

## Filmmaking in Australia: The Long and Winding Road

Not everyone has the courage to chase their dreams. Some surrender to the pressures and expectations of the world, side-tracked into stable jobs with no lasting satisfaction. Josef Gatti, 27, had different plans. Ten years ago, he stacked boxes and scanned items at a local department store. Now he creates and directs media productions for a living. The road was arduous, with many bumps and hurdles along the way. But with passion, hard-work and resilience on his side, Josef kicked logic and reason to the curb, and found success in one of the toughest and most competitive professions.

Josef's success story started with humble beginnings. There was nothing unordinary about his childhood. He had dreams and hopes for the future like anyone else. The difference was that he made the decision to follow them. But it didn't happen overnight. It was a gradual process, which started sometime between childhood and adolescence.

"The seed was planted when I was 14 years old," he said. "I watched one of the first ever web-series. It was a show made with two friends and a borrowed camera. They had no budget. But it was more entertaining than prime-time television."

The seed took a long time to blossom, however, and it wasn't watered with encouragement from his friends and family. "My parents always told me to choose a safe path," he said. "Anything out of the ordinary was too competitive, difficult, or unrealistic – especially in a small city like Adelaide. I took their word for it but it bothered me deeply."

Thankfully, he didn't take their word for long. But it made his dreams to become a filmmaker take a backseat for several more years. It didn't bother him too much at the time, though. He was busy enjoying the highs and lows of adolescent life, stealing hearts and cramming for tests.

It wasn't until late high school that he made the decision to follow his heart. He was faced with the daunting task of selecting university preferences but didn't want to choose a safe route like accounting and commerce.

"I thought about the web-series I saw all those years ago. They had achieved international success at this point. It wasn't enormous. But it was something. I remember thinking, if they could do it, I could too!" he said. "I applied for a bachelor's degree in

Media. My parents weren't too thrilled. But I think they understood. I was accepted into the course few months later."

It was a brave decision. But it didn't mean a whole lot in terms of film-making success. His mind was still plagued with self-doubt and uncertainty about the future. What's more is the undergraduate course was broad. It focused on theoretical knowledge and covered everything from journalism to media history.

Josef knew he wanted to become a filmmaker. But he still didn't have the self-belief and knowledge to become one. Not until a pivotal moment which happened during his final year.

"There was a subject in the final year of the course. The class had to collaborate and make an actual production. Everyone created and shared different scripts and ideas. There was a class vote, and mine won. That's when I really knew I could do it. I even directed that production, too. It changed my life. I don't think I would have had the confidence to realistically pursue a career in film-making had that not happened".

It's no surprise that little moments like these can define lives. The belief and admiration from peers were his guiding light. It instilled the confidence and self-belief he lacked and helped him learn some technical skills too.

Deciding to become a filmmaker is one thing and believing you can do it is another. But walking the path and making it a reality is the hardest part of all. Josef reflected on the early days in his career. It was a time when he was less skilled and more naïve about the industry.

"I made short films for fun," he said. "They were pretty bad. But it was awesome practice. I taught myself how to do everything, and I'm proud of that. Trial and error were my best teachers."

It is common knowledge that practice makes perfect is the formula for success, and filmmaking was no exception.

"I became quite good, and people started to notice," he said. "There was a colleague who helped me land an internship at ABC in Melbourne. I did that for a while and was eventually offered a role as a Production Assistant at Channel 9. From that point onward, my foot was well and truly in the door. I worked my way up and become a writer and producer."

It would have made sense to stop there. It was a respectable position, paid well, and there was room to climb. Josef was streets ahead of his classmates at this point. Not that he wanted to admit it. But it was a harsh truth about the competitive media industry. Not all of them were able to find media-related work. And those who did were limited to small local companies. Landing a position at Channel 9 was a remarkable achievement. Josef worked there for several years. But he wasn't one to settle for a secure and stable career. He started to feel underwhelmed and unsatisfied.

"I felt like I had betrayed myself," he said. "Yeah, things were cozy. I knew I had it good. But I still wanted to create and direct films. And I wasn't doing that there," he said.

Josef made small projects on weekends to quench his thirst and passion. It helped make the job more tolerable. But he couldn't hold on forever, and eventually decided to leave. He worked as a freelancer to make ends meet, and brainstormed, planned and developed his own projects in his free time.

It wasn't long before he landed the role of producer and editor on a feature film, called 'The Subjects'. "I never expected to actually work on a feature film so early in my career," he said. "It was an awesome experience. But the movie was written and directed by someone else. I couldn't wait to finish, so I could make my own".

It took some time, and plenty of freelance work in-between. Now two years later, Josef has finally been developed something of his own that has generated some real interest.

"I'm working on a project called 'Worlds' – that's the working title, at least," he said. "It's a series of visual art films that explore patterns and expressions of nature. It captures the manifestations of natural phenomena with cutting edge technology. Everything from sound waves, light waves and electricity – to microscopic organisms and macroscopic views in space."

There is nothing typical about it, and the mind-blowing description has raised eyebrows. But film making is not always about entertainment and profit. There is an artistic side too, and that's the direction Josef wanted to take.

"I wanted to make something that was artistically beautiful and inspired curiosity," he said. "I want to share my perspective with others. I know my project sounds niche. But like any art form, there is someone out there who will appreciate it."

The project is ambitious, and more difficult to market than others. But that is also its biggest strength. There is nothing quite like it.

“I’m in the process of making a deal with an established platform. I can’t reveal too many details now. But things are looking good,” he said.

Josef has not reached the heights of successful and artistic filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick and Quentin Tarantino. Not yet, anyway. But there is still more to come in his career.

“I’m a work in progress,” he laughed. “Everyone is a work in progress, until we find success and make a reputation for ourselves in the industry”.

Maybe he is right. But what he has done, however, is defy the odds and found a way to earn a living doing what he loves. That is a commendable effort, and in his opinion, more important than material and financial success.

“I haven’t worked a regular job in years,” he said. “... and I plan on keeping it that way.”

It is incredibly difficult to become a filmmaker, let alone a successful one. It is a cut-throat industry, and while experience and talent are essential, there is also an element of knowing the right people and being in the right place, at the right time.

Josef’s parents had every reason to advise him to seek a different career. It’s even harder down under, where the film industry pales in comparison to the United States.

“They have an enormous market in the USA,” said Josef. “There is more money to be made, which means more investors, more production, more opportunities, and more expert personnel.”

There have only been 185 films created in the last five years, which employed 326 producers, 204 directors and 277 writers, according to Screen Australia. This sounds like a lot. But these numbers are incredibly low. Much lower than United States.

The lack of funding is the most definitive factor. Generally, it is very expensive to make a successful film. It simply cannot happen without enough funding. There are some exceptions. But even the smallest projects need a little funding.

There is a well-known story about, Kevin Smith, a famous filmmaker who sold his entire comic book collection, used college funds and insurance money, and maxed out several different credit cards, in order to fund his first film. He filmed the movie at a convince

store he worked at during non-business hours and used local friends and actors to mitigate expenses. That film was called 'Clerks', and it became a smash hit. It cost a total of \$27,575 dollars, and went on to gross \$3.2 million dollars, and propped his film-making career.

That doesn't mean everyone should follow in his footsteps. The risk is high, and the reward is very unlikely. But it isn't impossible.

The more logical route is to find investors. The most common method in Australia is through Screen Australia, a federal government body created to provide funds and resources to assist the development, production and marketing of films.

There is far less money and opportunity available compared to private investors and studios in Hollywood. But there have been several projects that went on to become award winning films. However, it is still a very difficult and competitive process. No more than 10% of applications are successful, and most still need investment from other sources.

There is still some help for aspiring filmmakers, because things are changing, and the future looks bright – or at least, brighter than ever before. There have been advances in technology which have radically impacted the film and television industries and changed the game.

“The internet has given rise to new digital platforms. Not only that, but it also makes self-distribution possible,” said Josef. “Filmmakers no longer need to rely on broadcast and film distributors. There are many ways for filmmakers to showcase their work. If something goes viral, you could earn yourself a career.”

There is evidence to complement his claims. There has been a staggering growth in web series created in Australia. There were 3,248 episodes in 2016, compared to 107 in 2012, according to Screen Australia. “Modern equipment is also better, and more affordable and accessible than ever before,” said Josef. “Ten years ago, people couldn't access professional-grade equipment unless they were already established. Now anyone can do it – as long as they know how it's done.”

There has never been an easier and better time to pursue a career in filmmaking. But it's important to understand what it entails.

“There is a bit of everything in film-making,” said Josef. “There are many different roles and responsibilities that require all kinds of skills and talents. It really depends on which area you want to work in”.

These areas are spread across five main stages. The first stage is development, where the ideas for the film are created, and the screenplay is written. The second stage is pre-production, where arrangements and preparations are made for the shoot. The cast and crew are assembled, locations are selected, and sets are created. The third stage is production, where the raw footage and other elements are recorded. The fourth stage is post-production, where the images, sound and visual effects are edited and combined to produce a finished product. The fifth and final stage is distribution, where the finished product is distributed, marketed, screened in cinemas, and released to the public.

When it comes to filmmaking, people think of writers, directors, producers and editors. But there are many other roles and positions within the crew. There is everything from cameraman, sound recording, special effects and lighting, to casting, choreographing, and composing music. The bigger the project, the more the staff and crew there will be.

“Personally, I prefer directing and editing. But I’ve also done some filming and producing,” said Josef.

Whatever the role, none of them are easy. Most are performed in a high-pressure environment with strict deadlines and require attention to detail. “Some positions are easier than others,” said Josef.

“There’s an entry-level position called a runner, who is something along the lines of a general assistant. It’s still not that easy. But all it really takes is common sense and hard work. Writing is definitely the hardest,” he added. “The script is the blueprint of the entire film, and everything depends on it.”

But what makes filmmaking so important, and why would anyone want to become one? There are two main reasons. First, it is an intricate form of visual art, expression and storytelling. Filmmakers combine moving images, written word, music, audio recordings, and animation into one final product. There are several famous art-house films, including 2001: A Space Odyssey, Enter the Void, Mulholland Drive and Metropolis.

Second, filmmaking is an efficient way to communicate ideas and stories en masse, and arguably the ultimate medium for communication. Films can be used to share knowledge, inspire audiences, and celebrate culture.

The downside, however, is that the medium has become overwhelmingly commercial, which not only causes the content to suffer, which has an impact on society and

culture that is less than ideal. For example, physical attractiveness and material success are desirable, in part, because of how often they are portrayed in movies. It doesn't need to be like that forever, and Josef remains hopeful about the future.

"I would like to see film-making become more accessible to everyone," said Josef. "It would make film-making more about ideas and stories, rather than commercialization and profit. I think this will be better for the industry, and the world".

Josef has walked the long road to reach this point. But in many ways, his film-making journey was still young, and he was confident about his own future. "I have many things in the works," said Josef. "I'm particularly excited about finally creating a web series of my own. I would love to create an animated film next."

And what advice could an embattled film-making veteran to anyone interested in pursuing a similar career?

"First, I would say excellent choice. It is a world of fun. Prepare yourself for some very late nights and a reasonable amount of free work. Find your way onto a set and make friends. Get yourself a camera if you can, it doesn't need to be anything fancy. Just start making films - it is the only way to truly learn. You'll run into problems all the time. There will be issues with equipment. There will be incompetent crew members. There will be budget constraints. Whatever happens, don't dwell on mistakes, blunders and disappointments. Learn from them, and never give up."

There was no doubt that dedication and resilience were the key to Josef Gatti's success. His story has been a testament to that, and for that reason, there will be more success to come.