

John Boccacino: Hey there, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. We are the only podcast produced by Syracuse University alumni for Syracuse University alumni. My name is John Boccacino. I'm a class of 2003 graduate of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications studying broadcast journalism. I also work as the communications specialist in the office of alumni engagement.

John Boccacino: We are so pleased you found us on iTunes, on Google Play, on Spotify, Stitcher, TuneIn, there's 15 platforms that are currently housing this podcast right now. You can also go to [alumni.syr.edu/cuseconversations](http://alumni.syr.edu/cuseconversations) and [anchor.fm/cuseconversations](http://anchor.fm/cuseconversations). Please go find our podcast, subscribe, rate, and review, and tell all your friends because we have some really cool stories we're trying to tell here on the podcast.

John Boccacino: And of course today, we are actually coming to you from Los Angeles. I am so happy to have Alexis Ostrander, a member of the 2007 class of VPA, the College of Visual and Performing Arts, joining us on the podcast. And Alexis, thanks for making the time today.

Alexis O.: Thanks for having me. I just love that you're on 15 platforms. I'm so excited to tune in. That's really huge.

John Boccacino: What was it about Syracuse University that made you want to go and study in VPA, to enroll in VPA? What was it about Syracuse that really attracted you to the school?

Alexis O.: Well, my brother went to WVU, and his best friend Danny [inaudible 00:01:30], at the time, had gone to Syracuse. And so Danny, since a young age, always told me, "You need to go to Syracuse. You need to go to Syracuse." So Syracuse was always ingrained in me early on to root against my brother, and then, I have a lot of family in Upstate New York and Binghamton, and my older brother was actually born in Syracuse.

Alexis O.: So when I was starting to look at schools for theater, I had grown up doing theater, doing dinner theater in Virginia, and I was singing, I was dancing, I was acting, but I was always looking at what the director was doing, Syracuse had a very strong musical theater program. And I loved that I had family not far, about an hour away in Binghamton.

Alexis O.: So, I just fell in love with Syracuse that first time I went. My parents took me in the spring. I didn't go during a time where there was any snow unfortunately, so I didn't know how cold the winters were, but it was a beautiful, beautiful spring day when I visited the school and decided to go. And it was an amazing program. I loved it so much.

John Boccacino: A lot of times, you were are talking about your involvement in theater prior to Syracuse, and being on the stage. For folks that are listening now, the work that you're doing is behind the scenes. Take us through some of the products that

you've done, the films, the TV shows, everything you've worked on, and what would you say is maybe your most proudest moment of a show, of a movie that you've produced? What really stands out to you?

Alexis O.: Yeah. So I direct television currently, and I develop a lot of TV and films. So I've worked on TV shows on the narrative side, like American Horror Story, Riverdale, Deadly Class, Condor.

Alexis O.: Most recently, I did a really cool show called *Servant* for Apple, which Jason Blumenthal, who's a Syracuse alum, produced, with *Escape Artists*, and M. Night Shyamalan was the directing producer of the first episode, he directed the pilot. And then Tony Basgallop is an amazing writer from England who wrote the entire series. So it was really great. I got to work with Rupert Grint from *Harry Potter*. I got to work with Lauren Ambrose. There were amazing talents on that.

Alexis O.: And what I really loved about that experience was they really encourage us to do a lot of oners. In a lot of television, there's a lot of traditional coverage. You get a wide, you get a medium and you get a close, but when you can really stylize and really push yourself creatively with oners, to tell the whole story within a scene with limited cutaways, it's really empowering, and really allows you to focus on the story and work with certain characters.

Alexis O.: So I remember we built this amazing rig on the wall, where we got to bring in the actors and sit them at a table and do a 360 twice, and then pull back out, and it was just, it was really empowering. And I got to work with an amazing, amazing cast and crew, and I think we did like 13, 14 takes and then we called it a day on that scene and moved on, so that was really, really wonderful.

Alexis O.: I come from documentaries though. So my first [inaudible 00:04:53] was on *Ms. Wheelchair America*, and that was really life-changing for me because my sister-in-law is a quadriplegic and my brother was a disabled ski instructor, which is actually how he met Danny [inaudible 00:05:07], was when he was teaching disabled skiing out in Colorado. So that was my first foray into directing, was the documentary world. So I set off and started that doc when I was 21, and finished it four years later. So it's just the power of story I love, no matter what story it is.

John Boccacino: We on the podcast here, we love finding alumni to tell their stories and share their stories. We often say that our podcasts, we're the only one that Syracuse is doing for alumni, produced by alumni, to tell the stories of the great work that our alums are doing in their community. For you, Alexis, where did a storytelling passion, where did that come from?

Alexis O.: I think it started at a really young age for me. I was always like creating stories in my head through drawings, or I was always tuned in to the television, but not knowing TV was possible. My parents didn't let me watch a lot of cartoons or *The Simpsons* growing up. I watched a lot of classic movies on Turner Classic

Movie channel or AMC, and so I was always watching the black and white musicals and just really drawn to, just noticing story.

Alexis O.: And what I love about a good story is the heart and humor, but also just how you can explore the human condition. And you know, people are all different, like you and I are very different. You live in Syracuse, I live in LA. You graduated in 2003, I entered Syracuse in 2003. We have years apart, but yet we come together through our love of Syracuse. So it's like what stories bring people together and what unites them is what really excites me.

John Boccacino: Did you feel that making the move from being on stage, doing your theatrical performances, to then being behind the scenes, did you feel that that opened up maybe some more worlds or avenues to what you're trying to do with your career? Because I think that it's fascinating when someone has that perspective of staying humble, staying committed to the story and not making it about themselves. Like a lot of times, being in front of the camera, it can be about yourself. You're part of the bigger picture when you're kind of behind the scenes.

Alexis O.: Yeah, I mean, I loved performance, I loved being on stage and that energy you get and really collaborating with your fellow performers, but I just was always looking at what the director was doing. I was always drawn to what he or she was saying, and I gravitated toward that.

Alexis O.: So I got to put up a couple of things while I was at Syracuse, and then when I moved out here, thanks Sorkin Week and Aaron Sorkin, I came out on an internship and I got to see Tommy Schlamme, I interned in his office, just really use his passion of working with actors and telling a visual story.

Alexis O.: And I had studied photography at Syracuse as well, it was a concentration of mine, and I was always taking my dad's still camera at an early age and shooting photos. So I got to see that I could marry both my loves of working with actors and working with the official side of storytelling, because I think that's very important.

Alexis O.: So I've been drawn to that side of creating because it really is empowering for me to create a strong visual that really motivates the story. And I've been fortunate to work with amazing actors who they're not about themselves in front of the camera, they're about, what is the best performance? What am I doing to help motivate the story? What do you need me to do? How can we work at at this as a collaborative team to get the best performance to tell this story, whether it's based on a true story or fiction-based?

Alexis O.: So I've been very fortunate with that. I haven't had a lot of actors who were, "It's me, me, me." It's about really doing the best work and really collaborating and giving back in that way.

John Boccacino: And one of the coolest parts about your story, I find, is the spark that happens from being here in Los Angeles. And Sorkin Week, you mentioned this earlier, I believe John Adler mentioned that you are one of the very first, if not the first, Sorkin Week student that we had out here in Los Angeles with Syracuse University. What did that experience do for you? You mentioned your experiences with Tommy Schlamme and having a chance to be out here on the west coast. Did that open up some doors, change your mindset about some things? How did that affect you?

Alexis O.: Yeah, I was part of that inaugural year where they brought out ten students and two filmmakers, and it was life-changing. I knew no one in the entertainment industry except for my sister-in-law's best friend, who was a makeup artist on ER and I had met her when I was 11, and I just didn't know anyone. I didn't know that TV and film was possible. I thought I'd have to go the theater route, and I was very drawn to theater because I had grown up doing theater, but it really just... So Aaron just really gave back, and really introduced us to entertainment professionals, be it, you know, casting directors, filmmakers, directors, writers, actors, like everyone came, agents. We met so many amazing people that were inspiring, managers.

Alexis O.: And I look now, and it's like some of the people that I first met during that first Sorkin Week, I am now collaborating with or I've become friends with because the Syracuse network is so strong. And the good thing about that Sorkin Week is, he offered us internships, and I got to come out to LA and intern. And I interned on the show called Studio 60, which was amazing. I loved it.

John Boccacino: Unfortunately, a short-lived show that I thought could have had so much more potential. I love Aaron Sorkin's work, by the way.

Alexis O.: Yeah.

John Boccacino: I mean, The West Wing, Sports Night, just getting a chance to talk about the impact that his shows have provided, it's tremendous, and you have that experience, obviously, being here as a Sorkin Week student, but I didn't mean to cut you off, but you were talking about the network of it. Everyone talks about how there's a break, someone sets them up, there's a connection. Was that really, you feel like, the big break that kind of at least launched you moving in the right direction for your career?

Alexis O.: Yeah, that really gave me the spark to come to LA. It gave me the opportunity to come out here on an internship, and really dip my toes in the water and test it out, and see what LA was like and also see what the industry was like. And Aaron was incredible and super supportive, and he put me, because my focus was directing, he put me in Tommy Schlamme's office, which was basically film school for me. I got to learn what it was like to be in prep, production and post, and just watched Tommy work.

Alexis O.: And you know, I was there every single day, just learning and garnering so much knowledge from him. And Tommy's a very supportive producer, producing director, so it was really wonderful to see him work with actors and work with the crew, but also see how he worked with other directors that were coming in to direct, and it was life-changing. That changed my life.

Alexis O.: And then the writer's strike happened in 2007, so then I ended up... I was his second office assistant when I moved out and worked for Tommy Schlamme as my first job out here in LA, as his second office assistant, and then when the writer's strike happened in '07, I didn't have a job because production came to a halt during that time, and I ended up doing PR assisting for Moby at Sundance, during that film festival. And I ended up seeing a film that changed my life called Trouble The Water. It was directed by Tia Leesin, and she was there, and she said, "Pick up a camera and tell the story you're most passionate about."

Alexis O.: And I'm very passionate about disability, and disability in media, and my sister-in-law, Leslie, is a huge advocate in the community and she's a quadriplegic. So she was Ms. Wheelchair Georgia back in 1997, and then she was first runner-up for Ms. Wheelchair America. So seeing those women, I think I was 13 at the time, and just how empowering those women were on that stage, not letting their disability stereotype them in any way.

Alexis O.: So I started a documentary on Ms. Wheelchair America, called Defining Beauty: Ms. Wheelchair America, and teamed up with some amazing producers. One of them was a Syracuse alum, Manuela Ikenze, and we just got a group together that filmed it and shot it, and it went to festivals and it was an amazing experience. And after that doc experience, that's when I started transitioning onto the narrative side. I did docs for eight years working in TV as a doc producer.

John Boccacino: When it comes to the world of directing, and I want to go from the documentary side of things to The Haircut, which, from everything I was reading online about it, it was critically-acclaimed, it had a lot of the things, where a young director, I imagine it's hard to make a name for yourself, to try to stand out sometimes. What was your goal with The Haircut and how did you feel that your vision kind of came... And give our listeners a bit more insight too into what exactly the story of The Haircut is. It's set back in, what? 1976?

Alexis O.: Yeah, so The Haircut is about the first class of women to go to West Point in 1976, and that was inspired by my cousin who went to West Point, and I had done a doc on West Point for the History channel. And my cousin just kept telling me, "You need to look at this first class of women. They're inspiring, they're incredible." And my cousin, Will, is a Lieutenant Colonel in the army, and the more and more I started looking into these women, I was talking with my friend Julia and I'm like, "We've got to do a story on this. We've got to do a short film."

Alexis O.: And at the time, I had been applying to The AFI Directing Workshop for Women, and I ended up applying with The Haircut as a script. And The AFI Directing Workshop for Women, they choose eight to ten women a year to direct short films. And you know, that was where I really garnered a lot of my experience, starting out on the narrative side of things, and The Haircut was an amazing experience. We had 19 speaking roles, we had a hundred extras, we had over a hundred crew members. It was all period, so we had period cars, we had period costumes, and it was a really wonderful experience.

Alexis O.: And everyone just came together to make this passion project and make it happen, which was really exciting. And it premiered at the AFI Film Festival, and it went on to go to 45 film festivals, and it garnered over 13 awards and did really great on the festival circuit.

John Boccacino: AFI Fest world premiere in 2014, Directing Workshop for Women Showcase by AFI in 2015, I mean, look at all these independent film festivals, Raindance, Newport Beach Film Festival, Women Filmmakers Short Fest, Hollywood Shorts, the list goes on and on. Literally, it's two pages I'm seeing here on your website of the different accolades that the film was able to garner.

Alexis O.: Yeah.

John Boccacino: When you see your work come to fruition and accomplish the goals that you had for it, what does that do for you as a creative person seeing everything finally play out the way you wanted it to?

Alexis O.: It's hard for me to watch my work sometimes. I'm always like, "Oh, we could have done this, we could have done that," but when you sit back and you really just celebrate everyone that came together to create it, and just look at it, it's really rewarding. I love telling stories, and to me, that first class of women at West Point, it's an amazing, amazing group of women, and to be able to tell this story of these trailblazers and to honor them was a really empowering moment for me. And also, I'm working on it as a feature, and it's a story that I feel now will live in the feature space beyond the short film.

John Boccacino: You can tell, Alexis, that Syracuse did have a profound impact on your career, on your thinking, on your way of doing your directorial work, whether it's documentaries or for films. Who are some of the key faculty members that really got inside of you and like their message resonated and it appealed to you, and what were some of the words of wisdom that they shared with you?

Alexis O.: Well, I feel Gerry Clark, who is a professor on the theater side, she really honed in story for me. Her first few classes really were story-driven and story-motivated. And really working that at the very core freshman year was really, really strong for me.

Alexis O.: I also took a Newhouse class with Richard Dubin, who was fantastic, and it was always story-motivated. So I love coming from theater and working with actors, and working with crew, and working with my cinematographer, my editor. Everything comes from story for me. It's not just about the bells and whistles and the toys, it's every single camera move I do is because of something that story-related, or anything I do with an actor, it has to be pushing the story forward. So that's something I learned really early on from Gerry.

Alexis O.: I had some fun professors, Marie Kemp, Rodney Hudson, Craig MacDonald. There were some amazing professors that I had the honor of working with and learning from and growing with, which was great.

John Boccacino: How would you describe how a director orchestrates everything and how you try to just kind of make sure that the project stays on task, that your vision is being communicated? You have to be a little flexible, I would imagine too, if a talent comes up to you and says, "Hey, what about this? What if we do something in this direction?" How do you meld all those perspectives together to get the final product?

Alexis O.: I'm a big collaborator. I think collaboration is key. Also compromise, being able to compromise and being open to compromise. I've been fortunate, I've had some amazing mentors along the way who've really taught me to approach it with kindness and an open heart, and just everyone's there to do a job and collaborate.

Alexis O.: So from that early process, you know, how I start to answer your question on the process side of it, I start breaking down a script, and I just read the script first and then I jot down notes. And I read a script, before I even get to the prep process, at least 20 or 30 times. And I'm reading it every morning, right before I go into prep. I'm reading it every night before I go to bed. I'm shot listing, I'm breaking down scenes, I'm breaking down themes, I'm breaking down character arc, so I really start that process early on.

Alexis O.: One of my favorite parts is just really collaborating with my team members, and be it an episode or be it a short film or a feature, I think the most important thing is being on the same page. And I like to pull an image that all of my collaborators can really feel the essence of the story we want to tell. I like to pull a photo as reference, and that's something I did early on.

Alexis O.: For example, with The Haircut, I wanted to limit the color palette to a very specific color palette, and limit certain colors and only pop them at times, and so I pulled one image that had all the colors of the color palette that I wanted to see in production design, costume design, and what we were going to do with our cinematographer. So I feel it's important early on to get with your cinematographer, your production designer and your costume designer, and start those talks.

Alexis O.: But to me, it's all about collaboration and the art of compromise. I did an amazing workshop with Bethany Rooney at Warner Bros., The Warner Bros. TV Directing Workshop. I've done six directing workshops by the way, but the one with Bethany Rooney, she said there's an art to compromise, and I really believe that within the episodic space. You know, you're on a tight timeline, a tight schedule, it's a very tight budget, most of the time you only have a certain amount of time to shoot it, and there's something beautiful that comes out of compromise.

Alexis O.: Sometimes you might over cover something, but you can actually do it in a one or two shot and move on, and have your meat and potatoes scenes, and then you have your breakfast scenes, and then have your dinner scenes that you really dig into. So the compromise is a beautiful thing.

John Boccacino: It seems like you've been able to transition your skills well to both the big screen and the smaller screen for TV. I know that people know the series American Horror Story. That has a lot of a cultish following, it's incredibly compelling television, and you were fortunate enough to work on directing one of the episodes for Roanoke on the FX series. What was that like? Taking your talents and knowing that the audience is just magnified by a factor of millions because that show has such a popular following?

Alexis O.: Well that that was my break into television, was American Horror Story, my break into narrative. So I did the Ryan Murphy fellowship, it's called the HALF Foundation, and so, I got to shadow Nelson Cragg, who was my directing mentor. And he was a champion of mine, him and Tanase Popa, and Alexis Martin Woodall and Ryan Murphy, all of them, they gave me my shot on my first episode of TV.

Alexis O.: And the good thing is, I came from documentary, so I was used to shooting a lot of docu-style, and my episode was all found footage. So knowing the stakes of it being a big episode and a big show, and the audience that watches it, I've had those stakes because I've worked within the documentary side, but I felt at home naturally because I'd shadowed on the show.

Alexis O.: I had an amazing supportive crew. I feel like Ryan really wanted to set me up for success, which was fantastic. I got to really develop a close bond with the crew ahead of time because I had shadowed. And at points, I was shooting 4 to 16 camera setups at a time, all the way up to, we had two scenes that were 23 cameras set ups, and it was amazing because it was all found footage. We had police body cams, cop cameras, GoPros iPhone surveillance cameras, and it was really empowering because I had run five, ten person crews on the documentary side, so my mind could break that apart and use those skills that I already excelled at.

Alexis O.: And I'm very thankful that Ryan Murphy and Tanase Popa, and Alexis Martin Woodall and Nelson, like they all championed me, and my mentors were a

phone call away. If I had a question on the post side, I could call Alexis and she would give me advice. If I had a question in regards to something camera-wise I wanted to do, Nelson was super supportive. And I was really supported on my first episode of television and I think, you know, breaking in, having those champions, really made a difference for me.

Alexis O.: I've now gone out and I've booked my 21st episode of television. I've done multiple episodes on the same shows, and I feel that first episode was the hardest episode I've ever done, but it was the most rewarding in a way because it used my strengths, but also pushed me in a way that I had never use those skills as well.

John Boccacino: What are some of the upcoming projects that you're working on? The pitches you mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, what's coming down the pike for you?

Alexis O.: Yeah, so I pitch a lot. So I develop a lot of television and features in addition to directing episodically and pitching on features. I'm attached to two amazing projects that I can't talk about, but they're with Gotham, and Gotham's amazing, and we're taking those out right now. And then, I'm taking out two TV shows this fall that are adaptations of books.

Alexis O.: So I'm very IP-focused, I love reading. I read every night and I think that was instilled in me early on from my mother, was reading, and just being so story-focused and story-motivated, and really looking for those strong stories. Reading every night is something I'm drawn to. So a lot of my development either comes out of ideas and worlds that I want to play in, or IP, intellectual property.

John Boccacino: If someone's listening to this, we always talk about the Syracuse network, you know, the Orange Network looks out for its own. What advice would you give to someone who wants enter into this arena and is maybe listening for some feedback, some positive thoughts, what would you share with that person?

Alexis O.: I think the biggest thing is just going out there and creating, and not being worried about what other people are going to think of your work. I think you just need to keep developing your voice and finding your voice as a storyteller. Just go out there and shoot and create, and find collaborators, find people you want to grow with.

Alexis O.: I've been working a lot with the same editor since The Haircut, Emily Mendez. She's incredible. She edited The Haircut. She edited my first pilot, Light as a Feather, which then I got Emmy nominated, for a daytime Emmy for outstanding directing, and that's, you know, because I surrounded myself with the amazing team that I've developed with. I also had the amazing DP, Ben Hardwick, who I'd also shot three short films with.

Alexis O.: So I think go out there and really start to find collaborators that you want to grow with, and you'll learn from each other. And don't be afraid to make mistakes and discover your voice. And your voice is never done developing. I'm 13 years out here in Los Angeles since I interned and my voice is still growing, I'm still finding my voice as an artist, and it's ebbing and flowing and my taste is changing.

Alexis O.: You know, one day I want to do something really dark and weird and quirky, and then the next day I'm like, "Oh, I really want to go this dramady route." Be open and don't put yourself in a box early on. I think people out here in Los Angeles will put you in a box. You'll have people in the entertainment industry who are like, "Oh, she directed American Horror Story, she's only a horror director." No, I have other ranges. I've done The Haircut, and I've done comedy and dramadies, and I've done a lot of action, I've done a lot of thriller, so don't put yourself in a box.

Alexis O.: Just really develop your voice and go out there and just create, and pick up a camera and tell stories that you're passionate about, and don't try to fit your stories into what you think is commercial because then you're losing your voice, I feel. Like really focus on what excites you as a storyteller.

John Boccacino: Those are wise words of advice from Alexis Ostrander here on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. Alexis, we appreciate you sitting down here in Los Angeles to chat. Best of luck with your future endeavors. I'm sure we'll be hearing more about you and your awesome directorial work. And again, thank you for the time today.

Alexis O.: Thanks for having me, John.

John Boccacino: My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversation podcast.