

Director's Statement

I wrote, directed, co-edited and financed DISFIGURED because it's a movie I wanted to see.

I'm not a woman and I don't have an eating disorder, but the issues of appearance, control, isolation, and our complicated relationships to our own bodies seem universal to me. They are also sadly under-explored or horribly twisted in almost every form of media.

I am particularly aware of this because my wife Jenn is beautiful, graceful, stylish and - according to popular culture - fat. I have seen her ashamed to go to an exercise class at a size 22, accepted among dancers at a size 16, and rejected by salespeople in boutiques at a size 12. I have seen her proud, angry, hurt, confident and confused.

But, honestly - it's not like this stuff is hard to know about. Is there anyone in America with no first-hand knowledge of people struggling on all sides of these questions?

And they are questions. Some situations are complex, and you can't solve them. Those are the things we should make movies about. Easy answers don't really need a movie.

I truly love being a "Hollywood screenwriter" and I'll never stop escaping into melodrama and fantasy, but sometimes you tell stories in order to explore the messy truths of our daily experience.

The bad news is no financing entity or distributor would pay for that.

The good news is we are living in marvelous times, when anyone can make a movie.

I believe that should include people working in the movie business.

How We Shot

15 days. 6-to-8 crew members, total. No trucks, no trailers, no generators, no dollies. The rule was: if it couldn't fit in a car and be carried by the crew, we couldn't use it.

Cinematographer (and "A" Camera Operator) Idit Dvir shot it with two Canon XL2 standard-definition miniDV cameras, mostly with just natural light or "china balls." Production Sound Mixer Brandi Rice operated the entire sound department out of a folding shopping cart.

While this approach helps make the movie feel as truthful as possible, it was not motivated by a Dogme-like philosophical stringency. There was simply no other way to convince people to let us rent their locations. Everyone in Los Angeles knows a film crew brings with it three things: damage, parking problems and cash. Since we had almost none of that last one, we had to go a long way to defuse the threat of the first two.

(It worked: the only serious damage resulted from me eagerly "helping" at the Lydia's House location - trying to move a piano by myself and destroying the floor-track of a sliding door.)

To make things less stressful on the cast and crew, I tried to avoid shooting at night. Therefore, we taped heavy black plastic over all the doors and windows of the un-air-conditioned guest cottage we were using as Lydia's House. Unfortunately, those shooting days turned out to be among the hottest in Los Angeles history, so my "EZ day-for-nights" completely cooked the very people I was trying to protect. You try, you learn.

The (Almost) All-Girl Crew

It's difficult to find a crew for a "no-budget" shoot, and then I disqualified more than half of the available work force. I wanted only women on the set. (Except me, of course. Principles work best when applied to others.)

Mostly, I wanted to give the actors the most comfortable and supportive set I could manage. They were going to be exposing themselves - physically and emotionally. I didn't want a bunch of guys standing around off-camera passing judgment on their bodies and their feelings. It was only well into the shoot that someone pointed out my own script detailed women's cruel judgments on other women. But it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Once we were shooting, it was clear we needed a production assistant. Line Producer Laura Boersma brought in Anthony Fultz, pointing out, "We can't discriminate against him just because he's a guy."

Casting

I didn't want "names."

(It's not like "names" were flocking to be seen without makeup in a technologically-crude production for \$100 a day. But we did flirt with a few, since actual financing would have been nice, and since "names" are often "names" because they have talent.)

Executive Producer David Higgins brought the script to Casting Agent Valerie McCaffrey, who got it out to actors and agents. We spent much of a year flirting with "names" and collecting everyone else's head-shots.

But in the end, the characters found the actors: both Staci Lawrence and Ryan C. Benson were brought in by actor friends who read the script to audition for other roles and felt (correctly) they would be perfect for "Darcy" and "Bob."

Ryan was actually more handsome and less heavy than I intended "Bob" to be - but watching Ryan's audition I realized he would bring a wonderful complexity and ambivalence to our feelings about "Bob".

Meanwhile, Deidra Edwards read the script very early on and sent me a passionate, insightful note about "Lydia." I met with her, to explain we were

going to “names.” She waited over a year to audition, and got the very first appointment.

Ironically, her determination and instant connection with the role worked against Deidra: I made her come back for more call-backs than anyone else, partly because you can't take the first person who reads - and also because I was worried that knowing how much she wanted it was skewing my perceptions.

But when our DP Idit operated the camcorder for call-backs, I saw her looking up from the viewfinder during Deidra's scenes to meet my eye and signal: wow.

Staci, on the other hand, got a lucky break because I had to run the camcorder myself during some auditions. Distracted by wearing a lot of hats, I pushed the “stop/start” button too many times: I turned it off at the start of a scene she was reading, and then, thinking I was turning it off at the end, started recording. I was then called out of the room for a few minutes, so Staci sat waiting alone, unaware the camera was running. Her audition was great - but it was all “audition energy.” Those solitary unguarded minutes on the tape were her call-back, showing me the one last side to her that I needed to confirm she could be “Darcy.”

Locations

DISFIGURED was filmed entirely within a two-mile radius of Venice Beach.

This is partly because I don't know how to drive, and it made scouting locations a lot easier. But mainly: a movie needs a sense of place.

Since the sense of place is a shifty thing in Los Angeles, many of our locations are already gone. The loft full of hanging wires is now the controversial Venice Pinkberry; the store Lydia works at - French 50s-60s - has been divided in half.

We couldn't afford to close down most locations for more than a couple of hours, so we used them "as-is."

I particularly wanted to show Venice Beach "as is". Bikini-clad-rollerbladers on the bike path are certainly a part of the scene - but I also wanted to get the fog, the cleaning crews, the homeless. And since we did not have the crew to "lock up" exterior locations, anyone you see wandering in the background is a "real person."

Lydia's House, however, is very much a creation of Production Designer Tabitha Johnson. We shot there for only three days, but it took three weeks to get it ready. Borrowing, scrounging and begging items from artists, thrift shops, prop houses, my office and my wife's dresser, Tabitha redecorated a converted garage to express Lydia's colorful, contrary personality.

For Darcy's Condo she had to work in the opposite direction, removing art from the funky home we rented and replacing it with restrained canvases that she and her assistants painted all in one evening; they even created a signature for the nonexistent artist. But Tabitha also added those great sunflowers to remind us there's more in Darcy, waiting to bloom.

The Group

We shot The Fat Acceptance Group Meetings on the second and third days of our schedule. I figured we might as well jump in the deep end: the crew had to capture fourteen people improvising, and the actors had to talk about their bodies and sexuality in front of a room full of strangers and two cameras.

While it may seem like they are simply spilling their souls - the fact is, some moments are entirely "in character" and not what the actors personally believe in or have experienced. I would ask them to discuss specific questions, and take certain stands, then let the cameras run for ten minutes.

Yet we also all felt it during those two days: they were tapping into something real. There is a unique power in talking honestly. That's what the movie is about.