

Writing Outside the Box

A character popped into my head. She's white. I didn't care what people were going to say. I thought she deserved a movie, so I wrote it. It's a comedy. A lot of productions wanted it, but I went with the one that was most passionate about it.

For Colored Girls, the Movie

I saw it as a movie through my work with music videos. The poems seemed like songs. So I listened to them until I saw them. I've read for colored girls since I was fifteen. And ultimately, it has a traditional movie arc. It's light at first, grows more intense, then there's a breaking point and the characters experience a spiritual awakening.

Executive Producing

The role varies depending on the movie. On "for colored girls," my role [involved] the initial development. [I had to have the] vision to say this should be a movie – to package it in a way where the studio could see it. It's a play with no plot, with seven nameless black women, and it's all poetry. I figured if I could get the right names involved, I could get the studio involved. I talked to the author, optioned the rights, and wrote a draft script. Tyler Perry is one of those directors who finds his ways into the project by doing everything in the project, writing, producing, directing, and playing in it. I handled the initial childbirth.

Venturing Out

I just recently started a production company with Gabrielle Union called Stew U. We want to do movies and television for black women that's profitable and show studios a model that works. I remember reading an interview with Kanye West who said that when he was starting out, everyone wanted raps about drugs and guns. But he thought to himself, 'if I'm not interested in it, there's got to be someone like me who's interested in other things.' That's how I feel about the

type of projects I want to do through Stew U. There are women like me who want to see cooler fare.

The Industry

I'm working, but there are a lot of people who aren't. The industry is definitely contracting. But it's also a lot easier to do something independently than it ever has been before because of technology. You can edit a movie on your computer. A starting filmmaker can put together a reel a lot easier. But no, business isn't getting better.

Enduring the Economy

My survival has been more esoteric than fiscal. I firmly believe that what may be true in general doesn't have to be true for me. I had a manager who would tell me about how bad the business was and how much tougher it was being a black woman. After a week of him saying that to me, I fired him. I couldn't have that in my space; I have to write. And ultimately everything comes full circle; when the work is good, you get more work. You can't spend time thinking about the lack of opportunities.

Crabs in the Barrel

I see a lot of that happening with [black filmmakers]. It's very dangerous. Precious just made it ten times easier. See his movie. Support it. Say great things about it. If so and so's movie is a hit, than they want five more movies. I know a lot of people are very critical of black filmmakers, but some of them just hate. I ask them, "Where's your script?" You can't just complain and attack.

Best Business Lesson

Good intentions don't matter; it has to be on paper. Once there was an issue in a contract that my lawyer fought hard for. I just wanted to get the deal done and didn't want to scare [the client] off. My lawyer eventually won and later it became a legal issue. I thanked God that he fought for that detail or I would have been in a lot of trouble. I came into this thinking that everyone is nice. And they might be, but you must be protected.

Worst Business Advice

I had a manager who wanted me to take meetings and direct movies that I was personally offended by. I'm not doing a hip-hop BBQ movie. He thought that coming from hip-hop, I would love and be perfect for those types of movies even though I didn't do those types of rap videos.

Standing Ground

I do have challenges standing my ground, but not along racial or gender lines – more along creative lines. It's tough when I want to do something that the industry hasn't seen yet.

Biggest Sacrifices

Time is a big one because I notice that most of my friends who have 9-5 jobs, have Saturday and Sunday to themselves. There isn't one day of the week where I don't do anything. On Saturday, I'll still get up in the morning and fiddle around with work. If I have a deadline, I can't do anything but go to the office and write. [Security](#) is a sacrifice too because unlike some, I don't know that I'm getting a check every Friday.

Inspiration

Judd Apatow. I'm amazed by him as a [business](#) man. He has produced some of the biggest comedies ever. But he also wrote "Knocked Up" and "40 Year Old Virgin." He gets to make a lot of money doing what the country appreciates. He seems to have a style where he lets people do what they're good at and he allows his friends to contribute. Often, people think they have to do everything, but the project isn't as good as it can be because you're not letting people do what they can do.

Mantra

Use what's in your hand. I know people who want to break into the business, but they think they can't do it until they get the right manager or get the right this. I always ask myself, what do I have right now? I want to direct, but that's a career where I have to get three hundred people to work with me. So I started writing with the idea that I could sell a script and create an opportunity to develop the project. I see a lot of waiting until things are perfect. If you're not getting hired as an actor, you better be in class. In times when I haven't been working, I'm not on [vacation](#). I'm in workshops or working on getting better. Not being where you want to be isn't an excuse for not doing anything.

Parting Words

If you're a filmmaker and what you make is really good enough, sooner or later, it will happen. Put your work out there, in script form or as a low-budget film. You have to create work and you have to put it out there.

Felicia Pride is a writer-entrepreneur and author of [The Message](#). Follow her on [Twitter](#).