

THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 1.3

Theodore Shapiro interview – Episode Transcript

Theodore: I feel the presence of this cultural pressure to always be projecting total positivity, like everything's great. My career is great. And it's bullshit. Can I say bullshit on this podcast?

[music]

Matt: Welcome to The Resistance, a podcast that explores the distance between who we are and who we say we want to be. I'm your host, Matt Conner.

[music]

Matt: Here's the thing about resistance. It doesn't care who you are. Theodore Shapiro is, by anyone's definition, other than his own, a tremendous success. As a film composer, he has scored dozens and dozens of movies, from *The Devil Wears Prada* to *Marley and Me* to *Ghostbusters* to *Tropic Thunder*. His resumé includes box office smashes, and he's worked with some of the most popular directors today. Unfortunately for Theodore, none of this has stopped the resistance.

I love this episode because Theodore is so open and so honest about his own relationship, and battles with, the resistance. He's supposedly reached some pinnacle of success where you wouldn't expect resistance to live, and yet there it is. He's successful, yes, but not in the ways that he wants to be. He's accomplished so much, and yet there's still a hunger for vocational fulfillment.

Really it's ego versus contentment: a battle we all face. That tension is so relatable. Even now, I can think of ways in which I should be content with my house, my family, my own job. Yet even still, I wrestle with wanting to be somewhere, or even someone, else. What do we do with that energy? How do we face that resistance? Do we listen to our ego? And how do we maintain our healthy boundaries and perspectives, even as we're trying to strive with all we can toward excellence? Our conversation with Theodore opens all those doors and doesn't offer easy answers.

[music]

Matt: I would love to begin the way that we're beginning all of our Season One episodes. And that is to make sure that we're on track with our source material, which comes from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. Pressfield writes this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands resistance." I'd love to know your relationship to that, or your response to that, at this point in your career.

Theodore: So I have two ways of answering that question. Or responding to that material. The first is that in a lot of ways, I feel really fortunate that having sort of made the leap into becoming a film composer, which is really what I wanted to be doing, I find myself incredibly lucky to be doing the thing that I love, and I go to work every day, and I really enjoy what I do. So I feel fortunate on that level.

On another level, I would say that for me, what the resistance is is that the direction that my career has taken has been a little tricky in the sense that because I've had a lot of success working on comedies, it has limited my opportunities to work on different types of films.

So for me that's the challenge is that I see myself as somebody who would be a great choice to work on any movie, but the choices that I've made, while they've led to this very kind of healthy and in many

ways enviable career, has also closed down, and not closed down, but it's made more challenging the path of working on other films and having a broader palette of types of stories that I get to work on.

Matt: I've read where you said in other interviews that the dramatic film is more representative of you and your own personal –

Theodore: Yeah.

Matt: Taste and where you'd like to go. So that's true, and that's what you're saying even here now, right?

Theodore: Look, I don't want to re-inscribe the sense that drama is greater than comedy, because I love comedy. I've worked on some truly great ones that have been joyful to work on and for which I've gotten to write music that I'm really proud. I'm loathe to jump on the bandwagon of placing drama on a higher pedestal.

At the same time, the movies that I like to go see are certainly probably a little bit less mainstream. I'm looking for a better word than that, but I can't come up with it. Less mainstream than many of the ones that I have worked on. And so yeah, it's hard when you feel like you're not considered to be an appropriate choice for the types of movies that you would like to go see as an audience member.

Matt: I've heard that when I've interviewed actors or actresses in the past, as well, when you get typecast or pigeon-holed in a certain way. Certainly, showbusiness in general is so competitive that -- I'm referencing only conversations I've had in the past: certainly nothing I've heard or read from you. But those conversations being, you know, hey, opportunities come so slowly, being choosy when you're just starting, or you just moved to Hollywood, is a luxury. So of course I took that commercial. Of course I took that comedic gig. Whatever that is.

Theodore: Yeah.

Matt: And then pretty soon, I become known as that girl, that guy, that role. Is the same true in the world of composition and that's what you're feeling?

Theodore: It is true. I mean, I think that the reality is that there are a lot of gifted composers in Hollywood. And so if a film is looking to cast the role of composer on a film, it's certainly common for the studio, and in some cases the director, to feel more comfortable when they hire somebody who has shown that they can do that specific thing in the past.

There are all sorts of exceptions to that. There are certainly situations where you have a director relationship that enables you to transcend those barriers. And look, I just myself scored two movies in the past year that are outside of the genre that I often work in, so these things are not hard and fast boundaries. And there are always ways to get around them. But it is challenging.

In my own career, early on, I started out doing a bunch of comedies. Well actually, that's not even true. I was doing a broad range of independent films early on in my career, and I had done this heist thriller, directed by David Mamet, called *Heist*, starring Gene Hackman.

On the basis of that score, I got hired to do the film *Old School*, which this is the kind of thing that almost never happens. You do a dramatic thriller score, and on the basis of that, you get hired to do something in a completely different genre. But it just so happens that what happened was I did this kind of dark heist score, and on the basis of that, got the job for *Old School*. And at the same time as that, I also did a couple

of other comedies: one that was directed by a very, very good friend and collaborative partner of mine that was also a comedy. And then the director of *Old School* did his next movie, and I did that. And a momentum built up.

Pretty soon after that, I passed on, there was another comedy that came up right on the heels of that, and I passed on it, just thinking, I can't just keep doing comedies. And that movie went on to be an enormous success. I felt like I had a number of situations in my career where, when I tried to make the pivot and say, okay, I'm going to stop doing comedies for right now, the movies that I passed on became gigantic hits.

So it just felt like there was this inexorable momentum, and I ended up adopting the strategy that the way to navigate this was, they say that if you're white water rafting, not that I've done a lot of this, or if you're in an undertow, if you get caught in an undertow, swim with the current but slowly make your way over to the side. So that's sort of been my strategy with all of this is to just swim with the current and try, whenever possible, to make my way over to the side. So that's what I'm doing. And I'm happy to say that this year has felt like a good year in that regard, and yeah, so that's good.

Matt: Can you say what that movie was that went on?

Theodore: Wedding Crashers. [laughs]

Matt: Okay. Yeah, that's a big miss.

Theodore: [laughs] Yeah.

Matt: [laughs] I love the tension that you're describing, because you're not in any way coming across as ungrateful for the position you are. In fact, you've stated the opposite; I know I'm in this enviable position. I'm in this good place. You've put in your time, you've earned the position that you've earned, and yet at the same time, the longing to maybe do some other things, or to have been involved in, to be sort of positioned in a different way, I think is a very real tension where people don't really want to be honest about that, because they don't, in fear of coming across in that way. But internally, has that been something that you've wrestled with? How do I remain thankful and present with the work while also keeping my eye on where I want to go?

Theodore: A hundred percent. I wrestle with it constantly. I feel the presence of this cultural pressure to always be projecting total positivity. Like everything's great. My career is great. And it's bullshit. Can I say bullshit on this podcast?

Matt: Yeah, you can absolutely say anything you want on this.

Theodore: Yeah, I mean, it's bullshit for everybody. And many people still put that out there. And I think that, I'm not really a big social media person, but I think that the presence of social media has only amplified that dynamic. I have a healthy ego, and I think I'm as good as anybody out there. So it's painful to feel at times like you're not really a logical choice for certain types of films. And that's hard. I feel like I'm constantly telling myself, I know, I'm grateful, I'm grateful, and I'm also in pain. It's a real tension, but I don't want to shut off either current of that feeling. I have to sort of be honest about both parts of it. And by the way, I never talk about this publicly, so this feels scary to be talking about this in a public forum. But that's definitely the reality.

Matt: Do you feel like maybe that's your best self, is your ability to live in that tension? I would think it would be healthy to have the ego drive you forward in ways that lead to your best work yet to be unearthed, while at the same time staying grounded.

Theodore: A hundred percent. I wouldn't trade the ego for anything. I need it. And it does drive me to do my best work. Never do I start a project thinking, 'Yeah I'm going to just phone this in and do adequate work.' I want to do something great every time. Ego gets a bad rap, but I need it. It's part of who I am, and it's part of who I am as an artist.

At the same time, I am aware that being present with the conflict is important, and if you don't have that part, then you're just one of those people who is puffing themselves up and projecting something that's not real.

Matt: Can you think of times when you've lost one or the other?

Theodore: I would say I'm more likely to lose the gratefulness.

Matt: Okay.

Theodore: There have definitely been times where I've gotten swept up in a feeling, like I'm snake-bitten or none of my movies are successful or just stupid shit. I've gotten a little bit better at catching myself in those feelings. And also better at just sort of being present with the duality of, I am both grateful and frustrated. And so that's definitely been something for sure that I've developed in the last seven years or so. And through therapy, that was enormously helpful in developing that consciousness of being aware of how I'm feeling and being present with those feelings. So that's been a change for me, for sure, since I, like I'm 47 now. So I'd say somewhere in my 40s I developed a better sense of that.

Matt: When do you feel most fulfilled in this entire process? Is it opening night?

Theodore: No. No. It's when I'm working. I would say that most of the time, when I'm doing the work, I feel pretty good. And it sort of doesn't matter what I'm working on. When I'm in my process and I feel creative, and I feel like I'm having a good collaboration with a director who's appreciative of what I'm doing, I feel pretty great.

My usual MO is that I often feel like everything that I've ever done in the past, I don't really like that much, but I'm pretty sure that this next thing that I'm working on is the one that's really going to be good. So I tend to feel a lot of positive energy towards the thing that I'm currently working on. And I've even actually gotten better about appreciating the things that I've done in the past. But when I'm mid-process, I would say that feelings of frustration tend to drift away. It's really when I'm between projects, or when a movie comes out and people don't like it, or it doesn't do well, or there's some sort of industry-based disappointment, is when I feel most pained.

Matt: You sound very confident in your craft today.

Theodore: Yeah.

Matt: Were you always that way, even going back to some of your first work? Or is that just a result of the filmography that you've built up?

Theodore: It's funny. I think that I always did feel pretty confident of my craft [laughs] and looking back, clearly should not have felt confident in my craft early on in my career, when I didn't know what I

was doing. And look, probably in another 15 years, I'll look back on what I was doing now and think the same thing.

I think writing music for picture is something that takes a really long time to get the hang of, and it is difficult to do well, coming right out of the gate. But I do feel confident, and I think that I believe in myself. I think I do good work, and I know that I have the musical background to do good work. I think I have good training, and I understand how to write for a lot of different instruments. I feel good about that. And I've learned a lot over time, and so yeah, that's an arena where I don't feel like an imposter anymore. I think I felt like an imposter earlier, but I don't feel like an imposter.

Matt: Are you ever stumped?

Theodore: So my version of being stumped is a version where I come in and I do write something. Like, I do get something. I don't just stare at the screen all day usually. I get something out. But I know I feel sick about it, like I know it wasn't the right thing. So I come in the next day and look at what I had done, and sometimes I'm pleasantly surprised, and sometimes I just think, ugh, got to go back. So I do it again.

So that can be a process that goes on a few days. I'm utterly miserable when this happens. I go home, and I can't turn it off. And I just feel deeply unsettled when I don't think I've cracked the code on something. But I do tend, as opposed to just sitting and waiting until inspiration strikes. I do tend to try to work through it by writing.

But I also often find that what can happen is if I'm sitting in front of the picture and writing all day, I'll work, work, work, work, and then I'll get in the car and drive home, and then on the car ride home, I'll realize what the solution is, why I've got it all wrong. And it's just something that I could never really figure out while sitting in front of the picture.

Matt: But that sounds very healthy. Having spoken with several artists, the idea of feeling sick about something created versus feeling sick over having created nothing. That feels like a major part of the work, is at least getting something out there.

Theodore: Yeah.

Matt: Some batch of clay with which to work.

Theodore: Yes, yes. Absolutely. I think it's healthy, too. It's just the way that I am. It's not like I force myself to do it because I believe in it. It's not a dogmatic practice. But it is how I approach it. And I like that approach. I do feel it's a healthy way to go.

Matt: I want to go back to that analogy that you used. You're swimming with the current, you're moving toward the shore, and able to land maybe some more of these projects that are maybe more in the lane of things that you'd like to be moving toward. Is that working in your favor as you're getting a read in 2019 and maybe some of the opportunities coming your way?

Theodore: It is. I'm really happy to say it is. I'm going to be working on this movie that another dear collaborator, Jay Roach, is making about Fox News and sexual harassment, starring Charlize Theron playing Megyn Kelly, and Nicole Kidman playing Gretchen Carlson, and has an amazing cast: Margot Robbie and John Lithgow, Allison Janney. It's just sort of an incredible... Kate McKinnon, it's awesome. I couldn't be more excited about that. It looks like it's going to be great. The script is superb. Jay is another wonderful, kind director who I'm privileged to work with. So that's really thrilling.

And then I have a couple of animated films that I'm working on, which I love doing. And then another movie with Paul Feig. So it's going to be a busy year. And it feels like a creatively fulfilling year. So I am very grateful.

[music]

Matt: You've been listening to The Resistance. If you've enjoyed this episode, please rate us on iTunes and subscribe on your favorite podcast app. And for more information and further episodes, you can find us at listentotheresistance.com. Our theme is composed by Chad Howat. Engineering, production, and additional music by Jay Kirkpatrick. My name is Matt Conner, and I'm your host. Thanks for listening.