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Lydia Dean Pilcher

"People like us have
the responsibility to
come forward and
stay strong."

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Conquering the (virtual) world
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Remembering Sydney Pollack

Lydia Dean



Photo: Chris Buck

Pilcher



A classic film noir once posited of New York that there were “eight million stories in the naked city.” And until recently, there were roughly the same number of reasons a producer could find *not* to shoot a movie there: It’s too expensive. It’s too cumbersome. There’s no place to park. Having two baseball teams damages crew unity.

Several years ago, the Producers Guild put itself at the forefront of a coalition of groups lobbying for legislation to make producing entertainment in New York more affordable. And as the PGA’s representative on the New York Production Alliance, Lydia Dean Pilcher, can rightly claim a measure of credit for the incentives that have helped to jump-start the New York production sphere.

Pilcher was in a unique position to press for such change. As a thoroughly independent producer with both close ties to the New York producing community and a range of experience that’s taken her around the country and around the world, she brings a genuinely global perspective to local issues. What’s more, as the long-serving Vice Chair of the PGA East — until this summer when her second term expired — Pilcher could speak with the institutional strength of a national organization behind her. Thanks to her work and that of the New York Production Alliance, production in New York is booming, with an aggressive tax incentive program and a vigorous and proactive film office. (As for bridging the Mets/Yankees divide, you’re still on your own.)

Pilcher’s work in addressing the problems facing her profession is a natural extension of her creative work, which has never shied away from tackling provocative subjects such as gender equality, cultural identity and political and social injustice. Over the course of her career, she’s lent her skills to supporting the distinctively independent voices of such directors as Wes Anderson (*The Darjeeling Limited*), Tim Robbins (*Cradle Will Rock*), Alison MacLean (*Jesus’ Son*), Jane Anderson (*Normal*) and particularly Mira Nair, with whom she has collaborated on eight different projects, including *The Namesake*, *Vanity Fair* and the upcoming adventure film *Amelia*, starring Hilary Swank as Amelia Earhart.

It was from the Toronto set of *Amelia* that Lydia Dean Pilcher spoke to *Produced by* editor Chris Green for the 37th interview in this magazine’s ongoing series of Case Studies of successful producers and their work. Over the course of several phone calls (only occasionally broken up by the need to, say, produce a movie), she shared her thoughts on such topics as developing international financing models, the comparative challenges of shooting in India and New York, and the difficulties involved in selling a film with a main character named “Fuckhead.”



Lydia Dean Pilcher (right) and Mira Nair on location at the Taj Mahal while shooting *The Namesake*. (Photo: Abbot Genser)

How did you find your way into the industry, and into producing specifically? Everybody's path is different ... what did yours turn out to be?

I always loved movies, but growing up in Atlanta I never thought of it as a career. At Antioch College I focused on political science and journalism, and I worked as a film critic for the college newspaper. Sitting in the Little Arts Cinema of Yellow Springs, Ohio, I discovered filmmakers I'd never known of before ... Bertolucci, Bergman, Godard.... When I got to that point of "what am I going to do with my life?" I felt I should do whatever the thing was that I really loved the most. And the thing I loved the most was movies. I worked in radio and video documentary, but the only film course at Antioch was experimental film. The primary instructions, as I remember it, were not to take a shower with your camera or throw it down the stairs as you created your images.

Good advice at any stage of a career.

After Antioch, I applied to NYU for the graduate film program. At NYU while most of the others were on more of a Hollywood track, I continued to make docs. I loved the post-punk East Village and it was a great time to be at NYU. My classmates included Ang Lee, Jim Jarmusch, and Spike Lee. In fact, one of the first features that I worked on when I got

out of school was a script, *After Hours*, directed by Martin Scorsese and written by one of our classmates, Joe Mignon. After graduation I worked a bit in documentaries but became frustrated with the lack of opportunities; it wasn't as vibrant a field as it is today. So I began working on features, like *After Hours*, and just really fell in love with dramatic storytelling. I believed in the power of film to open up the world, inspire, to make us laugh and cry — make us feel things. Feeling that my talents were more in the financial and organizational areas, I decided to focus on a production track. I worked as a location assistant and a location manager (*Planes, Trains and Automobiles*), then became a production manager (*Quiz Show*), and a line producer (*Mississippi Masala*). I worked on both studio movies and independent films, and found that you tend to move up more quickly in the independent arena than you do on a studio track. In those days, we were making indie features in New York for \$.5 million to \$2 million. Having said that, the first feature I produced was in 1989 for \$200,000!

Wow. What was the title?

The Kill-Off, based on a Jim Thompson novel. It was adapted and directed by Maggie Greenwald. We shot it in 18 days. I produced it and I drove the camera truck! [laughs]



Pilcher (right) on location for *The Namesake* with lead actress Tabu.
(Photo: Abbot Genser)

On location for *Amelia*: (from left) Hilary Swank, Ewan McGregor, Pilcher, Mira Nair. (Photo: Ken Woroner)



Pilcher (right) on location for *Amelia* with director of photography Stuart Dryburgh.
(Photo: Ken Woroner)

So in those early days, who were some of the people that you learned from, and what were some of the lessons that you still find yourself employing today?

Robert Colesberry was one of my first mentors. He was a fantastic person in our business. He was the kind of person who knew production inside and out and then partnered, really partnered, with the director to realize their vision. We did *After Hours* with Amy Robinson also producing. And I was a unit manager on *Mississippi Burning* with Bob and Alan Parker. We did a number of other films together, and he was someone who was always a very strong inspiration for me.

As a producer, what was it about his approach that resonated with you?

He was passionate about filmmaking and he really got in the trenches with the director, understood what it was they wanted to achieve, and then had the skills and the creative energy to make it happen. When you work as a producing partner with a director with a personal vision, you're a leader, and a big part of the creative team in actualizing that vision. For me, that's everything, because I get the most pleasure from making the movie.

That's a perfect transition, since when you talk about working with directors with a personal vision, Mira Nair's obviously in that category. I understand *Amelia* is your eighth movie together. Given your strong collaborative track record, I was wondering if you could talk about that collaboration, and how it grew?

Well, I think that first of all, we both have a passion for the diversity of the world. We share a strong sense of social justice and a strong handmade artistic aesthetic. We love to travel. We love people. We love culture. We love ideas. We love art and beauty. We love politics... We just love life. Honestly, I think that all of us who love what we do are gypsies at heart because you have to love being rootless and creating a home wherever you are. Mira and I have given birth and raised our kids together and it's been a friendship and partnership that is very special.

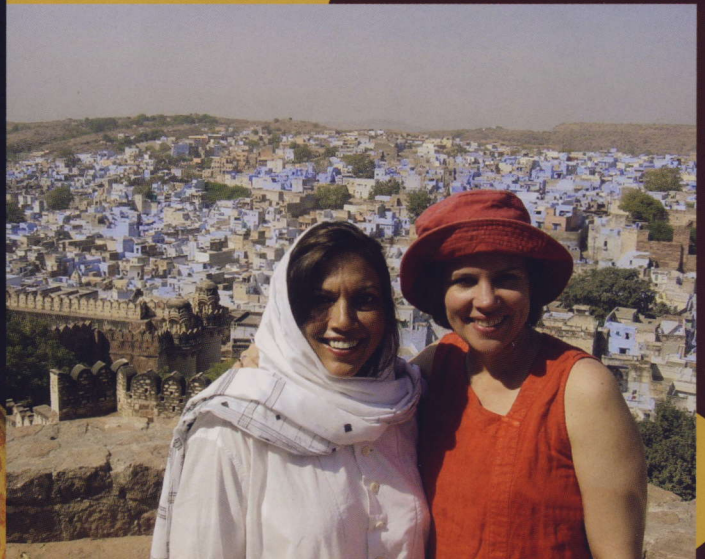
What seems particularly gratifying is how the scope of your films together has expanded, from smaller films like *Mississippi Masala* and *Kama Sutra* to more expansive stories like *Vanity Fair* and *Amelia*.

And we go back and forth. *The Namesake* cost \$10 million, and



Left: Pilcher (right) with writer-director Wes Anderson on the set of *The Darjeeling Limited*.

(Photo: James Hamilton)



Above: Pilcher (right) with Mira Nair in India.

Amelia is a \$45 million movie. Mira never wants to lose touch with her imagination. Inventing, doing something we haven't done before, or breaking new ground in a different way is always the goal. We'll likely do something smaller and more personal after this one. We've optioned and are quite focused on Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

You've worked with a lot of women directors in your career...

There was a period there in the nineties, particularly, where I was only working with women directors. I worked with Alison MacLean, Jane Anderson and Katja von Garnier, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and of course Mira...

Was that something you consciously sought out, or did that just naturally happen?

It wasn't a conscious thing. But obviously there is something in the storytelling, the female point of view that I'm drawn to, both as a woman and as a woman producer.

So, do you find yourself generally drawn to directors? Or are you drawn to scripts which you then develop? Every producer works in a different way, but at what point, typically, do you enter the process?

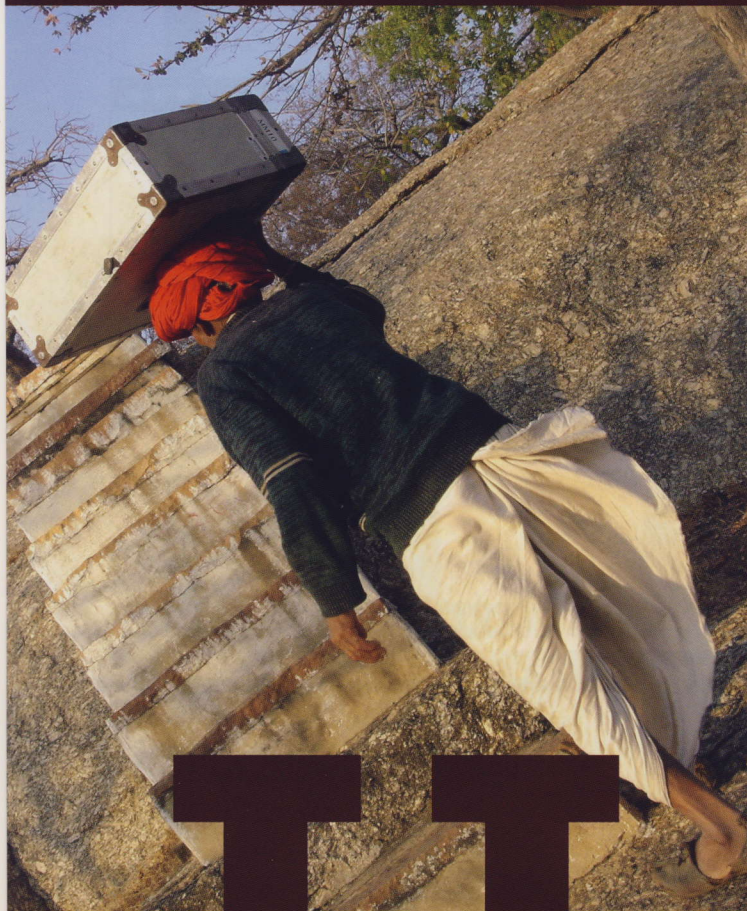
It's changed over time. In my early years, people were seeking me out because of my production skills. But because we mostly financed Mira's films internationally, I became experienced with models of financing films by pre-selling foreign territories. The advantage is the creative control as well as the cost of the movie being covered before production, with unsold territories in our pocket. This led to work with other independent directors using similar financing structures. Wayne Wang and

I made a movie in Hong Kong with Gong Li and Jeremy Irons called *Chinese Box*, based on that model. But at a certain point, I wanted to branch out and develop material. I had worked with Colin Callender and Keri Putnam when they were on the East Coast with HBO Showcase. When they formed HBO Films, I was able to get a first-look deal which lasted four years, and this was a great entrée for me into the world of development. I was able to take on projects in a different way than I had before. Keri was an amazing mentor for me in this arena of script development. And I got to produce some very cool movies with HBO like *Iron Jawed Angels*, *Hysterical Blindness*, *Normal* and *Disappearing Acts*.

It's interesting, the first transition you spoke of, developing a model for international financing ... that, I think, is something that a lot of PGA members find very intimidating. Questions of deal making and international finance often seem like a vast remove from the nuts and bolts of physical production and dramatic storytelling. How did you educate yourself and start that project?

The very first movie that I mentioned to you, *The Kill-Off*, I took to Cannes. It wasn't in competition, we just went and put it in the market. So I was exposed to the process of selling foreign rights early on. When you go to Cannes, the entire film industry of the world is there, and you realize how big and small it is at the same time. When Mira and I financed *Kama Sutra*, we had one equity financier, who gave us a cornerstone of \$2 million — and we needed eight. Our equity investor had Japanese rights for her \$2 million, and we set out with the goal of pre-selling to distributors from different territories. Over the course of Cannes, we raised the budget of the movie by pre-selling France (BAC Film), Germany (Pandora), Italy (Cecchi

Bottom: Pilcher (right) with daughter Lucy (back, partly obscured) on location in Rajasthan for *The Darjeeling Limited*. (Photo: James Hamilton)



Gori), the UK (Film Four), and Spain (BMG). We hired a lawyer to help us put those deal memos together. Then we met Wendy Palmer at CiBy Sales who took on the sales for the rest of international. By the time we left, we had raised the budget of the movie, signed an international sales agent, enlisted a bank, and we had withheld the rights to North America and India.

And this is all on the strength of Mira's name? Because Mira was still a young filmmaker at that point.

On the strength of a movie called *Kama Sutra* with Mira Nair directing. Six weeks later, we were able to commence our pre-production.

Wow. That's a good week's work.

We didn't close everything and have our complete cash flow until September, about a week before we started shooting, so it was a little hairy. But because of the weather in India, September through December was a perfect time to shoot the movie, and we had to make it happen.

Let's talk about that, because working in India is something you know a great deal about. How many shoots have you done over there now?

I've done four.

Obviously, India is a completely different production environment, but also has an incredibly vibrant filmmaking culture. How does an American producer negotiate the ins and outs of shooting there?

It's changed a lot over the years. When we made *Kama Sutra* in 1995, there were no computers, there was no Internet, there were no cell phones, which made producing a movie with that kind of complicated financial structure very challenging. It's changed a lot

Honestly, I think that all of heart because you have to wherever you are.



now, and that technology is pretty much part of daily life in India, so the challenges are different. Going into any different culture, you find that people have their own ways of doing things. I've also shot in Hong Kong, Uganda, London, even right now, in Toronto. In any location, you find a way to work with what is available to you. Embrace what is special about where you are. You never really succeed if you try to make everyone do it your way. You have to be willing to understand and be patient.

Specifically in terms of India, what are some of the aspects of the culture that are foreign to American filmmakers that you have to make allowances and adjustments for?

There is a very complex religious and social structure in South

Asia that is difficult for outsiders to understand. It can make doing business very interesting at times. But I always find that every time I return to India my knowledge and appreciation deepens and grows. Culturally, there's a sense of destiny, a feeling that things happen for a reason and what's meant to be is meant to be. There's not a sense of urgency about time. But I have to say that, being a New Yorker, I find that to be true almost everywhere I go. [laughs] I don't want to just pin it on India. You know, maybe we're all crazy. Everywhere else, life just has a different pace, a different rhythm. It's not that production happens in a lesser way, it just happens in a different way, and sometimes that's slower. There isn't this sort of American sensibility of "We can do anything and we can be anybody." It's not the way the rest of the world thinks ... thank God! Unfortunately, that's the way we're born to think. I hope that's not too abstract.

Well, maybe one way to ground that observation would be to compare it to New York. How much have you shot in New York City?

I cut my teeth shooting on the streets of New York and though I love to travel, it helps to work in the place where my children go to school! We filmed most of *The Namesake* in New York — we were one of the first films to benefit from the new tax production credit.

I think that for an out-of-town filmmaker, New York can be as intimidating in its own way as shooting in India or Uganda or any foreign country. So, what would you suggest to the "foreign" filmmaker who wants to find that New York production value, but is worried that it's out of his or her grasp?

diverse crew and working in conjunction with neighborhoods and communities is of utmost importance. As opposed to coming in like Vikings, like you're going to take over, like the way many movie companies do.

So in that instance, who do you talk to? Who's your first contact, to make sure that you're not going to step on the wrong toes, and that you're going to integrate with a neighborhood rather than working against it?

Well, location managers tend to have a good sense of it. Either they have experience in certain areas, or if they're going into a new area, they can suss out who the leaders of the community are, and what the various personalities are on the block. So you go in, and you try to be as respectful as possible. Talk to the neighborhood associations. Hiring a few people from the neighborhood to work on the shoot goes a long way. When you're filming in a densely populated location environment, that's critical to making it all work.

I do want to talk a little more about the PGA East since that's something you've been so closely involved with and its been such a bright spot for the Guild over the past few years. How did you come to be involved in the Guild? Who recruited you?

It was Hawk Koch, actually.

A lot of people give that answer.

I have to say, because I pretty much work all the time and I have two kids and run a company now, I wasn't terribly involved initially. I was a member for about three years before I got a call from Nancy Goldman, who told me they were looking to broaden out the leadership on the East

us who love what we do are gypsies at love being rootless and creating a home

I think the first thing is that you want to have New Yorkers running your production and leading you into the process. New York is its own culture. The unions work a little differently, like they do any place you go. Again, it's people who come in from the outside and want to do it "their way" and don't understand the way it's done locally that tend to butt up against the system and have problems. We have a pretty vibrant street culture, whereas in Los Angeles and other places, people spend a lot of time alone in their cars. New Yorkers tend to have big personas and loud voices and there's many, many different cultures. We walk and ride the subway and we're out on the street all the time, brushing up against everyone else. So I think that striving to have a

Coast and bring in more feature film people. It was at a time when I had just finished about three movies back to back and I was looking to take a breather and change up my focus a little bit. I had been feeling for a while that producers were not organized as a voice in New York and I was very interested in bringing the New York part of the Guild around to have more of a political focus in our film community. When David Picker and I were approached to run as officers, Nelle Nugent and John Schwally were putting a lot of energy into growing the PGA East and the membership was expanding exponentially. It was terrific synergistic timing. We opened an office, hired a staff, and we were able to start liaising with all the different organizations and groups

in New York. We created the Community Action Committee, which has taken on a lot of different issues over the past four years: lobbying for the tax credits, interfacing with the New York Production Alliance, working with the MPAA on the anti-piracy campaign, working with the Mayor's Task Force for Diversity in the film industry, and now we are engaged in a big environmental effort with Earthmark, which is off to a great running start focused on greening the film industry. So that's been very gratifying for me. Even though I've termed out as a PGA East officer, I look forward to continuing to work with the Community Action Committee and having an active presence.

Stepping back from New York for a bit, you're shooting the story of Amelia Earhart in Toronto. What was behind that choice?

Our era is the thirties, and Toronto is a great place for this period and for getting a lot of different landscapes. Amelia Earhart's story has about 50 locations. She's a person of the world, you know? Our sets include Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami, Hawaii, Wales, Newfoundland, Calcutta, Thailand, Mali... We'll finish our production in South Africa which is a great place for 1930's Miami, Hawaii, New Guinea, and Los Angeles; we're also able to get some of the European wine country and Africa, of course. We're in Halifax for Wales

and Newfoundland, which is where Amelia's trans-Atlantic flight departed from. So between these three locations we've pretty much managed to get all the looks we need.

As a point of contrast, I wonder if you could talk a little about the production of, for instance, *Jesus' Son*. It's a beautiful film, but I admit I'm curious, how does a producer sell an impressionistic, loosely-plotted episodic story with a main character named "Fuckhead"?

Exactly! [*laughs*] Well, that was a case where we weren't able to sell it until after the film was finished. We started with a cornerstone of equity. Everybody wanted to track the project, because it was a cult novel and people were interested in what Alison MacLean would do next. But as we attached each cast member, first Billy Crudup, then we got Samantha Morton, then we got Dennis Hopper and Denis Leary and Holly Hunter, Will Patton, Jack Black — who, to be fair, wasn't nearly as well known as he is today. And we still couldn't get a distributor on board. There were distributors who would call me up and say, "Lydia, we really like the movies you do but we can't figure this one out ... tell us, what is it that you see in this script?"

Now I'm really curious. What did you tell them?

It's basically a story about a guy who couldn't feel anything in the world. He had hit rock bottom, and it was about his jour-

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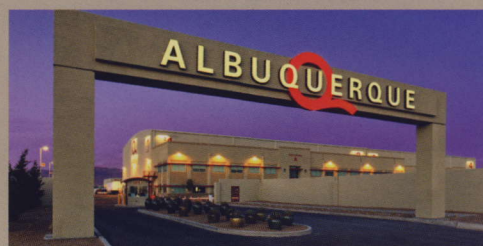
ney back to being able to touch and feel, to connect with other people. If people know the author, Denis Johnson, they understand what the tone is. And the challenge in making the movie was to bring a certain amount of warmth into a cold landscape to achieve a viscerally emotional tone. And to keep it funny. Finally, the budget of \$3.5 million was put together in a limited partnership and we shot it in Philadelphia. During post, it was coming around Cannes time again. [laughs] I had completed *Cradle Will Rock* directed by Tim Robbins, which was opening night at Cannes that year. We cut a forty-minute trailer for *Jesus' Son* and I took that to Cannes. With Bart Walker's help, we rented a hotel room and invited every distributor to come in and watch. And they all came. People were really moved. Some people asked us to hold out and wait so that they could see the whole movie. Alliance Atlantis made us an offer for foreign and we went ahead and made that sale at Cannes. Mark Urman and Tom Ortenberg immediately fell passionately in love with it and wanted it right away. Over the next month we made the decision to sell the domestic to Lionsgate.

I know that you have to get back to the set, but I wanted to share a last question with you. "Independent film" seems to mean something different every few years. What are the major challenges for an independent producer going forward? What should we be doing to encourage independent production and creative entrepreneurship?

The modes of financing are always changing. I think this era of the money on Wall Street and the hedge funds ... all of that is pretty much winding down. The loss of indie distribution outlets — losing New Line and Warner Independent and Picturehouse — these are major blows. Everything has to adjust and rebound. Looking at what's happening in reaction to the global market, it seems that there are more international financing opportunities for independents. But the landscape of movies is changing rapidly and drastically because of the way content is distributed and viewed. My feeling is that this is the crowning hope for all of us who have a brain and a heart. Material doesn't have to be dumbed down for the channel surfers, and marketing for movies can be targeted more brilliantly for non-mainstream viewers than ever before. This gives material with diverse content a chance to be successful in the marketplace. I also think the issues of entry and retention in our industry for independent filmmakers, women filmmakers, and diverse filmmakers is a very serious issue. It takes people with real vision in the studio executive's chair and strong-minded passionate producers to push back against the mediocre middle ground which studios tend to feed. This is a problem that will never go away. That's why people like us, who have the ability to create alternative visions, have the responsibility to come forward and stay strong. ♫

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