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A Conversation with Filmmaker Mike Formanski '12

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BRISTOL, R.I. – This February, Mike Formanski ’12 returned to the place where he first discovered the magic of filmmaking.

Now an MFA student at CalArts, Formanski visited RWU to discuss and debut his feature film, The Iron Wall, with his former mentor and digital media professor, Murray McMillan and his class.

“This film has to do with masculine identity,” Formanski explained before the screening. “It explores what’s considered accepted roles and ways of conducting yourself – how that influences homophobia and being a guy working in the arts.”

In The Iron Wall, Dave, a young New England-based photographer working for his father’s construction company, must confront ideals of manhood in his working-class, Italian-American community. When his friend Sean comes onto him, Dave is challenged to turn him down without damaging the friendship, and also to navigate judgements from family members who witness the interaction.

The idea for the film emerged from a conversation Formanski had with a friend about a potential film project that addressed homosexuality. Formanski had hesitated, worried that people would think it was autobiographical. After his friend questioned Formanski’s hesitation, he asked himself, “How can I accept someone else who has a different identity if I wouldn’t be able to accept myself?”

He decided, then, to create a piece that would invoke these types of questions, both for himself and for others.

“It’s a palatable way of introducing a lot of these conversations to people that aren’t used to having them,” he said.

After the screening, Formanski chatted with RWU News about the film, his experience in the visual arts department at RWU, and advice for future filmmakers.

How much work and time went into creating this film?

This was the most substantial and most expensive project I’ve done. It was a three-year project. Eleven days of production. It took a year or so to write the film. And then to fund it, it was about two months full-time of preparing a Kickstarter, creating an online presence, doing all of your social media, websites, web designs, creating your
campaign, and running your campaign which is just 30 days. We made our Kickstarter goal by $6, just hours before the closing date.

How did you choose the locations for the film?

This film was very specific to blue-collar New England, which is where I grew up. My mother and father run an electrical contracting company in New Haven. All of our family and friends growing up were tradesmen. It needed to be specific to that cultural place and this New England location. The bar featured in the film, for example is the bar my dad goes to when he gets a drink after work. The house we shot at was my house. The art gallery was Machines with Magnets – that was where I would go when I was living in Providence. So it was a very similar path to me transitioning from the blue collar world into the art world. Art is very personal in that way. Every single element of the film is something pulled from real life.

How did you select the actors?

I reached out to New York, Boston, and Providence, through a casting site called Backstage. I probably had 700 applications to find four people. Then you kind of have to discover your character in an actor. In the main character, for example, there was something very specific that I needed. I need someone who could represent this community we’ve been talking about and have a little bit of edge, but also a sensitivity because we’re dealing with his interactions with his friend.

How and when did you discover your love for film?

It started when I was at RWU. I basically took the route of the camera, where I started doing a lot of darkroom printing in Denny Moers’ class and then started doing some more digital media stuff with Murray McMillan. Experimental video turned into narrative video and I continued narrative on my own after leaving Roger Williams. What’s nice about it is I can have an artistic career but also pay my bills by working in the film industry.

What advice would you give someone who wants to be a professional filmmaker?

There’s no single road that will work for everyone, but if you continue to go for it you will find it. You have to be open to trying new things, looking in places you haven’t thought of, and figuring out what works for you.