

Do not seek approvals, go out and make your films happen, says Qumra Master Bennett Miller to emerging talents

Doha, Qatar; March 12, 2018: Oscar® nominated director and Qumra Master Bennett Miller (*Capote*, *Moneyball*, *Foxcatcher*) encouraged first- and second-time filmmakers attending his masterclass to equip themselves with resilience when making films and remain true to their vision.

At the industry event by the Doha Film Institute, Miller was at times clinically precise and more often channeling the emerging talents through his own experiences as a weather-beaten director-aspirant doing all sorts of “lowly work” before he accomplished his first project, *The Cruise*, a documentary on the personality of Timothy Levitch, an American actor, tour guide and author.

“I dropped out of school, worked for a filmmaker, got fired, was hurt, assisted on a music video, and then ended doing very lowly work for many years,” said Miller. “It reached a point where it occurred to me that I was incredibly unhappy doing this. I was following that 12-year-old kid [in himself] who had this fascination for the moving image. I made a decision to stop, and at that very minute feeling the relief of letting of my ambition and wanting to do film,” something clicked.

He experienced that familiar child-like feeling of wanting to do something, and he started filming Timothy, “a poetic soul living in a different era and very performative”. Miller was a one-man-crew, and shot for 77 hours but didn’t find it “interesting or soulful”. He started afresh, and shot another 100 hours of Timothy.

The final product, after four years of effort, was rejected by every festival until “a friend of a friend” formed an emotional reaction to it. She was then programming for a Los Angeles film festival and entered *The Cruise* as her fee. It was one of the press screenings and *The Cruise* received tremendous media acclaim.

Miller said he had never felt the same sense of gratification with any other film than when watching *The Cruise* projected on the big screen with an audience. “It was such a transcendental experience.” Lesson, then, for young filmmakers: “Do not wait for approvals; it won’t happen. Follow your vision of what you want to do, and don’t give up on what you are doing.”

Miller soon found that doors, previously inaccessible, were opening to him, and he did a lot of commercials wanting to have some security and not be dependent as well as to work with different people. He also associated with people with whom he would go on to work for years, underlining to the Qumra audience, that “relationships are everything”.

His next film was his true calling card to the big league with *Capote* on the life of Truman Capote, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, who won the Academy Award for Best Actor, and Miller earned his nomination.

Miller had known Hoffman when they did a theatre programme, and what Miller looked for in presenting Capote was not as much the physical features (Hoffman is a good taller and Miller resorted to camera angles and background actors who were taller than Hoffman) but his “interiors”. Miller said:

“Philip doesn’t impersonate; he can’t do it all. He had this Walkman and was listening to the voice of Capote in his head until he found that connection; he is very much an inside-out actor.”

The finest tribute came from Capote’s lifelong friend and author of *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Harper Lee. Almost everything in the film did not play out how it happened in real life, she wrote, but “this is the triumph of fiction, to get to the truth”.

As a director who has done all his three features based on real lives and incidents, including his next works, *Moneyball* (Brad Pitt and Jonah Hill, based on Michael Lewis’s account of the Oakland Athletics baseball team) and *Foxcatcher* (Channing Tatum, Steve Miller, about US Olympic gold medalist wrestlers Mark Schultz and his brother David), Miller said his approach is to find “the truth you want to reach”.

“It is a coincidence that all three are true stories, and it is very touchy business,” said Miller. “You are talking about real people and many people who are alive are part of the story.” To him, the journey, is therefore more of a “journalistic enquiry” as he talks to several people in the quest for truth. Ultimately, it is about “respecting people, and making the best case for all”, Miller said.

Working on the three films, each with intense mindscapes defining the characters, Miller said “you don’t need explosions and car chases to experience drama. I am bored by too much action.”

His prescription then is to focus on the script – and to remember that there are only three kinds of scenes – negotiation, fight and seduction. “If you are having a problem with a scene, stop and figure out” if it relates to any three of these.

Miller said after every film he would be so exhausted he would never want to do another film again. “A director needs a strange combo of qualities,” he said, and the most important being the resolve to “make the kind of movies I want to make”.

He said it is important to “feel the consciousness” with the story, going beyond the sensitising of studio films. “If you make a studio film, you only tell stories, but something else must happen.” He experiences that when watching films by Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick.

The fourth edition of Qumra brings together more than 150 acclaimed filmmakers, industry professionals and experts to nurture 34 films – the Qumra Projects – by first and second-time filmmakers that are in various stages of development. The six-day event is held through March 14, at Souq Waqif and the Museum of Islamic Art, and features Qumra Masterclasses, Qumra Talks and screenings in the Modern Masters and New Voices in Cinema segments.

-ENDS-

Note to Editors:

About Qumra

Directors and Producers attached to thirty-four projects in development and post-production are selected to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.



The event is organised in three main sections: The **Qumra Master Classes** are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity.

The **Qumra Meetings** are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts.

The **Qumra Screenings** are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives, as well as a series of films chosen by the Qumra Masters accompanied by Q&A sessions.

The Arabic term 'qumra' is popularly said to be the origin of the word 'camera', and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.

About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute's platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar's 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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