

In Proximity
Season 3 Episode 5
Ammar Mohamed
Final Transcript

Ammar Mohamed: One of the things about Ryan that, you know, I'm not sure people, like, talk about much, one of his best qualities is that he's relentless in his pursuit. The people that are working with him, his department heads, his producers, you know, people like myself, it's, like, infectious, you know what I mean? Like, you got to either match him or you got to go further. And that's the energy. That's what everybody brought to the movie.

[00:06 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today we're talking to Ryan Coogler's...assistant and an associate producer on Sinners.

Ammar Mohamed is a filmmaker, a colleague of mine at Proximity Media, and he's assistant to Ryan Coogler. He got his start in the industry working for Hannah Beachler, the production designer who won an Academy Award for her work on the film Black Panther. Ammar worked with Hannah on a couple films, including Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. They work together on set, in production, and then, when the film moved into post-production, Ammar found himself working with Ryan.

On this episode, he breaks down how he broke into the industry, how he got the job working with Ryan Coogler, and what his day-to-day is like. He also shares some crazy experiences and learnings, including one story that taught him a lot about himself and his boss. And he shares some tidbits from the set of Wakanda Forever and, of course, Sinners.

On this episode, we go deep into the trenches into what's it's really like assisting and really working alongside one of the busiest filmmakers today. Here's my conversation with Ammar Mohamed.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Paola Mardo: Ammar Mohamed, welcome to—

Ammar Mohamed: Paola Mardo. What's up?

Paola Mardo: Ammar Mohamed, welcome to In Proximity.

Ammar Mohamed: Thank you for having me.

Paola Mardo: Thank you being here at the office where you work.

Ammar Mohamed: Yes. We both work.

Paola Mardo: Where we both work, yes. And to have this very exciting conversation. But first, surprise voice memo question for you!

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, okay.

Paola Mardo: Figure out who this is, and then answer the question. Are you ready?

Ammar Mohamed: I'm ready. Let's do it.

Paola Mardo: I feel like a game show host every time I do it.

[LAUGHTER]

[BLOOPER BEEP SOUND]

Paola Mardo: All right, here we go.

[VOICE MEMO: SURPRISE QUESTION]

Hannah Beachler: Ammar, my very favorite person ever, my question for you is: When you first met me in Detroit and started working, how were you able to balance this new sort of environment of an art department with kind of just walking into it for the first time? What was your feelings? What was your thoughts? And what do you feel like you learned from that experience? And I love you! Bye, Ammar.

[VOICE MEMO ENDS]

Ammar Mohamed: That's sweet.

Paola Mardo: Who was that?

Ammar Mohamed: That is Hannah Beachler, Academy Award-winning production designer. I think—I think best known for her work with Ryan. She's designed all his films, and she is the person who gave me my first job in the film industry. God bless Hannah. Man, she saved my life. She asked me how I adjusted, basically, to everything?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. How were you able to balance this new sort of environment of an art department with just walking into it for the first time?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. I was—I was very scared. I remember—I remember the first day that I came to work, our art department coordinator, Deb Jurvis, she asked me to—she was like—she was like, "Can you go and make a crafty run for us?" And I was like, "Yeah, sure. I got you." And then I walked away from her office, and I went to the PAs, and I said, "What's a crafty run?" you know what I'm saying?

[LAUGHTER]

Because I had no fucking idea what anything was.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

Ammar Mohamed: So how I survived that was I never said no to anything, but I was also very fortunate because all the PAs there, like, helped me out. The PAs, the coordinators, everybody. Everybody was very helpful. But to answer her question, yes. She was also very helpful. Hannah told me something that, that really gave me, like, a license to kill, if you will, which was that it's not that you can't make mistakes. She said, "Just don't make the same mistake twice."

And that gave me a lot of, like—it gave me, like, a runway. So anytime I was doing something for the first time, I was never worried because I was like, I'm going to—I'm going to follow the instructions, and if I mess something up, like, you know, she'll be—she'll be nice enough to tell me what it is, and then the next time I do it, I'll have the information.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Ammar Mohamed: And that saved me because I would make a lot of mistakes, but I would get corrected, and then I would know not to make that mistake again. And, and you just—yeah, you learn the lessons, and you keep going and going and going. So, yeah, shout-out to the crew on, on No Sudden Move and shout-out to Hannah. They—they lifted me up and—yeah, they allowed me to keep going.

[5:00 - Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So, without getting into—like, too much into the weeds, because I have heard you tell this story before. But for those who don't know, you said your job with Hannah Beachler was your first job in the industry.

Ammar Mohamed: Right.

Paola Mardo: So before we get to the Ryan Coogler part of your career story, how did you actually enter the industry? Like, how did you get that job, and what does Twitter have to do with all of this?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. So small background is that I'm born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and my parents are immigrants from Sudan, which is in East Africa. And—and they came here in the early '90s, in 1993. And so I grew up there, and I did not have—you know, I didn't know anybody that worked in this industry or in entertainment, really. And, and it had always been of interest to me, but I never had, like—you know, no pun intended, but I never had the proximity to it.

And so, you know, one of these days—I was living in Detroit at the time. I think I was like 25 years old, 24, 25 years old. And I'm scrolling on the computer one day just on Google, like in a—in a—just in a wormhole of, like, searching things. And I remember I saw Hannah's name come up in, like—I don't remember what I was looking up, but her name came up in, like, "Suggested People" or something like that on Google search.

And I had remembered her name because of the Academy Award. She was the first Black person to win her category and be nominated.

Paola Mardo: And that was for Black Panther.

Ammar Mohamed: That was for Black Panther, yes. Yes, Black Panther. And I clicked on her name. And one of the first things that came up was a Twitter link, and below that Twitter link for her Twitter account was her three most recent tweets. And one of those tweets was, "Hey, everyone, I'm coming to Detroit to do a movie in January until June." And she was like, "And I'm looking for an art department assistant to help me out."

And I'm, like, sitting in Detroit on my couch, and she's coming—and she's talking about she's coming to Detroit. So I'm like, man, I, I got to send her something.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: So I made a Twitter. I didn't even have one. I made a Twitter. I DMed her my resume, and I said, "Hey, you know, I would love the opportunity to interview." And interestingly enough, she actually told me that—that when she saw my resume, she didn't really want to interview me. And her son Dominic—shout-out to Dominic—told her that he thought my resume was interesting and that she should interview me. He's like, "He has a very diverse resume. It's not necessarily, like, entertainment, but he's done a lot of stuff," you know, like political organizations. I had worked on some music. I had worked on some—I had scored some short films and some web series. Like, it was just this, like, mix of random things, random experiences.

And Dominic liked it. He told her to interview me. And she interviewed me, and we talked for 35 or 40 minutes, and she did not mention anything about the job while we were talking. When we got to the end of the conversation, she gave me the details, and she was like, "Are you still interested?"

I said, "Hell yeah!"

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And when I hung up the phone, I got the feeling that she had already picked her person and that she kind of spoke to me as a formality because she told me she would.

Paola Mardo: Oh, so you didn't think it went well.

Ammar Mohamed: No, it's not that I didn't think it went well. I just—to me, like, a job interview is supposed to be about the job, and we spent 95 percent of it not talking about the job.

Paola Mardo: Got it.

Ammar Mohamed: So I was—like I said, I thought she was just giving me the time of day because she already told me she would interview me. And then I remember it was MLK weekend. I interviewed on a Friday, and then she's like, "I'll get back to you at the end of the holiday weekend." And she called me on—I think on that Tuesday. She's like, "You got the job," and that was it.

And I didn't—I don't really know—my assumption is that, you know, because we spent so much time doing this job with people that she probably wanted someone that she would vibe with because the job is not—you know, being a PA is not—it's a hard job for many reasons, but it's not necessarily, like, a complicated one. It's not super hard to figure out. It just requires a lot physically from you, and it requires a lot of time.

And so I think that, that was her mindset, like, "He'll figure it out, and he's cool. We vibe." And it worked. I mean, I worked with Hannah for two and a half years and, like, some of the—some of the best years of my life, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Wow. It kind of goes back to what you say about just good people.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Being around good people.

Ammar Mohamed: Big time.

Paola Mardo: Especially when you're production, you're around each other almost 24/7.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, exactly. So usually—

Paola Mardo: You want to like the people you work with.

Ammar Mohamed: You want to be around cool people. You want to be around people that are chill. You want to be around people that are, like—you know, they're not—they're not going to give you a hard time.

Paola Mardo: Mm-hmm, but that also get the job done.

Ammar Mohamed: But that also get the job done, exactly.

Paola Mardo: Which sounds like you did because your next job after that was with...

Ammar Mohamed: Was with—so my next job after that, Hannah hired me to work on Black Panther: Wakanda Forever as her assistant on that movie. And so I moved down to Atlanta, and I—I was there with her for like a year and a half in Atlanta, and we prepped the movie, and we shot the movie there. And then, from there was when I made the transition from Hannah to Ryan. Yeah. Like, on that movie, like, we were—we were nearing the end of production, and Hannah, Hannah had—we had a meeting, her and I.

And I remember it was early in the morning. It was like a 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. meeting before, like, we went to set. And she's like, you know, "What do you want to do?" Like, you know, she was telling me basically, like, "I love working with you, but you, you also need to think about what you want to do next. You know, you got to think about transitioning."

And I told her, I was like, "Yeah, I want to write and direct movies." And she was like—I remember she said—she was like, "If you want to write and direct movies," she was like, "you need to go tell Ryan." And in my head, I'm like, "That's the last fucking thing I'm doing," you know what I mean? Like, this guy is—like, we've been at this movie, at this point, for a year, year and a half, at least I had been, and, like, this movie was incredibly difficult to make. And in my head, I'm like, "The last thing I'm going to do is walk up to him and be like, 'Hey, Ryan, like, you know, I want to write and direct movies.'"

[AS RYAN COOGLER] "Yeah, I bet you do, man."

You know what I'm saying? That's the last thing I'm doing!

[LAUGHTER]

So, in my head, I'm was like, "I'm not doing that." Like, I'm not going to go and tell him that. Like, I'll, I'll figure something else out.

Paola Mardo: What did she say?

Ammar Mohamed: I—I never told her that.

Paola Mardo: Oh, okay.

Ammar Mohamed: That was just in my head, I'm like, "I'm not doing that."

Paola Mardo: Got you, got you. So she gave you that advice, and you were like—

Ammar Mohamed: She gave me that advice. I was like, there's no way. This—and this is the craziest part. We leave the office, and we go to set that day. And me and Hannah would usually hang out at the director's monitor because Ryan is very rarely there. He's usually by the camera somewhere or, you know, on set.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Ammar Mohamed: And so we walked up to the director's monitor, and he's there, but he's by himself. And so I ask him where his assistants were, D'Angelo Louis and Zetra Evans. And he—and he told me—he was like, "Yeah, like, they're"—you know, he basically explained that they were taking these meetings called generals because they were getting promoted.

And as soon as he said that, it hit me, like, oh, shit, he's going to need—he's going to need a new assistant at some point. And then I convinced myself that I needed to tell him. I remember—I think I called D'Lo that night. I was like—after set, I called D'Lo. I was like, "Yo, what's going on?" I'm like, "I heard you getting promoted," dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. He was like, "Yeah"—

Paola Mardo: And did you have that kind of relationship with D'Lo already?

Ammar Mohamed: At that point, I had that relationship with D'Lo, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Okay, cool. Cool.

Ammar Mohamed: I was—me and D'Lo was tight. Me and Zetra was tight. And so I called him, and I asked him, and he said—he was like, "Yeah, like, something like that," you know? He didn't totally give it to me, but he—but he basically, like, was like, "Yeah, that's, that's happening."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And, and so then from there, I found time to talk to Ryan, and I just told him, like, "Hey, man, when you—when you go to look for a new assistant, like, throw my name in the hat."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And, you know, one thing led to another. I get a call from them a few weeks later after we wrap production. And I did my interviews, and, you know, thank God they picked me, you know? And here we are now, you know, three—over three years later.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And what a crazy three years it has been.

Ammar Mohamed: Man, what—

Paola Mardo: Man. You have really—and I remember meeting you because when I started here, when you guys wrapped *Wakanda Forever*, which was that March of 2022, and I believe you started at Proximity as Ryan's assistant a couple months later?

Ammar Mohamed: Yep, June.

Paola Mardo: Maybe the—okay, yeah, summer.

Ammar Mohamed: Yep, June of that year.

Paola Mardo: And, yeah, I felt like you kind of just jumped into that role because you guys were in post-production.

Ammar Mohamed: That's right.

Paola Mardo: So can you talk about, I guess, what it was like to just jump from, you know, assisting Hannah, production design, and then—on the production of that film and then jumping right into post-production with Ryan Coogler, the director of the film.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. It was—it was fucking crazy. It was difficult because there was adjustments to make, but it was also, like—at least for me, like, I felt, like, the weight of the moment, you know, of, like, that movie and, you know, what was happening at that time. And, you know, there was a lot of anticipation, you know, like, you know, "What are they going to do with—you know, with T'Challa?" and, "What are they going to do with the Panther?"

And I remember just being there and feeling like, "I have to, like, help them deliver this movie," you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And I—and there were many days where I was afraid that I was not going to be able to do that, you know? And so there was just—there was a lot. It was a lot happening. It

was a lot of change. I had to move to Los Angeles. I had never been here in my life. I had only heard about this place. And so there was a lot of things, like a lot of changes that I had to adjust to. And it was—it was—yeah, it was scary. Like, there were parts of it that were—that were very scary and felt very overwhelming. But I had—like, I had a lot of good systems around me, you know what I mean? Like, D'Lo and Zetra gave me the game as much as they could, you know, as much as you can prepare somebody for something like that.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome.

Ammar Mohamed: And, and I had a incredible crew around me on—on the—you know, shout-out to the Panther 2 post team. Like, they all helped me out along the way the same way they did in Detroit with Hannah. Like, I had never done post-production. So I'm asking them all these questions about, what's this and what's that? And, and everybody was just—they were kind enough to, like, hold my hand and, like, walk me through it.

Paola Mardo: I feel like you're also—I don't want you to sell yourself short because, you know, it takes a lot to navigate these things.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It was insane. Like, I had a lot of support. I will say that. But, like, I was—I was for sure, like, knocking shit out, you know what I mean? Like, because I had to. I was making many mistakes along the way, as you do when—when you're in unfamiliar territory, or as you can in unfamiliar territory, but, but, like, yeah, I would say, like, I was definitely proud of myself after the movie came out that I was able to, like, do it because when I started, it felt like I was climbing Mt. Everest, you know? And every day felt like you could—you could slip, you know? You were—it was like—you know, you would get tasked with things every day that if you—if you fucked it up, you could lose your job, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: I'm starting to, like, sweat thinking about this. Can—can I ask you to name—you know, I know you did a lot on this job. But tell me, you know, a memory or, or walk us through one of those, like, Mt. Everest type days where you had to do something or get out of some crazy situation and how you did that.

Ammar Mohamed: There's so many that I could talk about. But the one that I—that I want to talk about on this podcast, this one was actually very small, but the feeling that I had was like—I was so terrified. And it was—it was the day I moved to Los Angeles. I might've had this job for like two months, maybe less than that.

And I finally get to L.A., and the first day I land, I'm in the office and, and Zinzi, who is a founder at Proximity and also Ryan's wife, she calls me. And she says, "Hey, can you get me—can you get me a scan of Ryan's ID and—and email it over to me?"

I said, "Yeah, that's easy. No problem." So I go to his office, and I tell him. I say, "Hey, Zinzi asking for your ID. She needs a scan."

He's like, "Yeah, cool." Gives me his ID. And he also gives me—he's like—he's like, "Matter of fact, I got—I left something in the trunk of my car. See if you can grab that for me."

I'm like, "Cool." And he gives me his keys. I go downstairs. I grab what he needs from the trunk. I come back. I bring it to him. And then I go to—to scan the ID to send to Zinzi, and I'm looking around, checking my pockets.

[SOUNDS OF AMMAR PATTING HIS POCKETS]

I can't find the ID. I'm like, "Holy shit." I'm looking—I'm emptying all my pockets, and I'm like, "Shit." I'm like, "Where did I put this thing?"

And now I'm like—you know, I'm retracing my steps. And—and I retrace my steps, like, up and down this building like three times.

Paola Mardo: Oh, man.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, I'm—I'm in, like, a full panic because I'm like, I just showed up that day! And eventually, I'm looking around, and, like, I can't find it. And so then, I'm walking around the office like a crazy person whispering to people. I'm like, [WHISPERING] "Hey, have you guys seen a ID on the floor?" You know, like, I'm—I'm, like—I'm terrified because the last thing I want to do is walk into this man's office on my first day in L.A. and say, "Hey, man, I lost your ID," you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Ooh, yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: So I'm, like, freaking out. I'm trying to find it. I'm wasting hella time at this point. So I was like, all right, I got—I just have to go in there and tell him, because I could not find it anywhere.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And I remember I go to his office. The door is, like, creaked open, and I—and I open it. And I walk in, and I see Ryan, and I see the head of Marvel Security standing in his office talking to him, and I kid you not, I walk in, and I literally hear him say—he's like, "Yeah, man"—he said—he said, "Somebody said they found your ID on the floor, and they gave it to me."

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh!

Ammar Mohamed: And I walk in, and he looks at me, and I look at them, and I'm just like, "Aw, shit." And I thought I was going to get fired. Like, I was like, oh, yeah, that's it, you know what I mean? Like, this, this is how it goes. You show up on your first day, you fucking lose somebody's ID, and then you get clipped, you know? And I remember the rest of that day, I was

super anxious. Like, the whole time, I'm just like—I'm waiting for somebody to come in my office and send my ass home, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And we go home—

Paola Mardo: Well, did you guys talk at all?

Ammar Mohamed: No! Like, he didn't say anything about it. That was the thing that—that scared me.

Paola Mardo: Whoa. Whoa.

Ammar Mohamed: Because he didn't say anything. He just kind of gave me a look, and I gave him a look, and that was it. And so I go home, and I'm still freaking out at home. I'm like, man, they're going to fire me tomorrow. You know, like, all this shit's running through my head. And this is—and this is how fucking nice Ryan is. He comes in the next day, and he has this, like, pouch. And he hands it to me. It's one of his. He hands it to me, and he says, "Hey, man, put your stuff in here."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, "Put your important belongings in here."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And that was it. And, and that moment was, like, a big deal for me because I knew at that moment, I was like, all right, I'm going to be safe on this job. Not necessarily like—like, I'm not talking safety in the sense of, like, job security, but safe in the sense of, like, these people are not—like, these people are going to take care of me. As long as I have this job, like, I'm not around people who are—who are looking to see me, like, fall or anything like that. Like, we in this together.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And him coming the next day, like anybody—man, he could've cussed me out. He could've sent me home. He could've said whatever he wanted. But his reaction to me losing his ID was to give me one of his own belongings and say, "Hey, man, put your stuff in here," you know what I mean? So—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: It was something I always remembered.

Paola Mardo: I love that story.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, something I always remembered.

Paola Mardo: I love that story. I feel like a lot can be learned on both ends, you know?

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, yeah. Big time.

Paola Mardo: Whether you're assistant or the boss, like—

Ammar Mohamed: Big time.

Paola Mardo: That's a really eye-opening one. And not to feel like a talk show host, but we do have the bag here with us.

[PAOLA PULLS OUT THE BAG]

Ammar Mohamed: Yes. It's a great bag. I love it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about this? Because—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. [HOLDING BAG] This thing is—it's got, you know, two little compartments. But I—I would wear this for a long time just, like, kind of casually anytime I was out. And it did, it helped me keep all my—all my stuff together. I had my phone in here, my wallet, my keys, any of Ryan's stuff that he would hand to me because oftentimes, like when he's going to—he might be going in to do something for work. He'll hand me his phone. He'll hand me his wallet. He'll hand me his keys. And I—

Paola Mardo: Put it in there.

Ammar Mohamed: So this was like—this kept me—like, I knew as long as I had this, I had all my stuff. And it was just—yeah, it's a sense of relief, and it's just—yeah, it's something I always keep just because of, like, the memory of it, you know?

Paola Mardo: Oh, so you've graduated from this bag. You no longer need it?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. I mean, I use it—I use it from time to time still, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That's awesome.

Ammar Mohamed: But, but it's something I hope to always keep, you know what I'm saying? And, and maybe one day I'll pass it along to somebody who, who keeps losing IDs.

The other thing about that story I got to tell you—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Ammar Mohamed:—is the day before I lost his ID—I had moved to Flint for a little bit before I got the job, and I was supposed to move from—fly from Flint to L.A. on the 24th. And I show up to the airport—

Paola Mardo: Oh no.

Ammar Mohamed: Me and—my pop took me to the airport. We walk in, and I go to check my bags, and—

[AMMAR PATS HIS POCKETS]

Ammar Mohamed: Same thing. I'm looking around. I can't find my ID. And so, literally, I had to delay—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Oh, my god.

Ammar Mohamed: I had to call Ryan and say, "Hey, man, I have to delay my trip a day because I lost my ID, and I have to go get a new one, and I have to get on a flight tomorrow at the same time." So I'm already coming in playing defense because I'm— I'm supposed to show up to work one day, and I'm calling him, saying, "Hey, I can't come until tomorrow now because I lost my ID." I show up to work on the 25th, and then I fucking lose his ID, you know what I mean? It was terrible!

Paola Mardo: He's like, "This man and his IDs, I have no idea."

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, man, and, like, I just—I was so anxious after those two days. I was so anxious.

Paola Mardo: Wow. So you technically made the same mistake twice, but it's for different IDs, so it doesn't count. Doesn't count.

Ammar Mohamed: Different IDs, different circumstances, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It doesn't count.

Paola Mardo: But you learned from both. You learned from both.

[21:29 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: If you had to give someone, even just a fellow assistant who's working with a director or who's about to jump into this role for the first time, what are just a handful of tips that you—you would give that person just to be helpful?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, general tips, I would say one of the things that I had to stop doing on this job is putting things off. Like, sometimes you'll get a task, somebody will ask you for something, and it doesn't feel like a high-priority thing so you kind of like, all right, I'm going to put this to the side for a minute, and I'll come back to this at a later time. And I had to stop doing that with this job because what I would find is it would just build up on me. Like, I would—I would be working, doing my thing, and then I'd come back to the list, and I'd be like, whoa, where'd all this come from, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: You have a bunch of tasks that you—that you been putting off. And it'll also get you into trouble because you, you can forget about things, or you can, you know, not realize that there's a deadline here or whatever the case is. So I would say do things as soon as you can do them, number one.

And I would say, also, like, to make—if you're an assistant, to make your life easier, you know, just try your best to learn the person that you're working for, their habits, their mannerisms, when they tend to do things, and how they tend to do them. It—it'll go a long way for you to, like, pay that little bit much more of attention. And I, I would say even for, like, the execs, right? Like, you know, paying attention to, like, what works for your assistant and what doesn't or what they respond to, what they don't respond to, things like that.

And it takes a little bit more work. It takes a little bit more time. But it goes a much longer way to, like—to, like, try and understand them on a little bit of a deeper level so you can be a little more effective. And just, you know, take advantage of the people you meet on the job, the relationships. There's so—I've met, I mean, like countless number—

Paola Mardo: Who haven't you met at this point?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. A countless number of just, like, incredible people, people you know, people you don't know.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Like, don't take advantage of it in a weird way, obviously.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, don't take advantage of it in—yeah, in any weird way, but—

Paola Mardo: Be respectful and—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. If the moment allows for it, like, be curious. Ask people questions. Like, I find that people tend to be excited to tell you things if you're curious about it. So you can pick up a lot of game on the way just from that. And, yeah, and just—and just, you know, relationships are a big part of this thing. So, you know, be kind to the people you meet. Get to know them. You never know where anybody's going. So just, just—yeah, value the people and value the time while you have it. And, and that'll also take you a long way for when you eventually have to leave, right? You know, you hope to have made relationships that will, you know, come to—come to help you out in the long run. And maybe you come to help them out in the long run, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I know you can't talk about everybody, but can you name, you know, one or two people who have made an impression on you or who you learned something from?

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, man. There is—there is so many. I mean, I would say, like, obviously Ryan himself, you know, has had a—you know, before I even met him, right, his—his movies have had a, like—had a profound impact on my life personally and professionally. And then, you know, working with him, yeah, man, I've picked up a ton of game and, again, both personally and professionally, right?

Like, there's moments where I'm asking him things about the job, and then there's moments where I'm like—you know, I'm asking him something as, like, a—as, like, another man who's, you know, eight, nine years older than me who has been through things that I'm looking ahead to. And, and you pick up game that way, you know, for your personal life, like I said, and for your professional life.

I think—you know, outside of Ryan, obviously, I have to shout-out Hannah again because, like, Hannah is—Hannah was—yeah, she's a—she's a force of nature, man. Like, being around her, I became—I became comfortable very quick because the way Hannah gets down is, like, she doesn't really care who's in front of her, she's going to speak her mind. And she just has this, like, trust in herself that, like, things are going to work out, like the work is going to speak for her ultimately. And, and so I picked up a lot of that from her, as well.

So I—yeah, I would say, for me, just because I worked with them, like, Ryan and Hannah are the people that, like, I picked up the most—probably the most game from along the way, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

[26:00 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Because we're filming this right now—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo:—after another big film you have worked on with Ryan, Sinners.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, yeah.

Paola Mardo: I'm going to have to ask about this movie.

Ammar Mohamed: Okay, let's do it.

Paola Mardo: And I'm curious about the film through your perspective as his assistant who was there from literally now the very beginning. When did you first hear about this story that Ryan was writing?

Ammar Mohamed: When I first heard about it, I mean, it was before he started writing it, at least to my knowledge, for sure. But he told me he—that he had this idea. He's like, "Yeah, there's this—there's this movie that I think I'm going to—I'm going to write." And he kind of, you know, explained to me, like, the Sammie character. And he explained to me, like, what the elements were going to be. There were going to be vampires and, and I'm thinking to myself, I'm like, "Okay, like, this—it sounds cool," you know what I mean? Like, just it sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Take us to the set of Sinners. I was there for a few days. I did visit. And it was my big—like, first big, like, Hollywood movie set.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And it was just so incredible to see, I don't know, just A, the behind-the-scenes of this movie, but also, like, wow, the level of craftsmanship, each department, and just the way you guys work. And Ryan, you mentioned earlier in our conversation, he is not sitting at the director's chair by the director's camera.

Ammar Mohamed: No.

Paola Mardo: He's, like, in it.

Ammar Mohamed: He's in it.

Paola Mardo: By the camera.

Ammar Mohamed: He's right by the camera.

Paola Mardo: I mean, it's just incredible to witness. And can you tell me about, like, what a hard day is like on the set of Sinners or what a fun day was like?

Ammar Mohamed: We had a lot—we had a lot of hard ones on Sinners. One of the things about Ryan that, you know, I'm not sure people talk about much, and maybe this is because, you know, maybe the people who work with him really notice this, but one of his best qualities is that he's relentless in his pursuit. Like, and you can see it. You can feel it if you're working with him.

And I think the interesting thing is that the people that are working with him, his department heads, his producers, you know, people like myself, whoever's there, it's, like, infectious, you know what I mean? Like, you, you watching him, and you're like, man, if he's—if he's willing to, like, go this far, like, you got to either match him or you got to go further, you know?

And that's the energy. That's what everybody brought to the movie: Autumn, Hannah, Ruth. I mean, everybody was under pressure. Everybody had a lot of work to do. Like, you know, and that's—and that's really every movie, right? Like, they're all—they're all kind of difficult in that way. But this one was definitely like—it was special, and everybody just wanted to deliver, you know? And you felt, like, the urgency every day. Like, you know, some days, we were in locations that we had to close out pretty quick. You know, so you were constantly in a situation where you had to figure something out.

And it was crazy. It was so much fun, you know what I mean? Like, watching Mike play two characters was—I mean, you know.

Paola Mardo: Incredible.

Ammar Mohamed: It was incredible. I mean—and just, just everybody. The cast was so fun. We was in New Orleans, so, you know, all the New Orleans locals are, like—they're all super fun. Anybody from there is fun, you know what I'm saying?

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And you guys were—I know.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And you guys were in different parts of Louisiana.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, different parts of Louisiana.

Paola Mardo: I remember one day, I had a 4:00 a.m. call time or a pickup, really. And then we went out to where you guys shot the church scene.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh boy, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Which was shot on, you know, a plantation, essentially.

Ammar Mohamed: On location, yep.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And, yeah, it was hot out there. It was muddy.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, man. Oh, man.

Paola Mardo: It was intense.

Ammar Mohamed: Them church days was crazy. We had some crazy church days. Like, that was—I would say those were some of the most, like, just—I don't know if stressful is the right word, but you definitely felt like, man, we got—you know, we had a lot to do in that church. It's a very important part of the movie both at the beginning and at the end, right? If you've seen the film.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah. It was so cool to see, like, the camera, lighting, you know, grips.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, my god.

Paola Mardo: Like, they were just—the things they would do to just light and shoot that beautiful church that Hannah built, right?

Ammar Mohamed: Yes. Yes, Hannah built—Hannah built the church. Hannah and the art department built the church. And, you know, Autumn's team lit it beautifully. And just—

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and then the all-white costumes by Ruth, Ruth E. Carter.

Ammar Mohamed: The all-white—the all-white costumes. Like, the beams in the ceiling—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: You know, like, it was—it was perfect. It was perfect. And we even got—you know, we got some of it in—in the System 65 format.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Ammar Mohamed: You know, the—the Ultra Panavision, and then we got some of it in IMAX, which was also cool. So you got to see it—you know, you got to see it in, like, both scopes. You know, you saw, like, the width of it and, like, everybody, and then you also got to see, like, the height, like the—you know, when you get the beams, and the whole picture is—and they're both

beautiful, just incredible. I—you know, those, those days, I'll never forget. They were hard, but they were great.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And I have, actually, a photo, like a little Instax photo of you in the church. I think you were sitting on the pews, and I took a little snap. And you have your—your vest on.

Ammar Mohamed: The chest vest?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, the chest vest.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And I do remember, those few days I was there, you were, like, laser-focused.

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, yeah.

Paola Mardo: I could barely talk to you, honestly. I think we took some pictures.

Ammar Mohamed: No, no, no. It was—it was intense. It was intense because it's—like I said, man, when you see—when you got somebody working that hard on something and you can tell how bad they want this thing to be as good as it can be, you just—at some point, you don't got a option. Like, you just have to, like, put your head down, and, like, you got to zone it out, and you got to just focus.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, this is the day, this is the scene, this is—you know, and you got to just—I think—I think that's, you know, a big part of the job, is understanding, like, the moment. And the more you do it, the more you—you understand moments. And I think, you know—

Paola Mardo: What do you mean by that? Just expound on that. What about the moment?

Ammar Mohamed: I mean, sometimes, like, yeah, the—it's, it's hard to be, you know, laser-focused, you know, 24/7 every day on a job. Like, you need—you know, you need moments of relief. You know, so you try to have fun. You try to talk to people on set. You try to be lighthearted and, and—because you don't want to leave anywhere with a bad memory, right?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: But when I say "understanding the moment," there's some days, you got to shut the fuck up and work, you know what I mean? Like, you just need to—you got to sit down, you got to be by the camera, by the director, and you're going to sit on a apple box or on whatever, and that's going to be your day. And you're going to sit there, and you're going to take notes, and you're going to watch, and you're going to grab things when people need them. And

you just have to be locked-in. You got to be in—if not in step with, with—you know, if I'm not in step with Ryan, I'm a step ahead of him, you know? Like, there's days, like, that's—you have to be focused, and you have to, like, be able to come through.

And, and that's what I mean by, like, "understanding the moment," knowing when you need to lock in and knowing when you have some leeway to, like, breathe for a second and go, you know, go crack a joke with a crew member, you know, have something to drink, and just chill out because, you know, those moments come and go both ways. But you just—yeah, the more you do it, the more you understand when you need to, like—like, today is one of those days, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah. Is there a particular scene that you remember was one of those days where you were like, "I got to be just locked-in."

Ammar Mohamed: Like, like lasered in?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, like scene in the film?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. I mean, there was for sure one of those church days—I think it—it was a day that we didn't have the kids. But we had Saul, and we had Miles, and, and I just remember we were under the gun to, like—you know, we were—I think maybe we were supposed to wrap the location. That was supposed to be our last day there or something.

Paola Mardo: Ah.

Ammar Mohamed: And there was just this pressure, and the sun—you know, of course, like, when you're—when you need the sun to stay there, that motherfucker's just dropping, you know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: Yep. Yep.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, supersonic speed, and I remember just seeing, like, it getting darker and darker and us getting closer to the finish line and just being like, all right, like, whatever—you know, you just have to be, like, in that moment, like, ready to do whatever. And there would be days, too, like, man, there would be days that Mike would come to set, and he would have to do a very difficult scene or a very intense scene whether it was emotionally or physically, and sometimes our AD, Marvin, he would—he would get the crew together, and he would say, "Look, man, today's going to be a tough day. You know, Mike is going to have to do this, this, and that. Like, I need everybody to be focused. I need, like, a quiet set. I need everybody to, like, you know, work diligently and work quietly." Sometimes Marvin would just give it to you like that, and then you know, for the rest of that day, all right, I'm going to—I'm going to sit down, I'm going to be quiet, and I'm—I'm going to do my thing.

I would say—I would say the church day, though—I remember that last day at the church. That was for sure, like, a—that was for sure, like, a lock-in day. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Shout-out Marvin Williams.

Ammar Mohamed: Shout-out Marvin Williams, man. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: First AD.

Ammar Mohamed: First AD on Sinners. He's the best.

Paola Mardo: And Michael B. Jordan. I got to say his full name because—

Ammar Mohamed: Michael B. Jordan, right. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You know, you guys say "Mike," but—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. Yeah, you guys might know him as—

Paola Mardo: I got to say for the audience.

[LAUGHTER]

I guess I just want to ask one more because I know people are just going to really want to know.

Ammar Mohamed: Sure.

Paola Mardo: Is there a story from Sinners that you can share?

Ammar Mohamed: A good story? Oh, man, because my mind just went to, like, the intensity.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, I know.

Ammar Mohamed: I'm trying to, like—I'm trying to, like, pull back and loosen it.

Paola Mardo: What, what were the good times?

[LAUGHTER]

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. There was definitely good times. I would say one of the—actually, I would say this. The craziest day for me, or the craziest thing that I saw is—and you only see this in, in the movie for a glimpse, but it was the wildest shit I had ever seen filmed on a camera. It was—it was the scene where Delroy's character, Delta Slim, the scene where he—where the vampires get him, and they—and they, like, start eating at him.

And you see it for a glimpse, he's, like, under them and he's, like, screaming. And he's—you know, before that, he's on a stage, and he's got the bottle—cracked bottle in his hand. Watching them film that, like watching him, like, be taken off of the stage and—I don't know why, but that shit spooked me out. Like, it stuck with me for, like, days. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

And I remember, in my head, thinking, like, "Man, people are going to freak out when they see this shit," you know what I mean? And, and obviously, you know, for many reasons, you see it for—you know, for a moment to tell the story. But watching them do it, that shit was wild. It was—it was wild. I was very, like, affected by that shit, you know?

Paola Mardo: Oh, I know.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, I thought about it when I got home. And I was like, man, that was—there was just something about—it felt too real, you know? Like, you were watching it, and it felt too real. And I was like—you know, it was—it was almost like—I don't want to say it was uncomfortable, but it was definitely, like, eerie a little bit.

Paola Mardo: I bet.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, it was definitely eerie.

Paola Mardo: I hate that moment. It's like, ugh! It's so sad.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, it's scary. And everybody loved Delta Slim, you know?

Paola Mardo: I know!

[36:06 - "Prox Recs Theme" with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: For our final segment—

Ammar Mohamed: Sure.

Paola Mardo: I'm going to ask you for your Prox Rec, recommendation for our viewers, our listeners to help them in what it is they do, or you do, really. So, yeah, this is the best part when—you don't have to think about it. Just—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, yeah. My, my rec is going to be a little bit strange, kind of. It's actually a documentary that I rewatched recently by a filmmaker named Michael Moore, who is from—from Flint, Michigan.

Paola Mardo: Your town, yep.

Ammar Mohamed: Where I grew up. And he made a documentary called Fahrenheit 9/11, which is a very famous documentary. It's one of the highest grossing docs ever. But I rewatched it maybe two weeks ago, three weeks ago, and I was floored by, like, how fucking crazy that time was. Yeah, just—just with, you know, the current administration we have and, like, the political landscape that's in front of us, man, there was a lot of similarities, you know what I mean? Like, like, it was just—it was very eye-opening to rewatch it. If you haven't seen it, go watch it. If you've seen it but haven't seen it in a while, go rewatch it. It just—yeah, it connects a lot of dots.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: You know, and I think it gave me a little bit of perspective for myself, you know, about where we at and where—and where we might be headed.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: So, yeah, shout-out to Michael Moore, Fahrenheit 9/11.

Paola Mardo: Truly unexpected.

Ammar Mohamed: Very unexpected.

Paola Mardo: But I love the rec. Love it. I love a good rewatch, so appreciate that.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, it's great.

Paola Mardo: Thanks, Ammar, for, for doing this.

Ammar Mohamed: Thanks for having me. Appreciate you.

Paola Mardo: It was great.

Ammar Mohamed: Thank you, Paola.

Paola Mardo: Take notes, all!

Ammar Mohamed: Take notes.

[37:48 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]