In Proximity
Luke Matheny
Season 3 Episode 25
Final Transcript

Luke Matheny: I thought this is exactly the problem with a lot of short films. It's not like you need to give everything away, but you need to show an action or a conflict or something at the beginning that implies a structure.

Paola Mardo: Okay, so we have it live here.

Luke Matheny: Best Live Action Short Film.

Paola Mardo: What did it look like from the stage?

Luke Matheny: Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem were in the front row. I mean, they were smiling. It was just—it wasn't like they were like, [CROSSES ARMS] "Get off the stage!" I looked like I had won The Price is Right or something.

[LAUGHTER]

[0:24 - “In Proximity Theme” by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today, we're talking what it takes to make an Oscar-winning short film. Luke Matheny is an Oscar and Emmy winning writer, director, and showrunner. His credits include Ghost Writer, The Babysitters Club, and Gortimer Gibbons Life on Normal Street, for which he received a WGA nomination.

Luke's current work is in children's programming. He most recently adapted the beloved novel Charlotte's Web into an animated series for HBO Max starring Amy Adams, but his career spans various mediums, including directing the IFC comedy Maron, starring the comedian, actor, and OG podcaster Marc Maron. And he has the special distinction of winning both the Student Academy Award and the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film for God of Love, which he wrote, directed, and starred in.

Luke is a friend of In Proximity co-director, DP, and editor Patrick Epino. They both worked on an indie action comedy film called Awesome Asian Bad Guys. And I've always wanted to ask Luke, "What was it like to win an Oscar for a short film?" but more importantly, "What does it take to make a great award-winning short?" Pro tip, I learned it has a lot to do with timing and a little bit of luck. Luke gets into all that on this podcast and how he turned an early Oscar win into a working career as a writer, director, and showrunner. Here's my conversation with Luke Matheny.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[2:02 - "KN 9 to 5” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Welcome to In Proximity, Luke Matheny.

Luke Matheny: Thank you for having me.

Paola Mardo: So wonderful to have you here and excited to talk to you about your work. You've worked across different mediums, film and TV, different genres as well, but I want to start from the short film. Your short film, God of Love, is the story of a lounge singer and darts champion, Raymond, which you play, as well, whose prayers are finally and literally answered when he receives a mysterious package of passion-inducing darts. Is that how you would describe the darts?

Luke Matheny: It's funny to hear it read out loud like that, especially that I've won an Oscar and that sounds like the most ridiculous movie ever made.

[LAUGHTER]

But, yeah, that actually is the plot of it. Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: It's funny. I was trying to, like, write out and then say "passion-inducing darts." I was like, is there a better way—

Luke Matheny: Sometimes I say love-inducing.

Paola Mardo: Love-inducing, okay. I like that. Love-inducing darts.

Luke Matheny: That's probably more accurate, actually.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And, of course, the woman Ray loves, Kelly, played by Marian Brock, a drummer in his band. They're part of a jazz lounge band?

Luke Matheny: That's about right, with darts tricks. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yes, exactly. So he's in love with her, but she's in love with someone else. He is the guitarist in the band, Fozzie, played by Christopher Hirsh. So there's sort of a love triangle—

Luke Matheny: Exactly, yeah.

Paola Mardo:—situation here, and just a lot of love happening in the film. And basically, without giving it away, Ray uses the darts to try and win Kelly over and learns a lot about love over the

course of the film and the process and his place in the universe and the world. But it won multiple awards, including a Best Live Action Short Film Oscar. And before that, you won the Student Academy Award, right?

Luke Matheny: That's true.

Paola Mardo: Was that part of the plan, to win an Oscar for your short film?

Luke Matheny: The plan was to win the screenwriting prize at the NYU festival. That's where I was in grad school at the time. The movie was my thesis, and I thought if I could just win that screenwriting prize, that will prove that film school was worth it, and I'll show them all. But then it ended up taking on this incredible life of its own that I never could've imagined, especially considering that I was rejected from Sundance, South by Southwest, Tribeca, just a wall of rejection.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Luke Matheny: And then it just ended up winning the regional Student Oscar, which then went on to—and then it went on to win the Student Oscar even though it was rejected by all these other places. And so, yeah, if it hadn't been that one little path, I probably literally wouldn't be here. Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: The regional award that you won, the student award?

Luke Matheny: Yeah. So that makes you eligible to submit to the—

Paola Mardo: Student—

Luke Matheny: The national Student Oscars, and then that made me eligible to submit to the Academy Awards.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Luke Matheny: And I remember I got shortlisted, and I was like, "Wow! What could be better than that?" Then I got nominated, and that was the most exciting thing that ever happened in my life. And then people said, "Good luck!" and I was like, "For what?" And I was like, "Oh, that's right. They're going to have the actual ceremony." Then I ended up winning and that was, you know—

Paola Mardo: Incredible!

Luke Matheny:—a really surreal experience, yeah, that I could never have planned.

[4:59 - “Good Times” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Okay. So we have it live here, the Best—is it Live Action Short Film Oscar?

Luke Matheny: Best Live Action Short Film, Luke Matheny, 2010. So it's been a while, but yeah. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Hey, great year.

Luke Matheny: I think it's important to mention you asked me to bring this.

Paola Mardo: Yes!

Luke Matheny: I don't—

Paola Mardo: Yes, yes, yes.

Luke Matheny:—just carry it around with me.

Paola Mardo: Well, when I shared with the Proximity team that you were coming, literally someone was like, "Can he bring the Oscar?"

[LAUGHTER]

And we got very excited.

Luke Matheny: Oh, I get it.

Paola Mardo: So thank you for doing it.

Luke Matheny: It's an object of fascination. And I—you know, people come over, and then they see it. They want to take their picture with it. It was at my mom's for a long time right after I won it, and—

Paola Mardo: Oh, I love that.

Luke Matheny: She said people would, would see it, would freak out. They would go back home, like, fix up their makeup, and come back to the house so they could take their picture with the Oscar.

Paola Mardo: I mean, why not? When you were—when you found out you were nominated, what is that feeling like?

Luke Matheny: At that point in my career, I had so little going on. It was the beginning of my career. So I, I thought the Student Academy Award was going to be the culmination of, of everything. And honestly, it was very expensive to make the DCP and the transfer to, like,

submit to the Oscars, and I thought, "Is this really going to be worth the $3,000 or whatever?" Then you're telling yourself, "Well, you might never get to do this again." Then you did it, and then the short list happens, and that seems like—I mean, every single step felt like the best—or like I was in new territory because, you know, if I hadn't won the Academy Award, I would've spent the rest of my life saying, "I got nominated for an Academy Award once," which would've been amazing.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, which is great.

Luke Matheny: But, yeah, it was just—it was like, you know, you spend all this time hoping you're going to get in the regional Student Oscars. Then you qualify for the national Oscars. Then you're waiting for the short list. Then you're waiting for the nominations. Then you're waiting for the actual—so by the time Jake Gyllenhaal called my name on the ceremony, it was like—yeah, my brain just sort of exploded for a second and—because it had been, you know, 16 months of anticipation, or whatever it was, leading up to that moment.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

[CLIP: 83RD ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS CEREMONY]

[APPLAUSE]

Jake Gyllenhaal: And the Oscar goes to God of Love, Luke Matheny.

[MUSIC AND APPLAUSE AS LUKE MATHENY MAKES WAY TO STAGE]

Announcer: This is the first Academy Award and nomination for Luke Matheny.

Luke Matheny: I should've gotten a haircut! Hey, everybody.

[LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE]

[CLIP ENDS]

Paola Mardo: Your speech is also so iconic. I feel like it ends up in, like, lists of best Oscar speeches, or at least I've seen. And it's just a fun speech. Especially as someone so early in their career, you were so confident up there. You were funny. I feel like you did all the things right in an Oscar speech.

Luke Matheny: Thank you. It's funny because I—after it happened, I really had little interest in watching it for whatever reason.

Paola Mardo: Really?

Luke Matheny: It just sort of—it felt like the past. And then I went to some film festival six or seven months afterwards where they played it, like after they showed the movie.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh!

Luke Matheny: So I hadn't actually seen it. And I had gotten a lot of attention for the speech, but I had written it out so I—it wasn't like it was the Gettysburg Address. It wasn't this, like, perfectly written thing. And I wasn't quite sure what all the hubbub was about, but when I watched it, I was like, I mean, "This guy really looks like he is delighted to have won an Oscar," in a way that I think is appealing just to people, movie fans at home. I looked like I had won, you know, The Price is Right or something.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: I wouldn't say that, but, yeah, maybe.

Luke Matheny: But I was—

Paola Mardo: In a good way.

Luke Matheny: You could tell I was, like, super stoked about it, and I was ready to read the speech. And, yeah, it was fun.

Paola Mardo: What did it look like from the stage? Do you even remember?

Luke Matheny: Yeah. Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem were in the front row. I certainly remember that. That was all I could really remember. It was—and then just the—because you can really only see that front row.

Paola Mardo: The front row. God, that's intimidating! Or was it fun? You were like, "Yes!" They're cheering you on?

Luke Matheny: No, I was—I was pretty stoked at that point. And, yeah, I mean, they were just smiling. It was just—it wasn't like they were like, [CROSSES ARMS] "Get off the stage!" But, no, it was an—it was an incredible moment. Like, I grew up watching the Oscars. I—Oscar trivia was sort of my, like, party trick for many years.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Luke Matheny: I, I can name every Best Picture from 1927 to present. That was, like, this thing I was always able to do. And I think another thing that helped with the speech was you go to this Nominees Luncheon where they give you very specific instructions, where they say you're going to have—I believe 45 seconds was the length. And they took—said, "Everyone needs to practice." So I'm, like, a nerd, so I was like, "Oh, I guess Jeff Bridges is practicing his speech at

home, and we're all just at home do—all the nominees are in the same boat, right?" But—so I think that actually really helped. And I had written the whole thing out, and I had, like, rehearsed it a couple times. So then when it was go time, I wasn't really stumbling or anything. I was ready to go.

Paola Mardo: That's great.

Luke Matheny: I literally ran up to the stage because—

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You're like, "I'm ready!"

Luke Matheny: Well, I also thought, like, the Live Action Short category, they're going to just cut this off a little earlier. I got to go as fast as I can.

Paola Mardo: I like—you're thinking about the producers, you know?

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: That's great. That's great.

Luke Matheny: Yeah, I'm obsessed with the schedule for some reason.

Paola Mardo: You are!

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: I married an assistant director, as a—

Paola Mardo: There you go.

Luke Matheny: She's a UPM now, but yeah.

Paola Mardo: Shout out, Maileen!

Luke Matheny: Yeah. [WAVES TO CAMERA] Love you, baby.

[10:06 - “In Proximity ‘90s” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So you went to film school at NYU. We'll just take it back to that. Did you want to become a director, or were you more interested in writing? Or you also acted in the film. So, I guess, what was the goal going into film school? Because, you know, everyone talks about, "Should I go to film school or not?"

Luke Matheny: Sure. Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: It's always a question. I know you teach now, too. So—

Luke Matheny: Well, in terms of, "Should I go to film school?" It's hard for me to say no because I had the best possible outcome from film school in that my thesis won an Academy Award. So, if I'm saying, "Don't go to film school," then, like, nobody should go.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Luke Matheny: But it is fair to say, like, if I had stayed around in Chicago where I was living at the time and tried to get my own thing going, I would not have been able to make comparable things happen in my career in that reality. And I think the film school reality was more appropriate for me. Obviously, there are a zillion people who do it a zillion different ways, but that was more appropriate for what was going on with me. I think, at the time, I was—when I started film school, I thought I was going to be doing more indie/dramady, two-guys-sitting-on-a-couch-making-pop-culture-references sort of stuff, which was, you know, in the ether kind of—

Paola Mardo: At the time, yeah.

Luke Matheny: In the, you know, early 2000s sort of thing. But I think it was—NYU graduate film program is three years of classes, which—and then you have two years to do your thesis, which seems like an egregiously long amount of time, but it does give you time to sort of—and it is expensive, and it feels indulgent, but it does give you time to kind of explore your voice a little more.

Paola Mardo: Yeah!

Luke Matheny: And I think a more stylish cinematic kind of approach to comedy was something I was cultivating and discovering a little more when I was there. So that kind of—I was—I have always been into, like, jazz photography and things like that, but I don't think I really thought of incorporating it into a film. And that's really what I tried to do with God of Love in conjunction with my, you know, classmates at the time, who were, you know, excited to go along with it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and you did want to do all things: writing, directing, acting? Like, going into film school, that was part of the plan?

Luke Matheny: Certainly not acting. I was—I was thinking—it's a auteur program so you—pretty much everyone directs their own material that you write. So I was thinking of being a writer/director. And the first movie I made, I ended up acting in because I couldn't find anyone on short notice, so I just decided to act in it.

Paola Mardo: You happened to be available.

Luke Matheny: I was available, and I knew exactly what the director wanted.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Luke Matheny: And then my next film—

Paola Mardo: You had a good rapport. Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Yeah, exactly. And for my next film, I—same thing, where I had written a part, and then I auditioned a bunch of actors, and I was like—you just find yourself telling them to do what you would do. And these are much better actors than I am. I'm not saying I'm a great actor, but I had just kind of written it very specifically to my own voice or whatever. So I ended up playing that role, too.

And then, by the time I got to the thesis, I was like, "All right, this is my last shot. I just want to design it around everything I—my narrow set of skills but, like, showcase all of them. So I'm writing, I'm directing, I'm acting in it, I'm singing." I was like, anything that might get me work after I leave this program debt-ridden. Like, I'll put it all in the movie, was sort of the wayI was thinking about it. And, and that's what happened.

So I'm very fortunate that I ended up being so handsomely rewarded for putting myself out there like that because I feel like this happens at other times, and then you are slapped in the face by the world.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You—

Luke Matheny: So I'm, I have a charmed situation in that way.

Paola Mardo: I love that you said that and you're honest about that because, A, putting yourself in a film, too, behind or in front of a camera, is very personal, and you're—it's a very vulnerable kind of situation. But also you're making a short as a young filmmaker, and you do want to put your stamp on this product that you're going to put out into the world, right? Because why are you making a short film if not to kind of show what your voice is—

Luke Matheny: Exactly.

Paola Mardo:—or what kind of stories you want to tell? But what made you want to tell a story about love and set in this sort of jazz world? Like, was there an inspiration in your own life?

Luke Matheny: In some ways. It was more just the, the starting point was—came from my previous movie that I had done in film school that was an adaptation of Cyrano de Bergerac, the play with the big nose. I did, like, a comic adaptation of Cyrano where he had big ears instead of a big nose.

Paola Mardo: Hilarious, hilarious.

Luke Matheny: So that was funny, and that idea sort of fell from the sky, and it wasn't at all the kind of thing I was doing at film school, but I had some success with it. And I kind of explored that a little more when it came time to do my thesis film. So I thought maybe a—this spoils it a little bit—a Cupid story would be something to investigate.

Paola Mardo: His origin story.

Luke Matheny: Yeah, the movie ends up being kind of a Cupid origin story. That is what it is. So that was just where the broad sort of idea came from. And then just working through it, I think I was, you know, working through my early 20s and prior long cycles of unrequited delusion—unrequited love and delusion. And that was a subject I knew rather well at the time. I would say I was—

Paola Mardo: You were writing what you knew.

Luke Matheny: Yeah, really understood that. But I was in a relationship at the time, so I was starting to have, like, a kind of more positive, you know, feeling about the whole thing. And I guess that all kind of subconsciously made its way into the material.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, to me, when I saw it—- that's funny you talked about Cyrano de Bergerac. I don't know. I love the tone and the style, like the black-and-white film. Did you shoot on black-and-white, or did you edit it in?

Luke Matheny: We shot it on the—the first RED camera, the RED One. So it was all recorded in—we have the data in color, but the monitors were all set to black-and-white.

Paola Mardo: Cool.

Luke Matheny: It was—that was always the plan.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, it has sort of, like, Godard French New Wave kind of style.

Luke Matheny: Yeah. My cinematographer, Bobby Webster, and I definitely looked at a lot of French New Wave stuff and jazz photography, and that was—that was definitely a plan from the—from the get-go.

Paola Mardo: And it's funny but also bittersweet. It sounds like a lot of the choices were personal and your taste. But there was—like, did you have a mood board? Like, how did you sort of put it together and, like, talk to your cinematographer, your production designer, your crew to sort of give them the visual language to stick to in the film?

Luke Matheny: Detailed conversations with each department head, really, and then a willingness to trade up if the other guy had a better idea than I did. Like, there's a little scene where another character decorates a room to make it for a big fancy date, which in my mind was going to be just he went to Party City and got cheap decorations. But the production designer was like, "No, you got to have this really over-the-top thing where—just to keep in the same tone of the comedy of the rest of the—of the movie."

So he went to town and, you know, just did, you know, the full production design sort of version. So it's—I mean, it plays very absurdly, but then it's also kind of charming at the same time. So that was an example of someone having an idea that did not occur to me when I was writing it or when I was envisioning it. But you sort of have to be, while having a kind of firm grasp of the bigger version, be ready to, like, spot little gifts as they—as they come.

Paola Mardo: I love that. I think that's great advice for a director and then also for making a short film. So did you watch every take?

Luke Matheny: I think I just knew it was a slippery slope, and if I started watching takes and—

Paola Mardo: You'd run out of time and the whole thing.

Luke Matheny: Yeah, exactly.

Paola Mardo: So you have to trust your DP and even, like, other folks on set to just call things out.

Luke Matheny: Right. I'd rather just get five more takes instead of—in the time that it takes to review one.

Paola Mardo: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Luke Matheny: You know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Luke Matheny: And then talk about it. Like, just try it the other way.

Paola Mardo: That's cool. I mean, I also direct this show. It's not narrative, but there are, like, visual elements that I definitely oversee. I work with co-director Patrick Epino, shout out. He's behind the camera.

Luke Matheny: He's the best.

Paola Mardo: He is—whom you know, your friend as well, and you've worked together on a film called Awesome Asian Bad Guys, shout out. But I, I totally relate to, you know, even though you are the director, and it's your vision, that, you know, people are helping put up on screen—

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo:—or help make happen, you do have to—especially as someone who's also in front of the camera, right? You have to sort of trust the team will, like, "Okay, once I'm here, I'm not the director anymore." You know what I mean? I'm kind of leaning on the team to, like, help me out.

Luke Matheny: You have to be pretty honest with yourself about how much you can realistically accomplish all by yourself, even in terms of what you can deliver as an actor. I think sometimes people put themselves in the films and write roles for themselves that they can't quite pull off, which I think is tricky, too. So, yeah, it's really—you have to have a pretty good understanding of your limitations and then fill in the blanks with the people around you who can pick up things that you are unable to.

[18:51 - “In Proximity ‘90s” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Short film, it's not simply like making a movie and just making it shorter.

Luke Matheny: Correct.

Paola Mardo: Yes, time plays into it, but it is a form that has limitations that, you know, can be challenging but also can help you in kind of creating a really tight, strong movie. You know, what do you feel like is essential in making a great short film or a short movie?

Luke Matheny: This is a great question, and just since making God of Love, I'm on different juries a lot now. So I've ended up watching way more short films than I ever expected to in my life. And it's a very difficult form. It's usually made by people who don't have many resources, don't have much experience. The things they are trying to showcase might not be appropriate to a short film.

For instance, one long ponderous scene in the context of a feature might land a little more. But in a short film where you're not quite sure how long it's going to be, if you watch a minute of someone looking mournfully in the mirror in the bathroom, like, in a feature, you could see how that moment would just kill. But there's an unmoored quality that the audience gets, I think, when they don't quite understand where the story is going in a short film.

A federal prosecutor has this advice. He was—oh, he was talking to a friend who does pitching. And I actually thought this is very similar to short films. And my friend, you know, did his director pitch for his prosecutor, and his prosecutor friend always says, at the beginning of the—his—the opening arguments or whatever—he always says—lays out what's going to happen. "In this trial, you're going to learn about this. You're going to learn about this. You going to learn why she committed this crime," or something like that. And then, the second you say that, the jury relaxes because they have a sense of the broad shape of a thing. And then he was saying, like, in a pitch, it helps to—for execs to kind of spell out where you're going to go.

Paola Mardo: Right, at the top because—so that they can kind of follow along, as well.

Luke Matheny: Yeah. You know where you are in the structure. And the second he was telling me this story, I thought, this is exactly the problem with a lot of short films, is—it's not like you need to give everything away, but you need to show an action or conflict or something at the beginning that, like, implies a structure so the audience is thinking, "Oh, this is obviously going to be about a date," or, "a trial," or, "a confrontation between these two siblings," or something like that.

So it doesn't give anything away, but we just sort of understand, okay, so then when the confrontation between two siblings happens, we know, okay, we're probably close to the climax or near Act III. Because when you remove these signposts, to me, it always creates just this very unstable feeling, and I'm always—I always feel like the—you know, the astronaut who goes to, like, fix the ship, and then the cord gets cut, and they're just, like, floating into space. And it's like, "Why does this 12-minute film feel like the longest movie I've ever seen?"

Paola Mardo: Right, right.

Luke Matheny: Like, I've seen much worse two-hour movies that, like, I'm sort of fine with sitting through. But there's just a real tricky with short films, to—that I've diagnosed as: you have to get to the point a little quicker than you think.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You know, a feature film, for the most part—obviously, people can change structure and things like that—but you kind of know this means beginning, middle, end.

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You know, you kind of know how far you'll get to get to the climax. Like, you kind of—

Luke Matheny: And you watch a zillion features your whole life. You kind of understand how they work. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You kind of know the flow. But with shorts, you know, a 10-minute short, 20-minute short, you can't really tell so much what those exact, I guess, timestamps are.

Luke Matheny: Yeah, the little slaloms that, that you have to kind of ski through getting in the story, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I guess, in your short, I felt like because I knew, okay, it's about this guy. He's in love with this girl, and he has these darts, and he's going to use them to sort of, like, you know—

Luke Matheny: Resolve a love triangle.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and he has a limited amount of darts, and, you know, a certain amount of time to get this girl to love him or whatever it is.

Luke Matheny: Exactly.

Paola Mardo: To me, that sort of implied a structure. Is that what you're talking about? Or was it—

Luke Matheny: Yeah, exactly right. Well, just right at the beginning, you sort of understand the relationship. He's in love with her, she's in love with the best friend, the best friend may or may not be in love with her. So right there, you know, okay, that's kind of the subject. Then these darts come into his life, and he's going to use the darts to try to resolve this problem. And everything I'm saying now is only through the benefit of having—in retrospect. When I was making the movie, I wasn't thinking about any of these things. I did work on the script forever, but it was more just kind of blindly trying to figure out what it wasn't and what it was until I sort of got it to the right place. So I didn't—now I teach at American Film Institute. Like, I'm an adjunct professor there, and I, I actually use God of Love as—

Paola Mardo: You force your students to watch your film.

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Yeah, no, it's ridiculous. Shout out, you know, Principles of—

Paola Mardo: Shout out AFI!

Luke Matheny: Yeah. And I certainly didn't set out to write, like, a textbook kind of thing, but I think it just sort of turned out that way through continued listening to notes, addressing notes. And then, by the time it was—kind of hit this satisfying whole, it did sort of become a textbook kind of script.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You know, I produced a short film as well, recently, you know, with Patrick as director. And I personally—it was the first short I've ever produced. And it taught me a lot about working within limitations but being creative within those limitations as well. Like, we had

a limited amount of time to shoot this thing, x amount of pages to get through, budget, you know what I mean? So there was certain constrictions to what we could do, but within it, I think it helped us be more creative.

Luke Matheny: I feel like few short film producers are ever like, "We had unlimited resources. We didn't need to be creative at all!" Yeah.

Paola Mardo: I know. We had a budget. I mean, much like any movie, but on shorts, it's even smaller, right?

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: What else, I guess, besides, like, a narrative structure do you feel like are good—I mean, you're a professor—good limitations or things that filmmakers can think about or play around with as they make a short film?

Luke Matheny: In terms of shorts?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Luke Matheny: I always say no matter what you're making, and this is a unglamorous way to put it, if it's a web series or a feature film or a TV show, you have a certain amount of time to get a certain number of shots. Like, that just is what you have to do.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Luke Matheny: And maybe certain number of shots isn't the right way. Maybe it's, like, the right number of shots or something. So that is—like, time is finite. You have to—you have to figure out a circumstance that lets you, like, get those things. And sometimes at film school, whenever someone would say, "Oh, this shoot's really ambitious," I would always be worried because to me, all that meant was, "This seems like a long shot, and we don't quite have the resources to pull off an insane thing that a film—a student film can't really do," you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. But it's also like you can take that—whatever, the big movie that you want to make but talk to an AD or talk to a producer and be like, "Okay, what's realistic? What can we do in the two days or ten days? What can we maybe change or cut or whatever?" I mean, that's part of the process, right, as you're—

Luke Matheny: And the more you think yourself like a producer and get ahead of some of those questions, I think that's helpful, as opposed to, like, waiting for the producer or the AD to tell you this is impossible. It's like, "Well, maybe I can't do this underwater musical sequence," you know?

Paola Mardo: Right, right. Better to know ahead of time than, like, the night before.

Luke Matheny: Yeah!

Paola Mardo: I don't want to be too prescriptive, but, like, because you have watched so many shorts, and you teach about it, as well, what are other dos and don'ts, at least creatively, for short films? Like, what just doesn't work? Or what really works, and you're like, "Yeah, more of that?"

Luke Matheny: I would say it's really hard to make a good short film. When I look back at the circumstances that went into my short film, it all feels—well, some of it was, you know, me doing—me making correct decisions, but a lot of it feels like luck in retrospect of, like, the right things aligning at the right time. So I'll just say that. Like, if you make a bad short film, you are not alone. Like, it is really easy to make one, and it's a hard form to master.

The things you end up seeing a lot of are just too slow of a pace in the first couple minutes. Because sometimes the thing you want to showcase is, like, a really meaningful, dramatic scene between two people, which is what great movies have, great features. But, you know, by the time you get to the end of Past Live, Celine Song has set up all this stuff. So, like, these scenes between two people are just singing, and they can take—have as many pauses or can breathe as much as you want because so much has gone into the audience, like, being ready to enjoy it.

If you only have two minutes to get to know the characters, these things just don't land with the same—the same impact. So there are some things that are just way harder to pull off. And then I find that comes at the expense of a more propulsive story, which seems to matter less to short filmmakers because it's more like they have this one set piece in their mind, or it's like, "We're going to do an underwater mermaid sequence." And then that kind of wags the dog a little bit. And I've seen these things. They look awesome sometimes, but then you—they need to be undergirded by, like, a stronger story, in my opinion.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, a long, like, five-minute walk just doesn't hit the same in a short film as it probably does in a feature film.

Luke Matheny: Right. If you only had 10 seconds of setup, and then you had to walk—watch them walk for five minutes, it doesn't—yeah, it doesn't hit.

Paola Mardo: Right.

[28:12 - “In Proximity ‘90s” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: How did you go from short film to, like, a working career as a writer/director. Did you have a plan with your short film in mind to help launch you into whatever that path was?

Luke Matheny: When the Oscars happened, my goal was to make an indie feature. The NYU program is sort of focused toward kind of getting your feature into Sundance. That was sort of the, the aspiration of most filmmakers there. So the Oscars was even a little outside of what people were trying to do.

Paola Mardo: Cool.

Luke Matheny: And I was hoping to be one of those, you know, go to Park City and do the whole thing. I had this goofy indie comedy script that was based on Don Quixote called Ron Quixote that was going to star me. It was a buddy comedy with me and Gabourey Sidibe, was sort of the—I shouldn't tell you any more. The script was barely done when, when all the Oscar stuff happened.

So then I was just sort of panicking. Like, I had this amazing prize that had landed in my lap, and I was getting caught unprepared because I didn't have this fully locked and loaded script that was ready to go. And it was also earlier in my writing career, too. Like, it was—if I revisited the project today, it would be a much better script, but I think I just didn't—hadn't quite honed the craft. So, while all of this happening, I'm really frantically trying to rewrite this thing. You know, your rep starts sending you other stuff. They—it was a very specific situation because I had won an Academy Award. So that—

Paola Mardo: Okay. Can I just quickly pause? So you were already represented at this time?

Luke Matheny: At the Student Oscars, I got an agent.

Paola Mardo: Okay. That's helpful to know.

Luke Matheny: They came to me. That was Paradigm, which I'm not anymore, but they, they were—they were great. And the more traditional path is getting a manager or something first, and then you kind of build a relationship with a manager, and then at some point you take on an agent.

Paola Mardo: Some people get represented early on. Some don't, but you had awards sort of behind you and that momentum.

Luke Matheny: Right.

Paola Mardo: So you did—you know, people approached you. So, after the Oscars, you had—you had this guy—this Oscar statuette I'm looking at right now for those listening—and you had a couple representatives, an agent and a lawyer, at least.

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And so what took you to that next level into an actual career in the industry?

Luke Matheny: The main thing the agents can do early on is set you up on a bunch of general meetings at production companies. So you meet everyone in town, hopefully vibing with someone who has a similar sensibility, liked your short film, and they might have something you can work on. So that's one thing. They field offers if, like, you just start getting offers off the short film, or there's open directing assignments they might send to the agent.

Paola Mardo: It happens.

Luke Matheny: And, and—which isn't to say you're just offered the job. You're offered to pitch on it. You know, they—so then—

Paola Mardo: Right.

Luke Matheny: So you can—they can field offers, or they can—if you have this feature script, they can send it to producers. So those are kind of the main things. And along those lines of the general meetings, I was supposed to have a general meeting at this place called Apostle Entertainment. I—it got rescheduled. I was never able to do the meeting, but they liked the short film. And then they ended up reaching out to offer my reps—through my reps to offer me a direct—to direct a pilot presentation, like a proof of concept pilot for this show called Maron, which starred Marc Maron. It was on IFC.

Paola Mardo: Oh, cool.

Luke Matheny: And this was in the early days. His legendary podcast was finally—it hit—

Paola Mardo: I was going to say shout out to the OG podcaster!

Luke Matheny: Yeah, but that was—that was the early days. Like, I didn't really know who he was when I first got the offer. I was at a wedding, I remember, and I remember only the most hipster-iest person at the wedding knew who it was. Like, because—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Sounds about right.

Luke Matheny: Yeah. It was like the early—the very early days of it. But then I ended up directing that and going from this weird student film where I had 20 days to shoot—sorry, 10 days to shoot a 20-page script—I had to do the 20 pages in two days—

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Luke Matheny:—you know, for this proof of concept. And then, once the show got picked up, and they were nice enough to bring me back as the pilot director and producing director, or one of the producing directors.

Paola Mardo: Oh, cool.

Luke Matheny: I—it was three days an episode. So.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Luke Matheny: So—which was a huge part of my career, too. You learn how to move much faster, which was an amazing education.

[32:13 - “In Proximity ‘90s” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So you just released a animated version of Charlotte's Web, animated TV show. You're the executive producer and showrunner for the new Charlotte's Web animated series on HBO Max.

Luke Matheny: Yes!

Paola Mardo: Shout out! You can watch it now with streaming. And obviously, Charlotte's Web by E.B. White, it's an American classic. It actually traveled abroad, as well. I grew up partially in the Philippines, and I read the book, and I remember seeing the movie. Like, it was just part of my childhood, as well, growing up in a totally different country.

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: So, yeah, it's just an iconic piece of literature and a story that's also been adapted, I think, for film and TV multiple times.

Luke Matheny: There were two, two bigger ones before. There was a musical in the either late '60s or early '70s—it was animated—that was usually on TV once a year that starred Debbie Reynolds as Charlotte. And then there was a live-action version in like 2000—the mid 2000s—that Julia Roberts was the voice of Charlotte.

Paola Mardo: Yes, and—

Luke Matheny: But we have, in my humble opinion, the greatest Charlotte on screen.

Paola Mardo: Hey!

Luke Matheny: Amy Adams, who was an absolute genius.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, you had a great voice cast. I mean, I'm just going to list out right now. You had Amy Adams as Charlotte; Jean Smart as narrator; Elijah Wood, adult Wilbur.

Luke Matheny: Cynthia Erivo was the goose. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Cynthia Erivo, goose; Randall Park—Awesome Asian Bad Guys shout-out, too—as Templeton.

Luke Matheny: We acted together in that, actually. Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yes, you did. So, I mean, what an incredible cast and just a beautiful story to adapt into this medium. Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about how this project came to be and how you got attached as the executive producer and showrunner?

Luke Matheny: Well, backing up a little bit, and I was just talking about directing sitcoms with Marc Maron, which was a different thing, and then, early on in my career, I got a kids pilot sent to me. And I ended up becoming the producing director and a showrunner of a show called Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street, which has actually been—the bulk of my career since I've been out here is kind of higher-end streaming kids television.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Luke Matheny: And I worked on another show called Ghost Writer that was on Apple TV+ that was about fictional characters that jump out of books, kind of. And one of the books we did in the last season was Charlotte's Web. And the estate was really happy with how that was all going, or that relationship was going. They offered the producer of Sesame Workshop an opportunity to take a crack at it, like a limited series.

Paola Mardo: Cool.

Luke Matheny: And then I was sort of asked to take it on because I had already been sort of working on the project, and Sesame asked me to do it. So it was a very lucky thing that fell in my lap. I just ran with it the best I could. I had been—at the time, I had been—it was during the pandemic. I was far away from my family. My daughter, at the time, was only six months old, and I'm, like, in another country. And I knew if I took this job, I could be at home, like—

Paola Mardo: Wait, where were you?

Luke Matheny: In Toronto. That's where I was shooting—

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Luke Matheny:—Ghost Writer. And I thought, okay, this is—who's going to say no to Charlotte's Web? This is a great opportunity, and I get to do it in my house because animation, you can do remotely. And it was a dream to work on.

Paola Mardo: Well, how did you approach adapting a book and also something that's been adapted prior times, as well?

Luke Matheny: Sure. Well, the first thing I did was watch the other ones, the other—and I thought there was—there was still room to try to expand the story and yet still kind of make it kind of a definitive version. That, that's what I was sort of hoping for. That's what I just kept telling everyone on the team, is, "I want ours to be the best one."

So the mandate was to make three 44-minute episodes. That wasn't my decision. That was—that was what the assignment was. So I kind of knew that's what I had to do. I love heavier themes in children's things, and, you know, E.B. White's writing is unimprovable, really, especially on the page. And I was just looking for how to rise to the occasion and adapt it. So it's a little daunting because you're like, "This is one of the greatest writers of American English. How am I going to"—it, it was like a T-2. Like, like T-2 was, like, more advanced than T-1, and you're like, "How are we going to beat this guy?" Like, it doesn't make—how am I going to be better than E.B. White or—

Paola Mardo: I was like, "He's making a Terminator reference right now?"

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Yeah. How am I—how am I going to fool the audience into thinking I'm as good as E.B. White or, like—

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Luke Matheny: Which is to say you have to borrow in sort of a clever enough way that it, it feels like we've perfectly mimicked his style, which is all thankless. I wasn't really interested in, like, getting my voice out there. I wanted to be true to the spirit of the material.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. So have your kids, or at least your nine-year-old, has he read the book yet, or no? Is it still too—

Luke Matheny: Yeah. I mean, as the years went by, you know, and after school, they would end up reading it.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Luke Matheny: So they had seen the—

Paola Mardo: Wow. And he saw your show? Both of them have seen the show?

Luke Matheny: Yeah. The night it came out, we—you know, we'd been waiting for that for, you know, a long time. It was—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Luke Matheny:—as my daughter said, "Daddy's special night." And, yeah, my, my wife baked a cake with a big web on it that said "Some dad!" which is a reference to the—to the book. And, yeah, we sat down, we watched all three parts, and it was—it was one of the best nights of my life.

[37:07 - “Juno Arp Stinger” by Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: I appreciate that you mentioned, you know, your background and sort of your roots also in children's media. I think that's such a specific kind of storytelling to, to be in and to be able to master really well. What is it about, I think, your own interests that drew you to that, or your skills? Like, how did you find yourself in that lane?

Luke Matheny: Well, my career just unfolded that way, in a way that wasn't quite by design because I ended up getting that kids job earlier in my career. And I think there was a—there's an innocence to my work, maybe, that turned out to overlap nicely with kids television, or there's a lack of cynicism, I would say but still kind of good-humored. So I think there were just a lot of qualities of my short film that ended up being surprisingly compatible with things that are valuable in kids TV.

It certainly wasn't where I pictured my career going, but I'm now—you know, when you want to get to Park City, it—and you're like, "Why am I doing a kids show?" And then like 10 years later, you're like, "Hey, I just gave a presentation at the kids' school on Charlotte's Web, and I'm the coolest guy in South Pasadena.

Paola Mardo: Hey, you are!

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Yeah. So it's—life unfolds in ways you can't—you can't predict, and things that are valued at one point are unimportant later and vice versa, you know?

Paola Mardo: I think it's important, also, to know, especially as the industry is changing—I mean, you mentioned Sundance, and Sundance is moving, right?

Luke Matheny: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: So even the festival itself is changing.

Luke Matheny: I've still never gotten in. I've visited a couple times, but yeah.

Paola Mardo: Well, you know what...

Luke Matheny: You never know.

Paola Mardo: You never know who's listening and watching right now.

Luke Matheny: Right, right.

Paola Mardo: But I think that's important in building a career, honestly, in any field, but specifically film and TV because—I mean, even making a short film for myself, it's, like, getting to that point was, like—I got into podcasting. Before that, I was in film publicity. Before that—you know what I mean? So there's no one way to do things.

Luke Matheny: That's for sure. I do think, regardless of the path, you do have to make something.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Luke Matheny: Like, sort of nothing happens if you make nothing. And very few careers blossom on a promise of something or a suggestion of something or a pledge to do something. Like, you actually have to make the thing. Like, I—you know, before film school, I majored in journalism in undergrad, and I made a really goofy, weird movie with my friends that was kind of a—kind of a lark.

But, you know, we worked really hard on it. We saved our money for a couple years. We bought a camera. This is back before cell phones—you could shoot something on a cell phone, but, like, a digital video camera. And, like, that's—the movie did not turn out well, but parts of it turned out well, and that's what I used to get into film school at NYU, which was a prestigious program and certainly advanced my career.

And then that short, obviously, my—you know, my story is very specific. It's weird to give advice. Like, "Well, the first thing you should do in your career is win an Academy Award because it was very helpful."

Paola Mardo: Well, make something, keep going.

Luke Matheny: And keep going.

Paola Mardo: I think that's, that's the big lesson here.

Luke Matheny: Because you might make a couple bad things, and then you have to choose the right lessons from—

Paola Mardo: Mm-hmm. Pivot if you need to.

Luke Matheny: Yeah. I went to a—like, a 30th anniversary screening of Do the Right Thing. And Spike Lee was a professor in film school.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Luke Matheny: I got to go back—I saw him for just a second, and I was watching Do the Right Thing, and I kept thinking about how his first two movies, School Daze and She's Gotta Have It, are wonderful films but, like, it's like an explosion to get to—the third movie was amazing. And I was just sort of asking about that, of, like, "What, what did you learn from those first two that you were able to take off into the stratosphere for the third one?" He said, "I've learned something from every single movie I ever made," which is the only right answer. You know, you just have to keep learning no matter what the outcome is and then figure out what to take from it, and put it into the next project.

Paola Mardo: And keep making stuff.

[40:57 - “Juno Arp Stinger” by Ken Nana]

Luke Matheny: Do you want to hold it?

Paola Mardo: Actually, I guess. Why not? It's here.

Luke Matheny: It's heavier than you think.

Paola Mardo: Okay. Okay. Let me try. One second. Oh. Oh, it is. I feel like I'm getting a workout right now. Charlotte's Web also, like we mentioned, starred Amy Adams as Charlotte. And she actually, along with Jake Gyllenhaal, gave you this.

Luke Matheny: She was one of the presenters, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah! Did—like, did that—did you guys talk about that, or did it ever come up or go full circle?

Luke Matheny: Sure, yeah. I—yeah.

Paola Mardo: What was that like?

Luke Matheny: No, we definitely talked about it. It was one of those—what a crazy full-circle moment. No, it really felt like that. And Amy is the nicest and so easy to work with. And she's so

pleasant and kind of collaborative, you—it disguises the actual genius. Like, you don't think you're working with a genius because she's just so nice, but, like, she's brilliant.

[41:48 - “Prox Recs Theme” with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: Okay, Luke, we've come to the last part of the show.

Luke Matheny: Okay.

Paola Mardo: It's called Prox Recs, and it's where our guests recommend—they give a rec for our audience. Usually, it's about what you do as a filmmaker, writer, film director, something they can sort of walk away from this conversation and dig into whatever lessons you've imparted a little bit more.

Luke Matheny: I mean, the podcast I listen to all the time is this show called Blank Check, if you—

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Luke Matheny: You've heard of this, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yes. I have heard it, but—

Luke Matheny: So it's about director filmographies. So it's just a real deep dive into the careers of different directors. The premise is, like, at a certain degree of success, a director has a blank check to do whatever they want, and sometimes the checks bounce, sometimes they clear. And it kind of goes film by film through a director's filmography chronologically, these two: a film critic from The Atlantic and an actor. And they're really funny guys, and it's very entertaining, and you can just scroll—I'm listening to the Buster Keaton one right now, which I think is really good.

Paola Mardo: I love that you mentioned Buster Keaton. I feel like that's very aligned with your work.

[LAUGHTER]

Luke Matheny: Sure.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Are there other series or directors that people should check out?

Luke Matheny: I started with the Bob Zemeckis one.

Paola Mardo: Okay!

Luke Matheny: It's a long filmography fast and—

Paola Mardo: Do they go through every film or just—

Luke Matheny: Yeah. Every, every episode is a movie, and then they go one-by-one through the whole—the whole filmography. And it's—no, it's a pleasure to listen to. And, yeah, I—well, they just did the Coen Brothers last year, so that was a great one.

Paola Mardo: Oh, sick. Cool.

Luke Matheny: Yeah. Seth Rogan was, like, the guest on the Lebowski one. Marc Maron was the Serious Man one.

Paola Mardo: Oh, they have guests, too!

Luke Matheny: No, it's very cool. It's very cool. Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Okay, cool. Okay. Shout out Blank Check. Check it out.

Luke Matheny: And it's just good for filmmakers. You just really hear in-depth discussions about filmmaking.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Okay. [HOLDING OSCAR] This guy's been sitting on me for quite a while, and it's time to say thank you, Luke Matheny, for being on the show. I really appreciate it.

Luke Matheny: The pleasure was mine. Thank you for having me.

[43:43 - “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 is by Ludwig Göransson.

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

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]