

Interview for:

In Short A Guide to Short Film-making in the digital Age

Authors:

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Winta Yohannes was born in Eritrea and moved to Germany with her mother to escape the effects of war. A short course at the New York Film Academy in 1995 confirmed the direction she wanted to take, and she stayed on to gain professional production experience. She then took up a place at the London International Film School, and graduated in 2000. She is now writing a feature-length script and making music videos.

We discussed her graduation short, Cherish.

How did you become a film-maker?

I grew up in Germany. After school I wanted to go to New York because I'd been there for vacation twice and I just wanted to get out and see a bit of a different



world. New York is very energetic and it completely hypnotised me as a city. I always wanted to make films, but I wanted to get an experience of doing it and see if the practicality is really for me, because it's so easy to fall in love with an idea of what you want to do just because you like films. I did a two month course at the New York Film Academy, where you do a couple of really little films like one minute, three minute, and then you end up with a ten minute film. And then I worked on low budget sets, music videos, things like that.

Why did you decide to make Cherish?

It was my graduation film from LIFS (The London International Film School). I could have done a documentary, I could have done something longer, but I want to direct drama so I wanted to do something that could be a showcase but also to develop my skills as a writer/director. Film is very expensive, so it's better to do a short with your own money, on your own terms. I thought that if I do a couple of shorts I'll be more ready for what I eventually want to do, which are feature films. Every film you learn something, and every film I've done I've taken one thing that I want to improve on. Plus I've seen friends of mine doing features, and even getting funding, private funding, and their films are still on the shelves, so I'm trying to think more in terms of doing a couple of little things that will take me one step at a time. It's such a disheartening process to make a film - and a feature as well takes so much time and effort - and then for it not to be distributed. I'd rather wait than rush into it. When you make a feature you have to be really ready for it, because if it's not good it's very unlikely that you will get an opportunity to make a second one, especially if you're a woman and on top of that a minority. If you get your break you'd better well be ready. It's important for me that I feel, when I get that chance that doesn't come along very often, that I'm able to take it.

Could you describe Cherish for us?

It's a portrait of this girl who has an idyllic idea of what love is and what her parents used to be like. She doesn't actually know much about it, but she idealises love. Then all of a sudden her dad pops up into her life and makes her confront - what does she really know? How she sees things, is that really how it is? When I was young I had an idea of love, and when I grew up it was just a whole other ball game. So it's a kind of coming of age story. But at the end of the film it's not like she's realised how it is, it's that she's at the beginning of realising that there's a whole lot out there that

she doesn't know and that things don't work as easily as you think they do when you're a teenager.

How did you first get the idea for it?

I had a different script at first that I adapted from a short story by an American writer, J California Cooper, which was brilliant, but it would have been very expensive and difficult to make, so then I thought that I'd rather do my own story. I was trying to find a story. I took my time to find it, and I think it's inspired by the fact that I met my dad quite late. I never really thought of it as a story because he always said, 'Don't make a story about me and your life.' I think it was inspired by a visit to him. I don't know why because I was writing about other stuff, but it just suddenly went like, 'This is something real, this is something that I can relate to.' A lot of friends, and people that I've met, can relate to this, because even people who are 26/27 have issues in understanding why their parents are not together or why things are the way they are. I thought, 'That's quite universal.' It's not especially a black story. It's a story anybody can relate to if you're interested in it or if you have similar situations. I like stories where you can involve all kinds of backgrounds.

Was it a personal experience that started the idea?

It was the trigger, yes. It made me reflect on certain things, but it's not like the story is my story, but the idea behind it is quite close to my heart. I went to my dad's, who lives in New Haven, Connecticut in the States. I actually went there to write. It was really quiet, and I was sitting in front of my computer thinking, 'There must be a story, there must be a story,' and then it sort of sunk in that there's a story right there where I was. Then I had different approaches to the story, and then I went completely away from being right there and took a more universal setting of the dad coming to meet his daughter that he's never really known.

You wrote different versions of it?

Yes I did, I started immediately writing scenes, dialogue, in order. But then I would change things around. I always want to force myself to write a story line first and then a treatment, but that really blocks my writing because then I tend to analyse it straight away and think, 'Oh no, this is really clichéd,' so I write the treatment afterwards. For a feature, that will be a little bit different I think, so I'm struggling

with that as I'm trying to put a feature idea on paper right now, and my old way of working on shorts doesn't really apply to that.

So you wrote it all out and then played around with the structure of it?

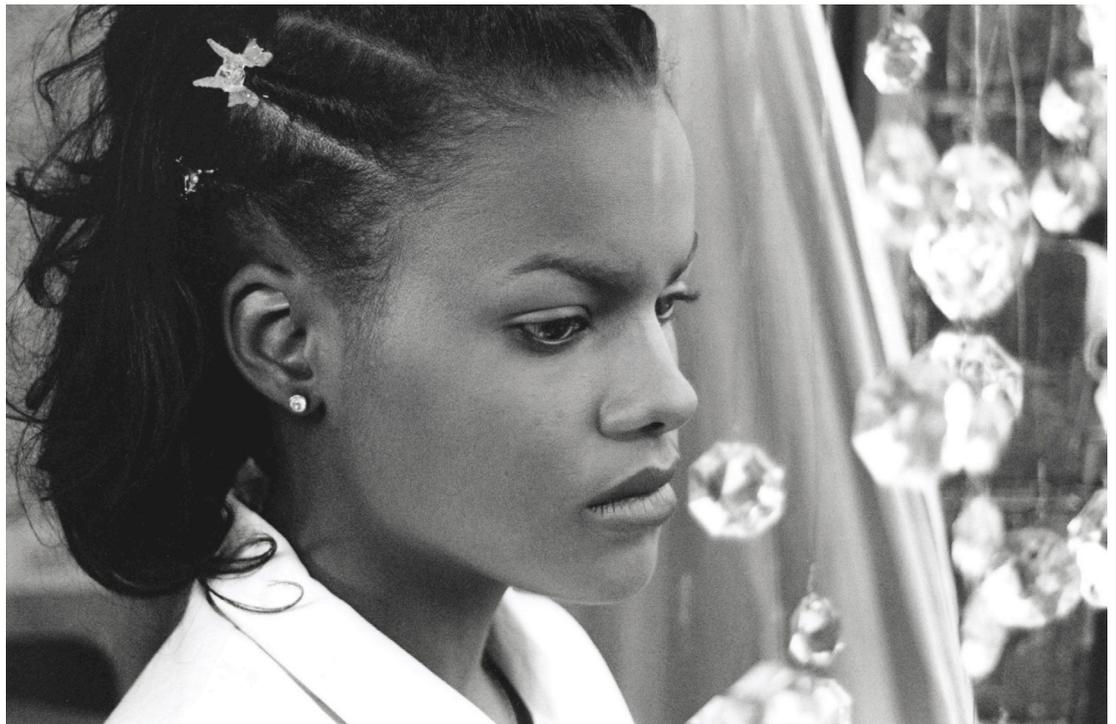
Yes, I wrote one scene not knowing what the next scene was, and then maybe later I'd go back and think, 'I need a transition scene here.' But I guess it depends on the story. If I would write a story that's completely outside of myself, I think it would be easier for me to make a structure first. If something's close to you I think it's sometimes very hard to judge it right, and you can block yourself by thinking about that constantly while you're making the structure and the treatment. So I thought it best to get it out first and then re-write it.

How long did it take you to write the script?

About two weeks just to get the idea of the story I'm doing, and then I kept re-writing it.

When did you get the idea that the gift from the father to his daughter would be the traditional Eritrean dress?

That was in there from the beginning, because it's a quite typical thing to do. Not



the dress necessarily, but in Eritrea if somebody comes they will bring you a present and most likely they will bring you something connected to home, and if you hadn't grown up there it would be a little bit alien. So it could be jewellery, it could be anything, but I thought a dress would be so obvious for her to think, 'What's that?' or for her boyfriend to say, 'What are you wearing?' At first, we didn't plan for her to wear it at the end, but then we thought it was nice because it's almost like the dad is there. She's wearing it and doing the opposite of what she should be doing in that dress, and it added to the meaning.

What would you say Cherish means?

What it means to me is that a lot of things are really mysterious to you and that you'll never really understand them. You can understand them logically, but that's a very different thing to understanding them emotionally. Everything is so rational nowadays that you think, 'Yes, it's normal that people do this because the world is like that,' and so on, but emotionally people still deal with things differently - otherwise we'd have far fewer problems! I think that's how I see it, which can apply to a lot of different stories as well. There's also something going on around tradition, the old life and the new life. I was a bit scared about using the dress because people might connect that to a religious meaning, which was not the intention. The scene in front of the mirror - I'm not happy about that because I think that has different interpretations that were not really the point, or is not of the culture where I'm from. We do wear the dress and head-dress like that, and people over here automatically perceive it as Muslim. It has to do with tradition but it's not meant to be the main point of the story, although it's part of it obviously because she sees things completely differently. If she was brought up traditionally, first of all you don't question your dad, for instance, it's a big thing about how you treat the elders, and all of that obviously doesn't apply. The father understands that and because he wants to get to know her he respects that, but there's also a tension there and the conversation between them never really flows. It's because they both know their differences. But him bringing the dress is also trying to tell her, 'Don't forget where you're from,' so in that sense it is to do with tradition.

What was the next step after you had finished the script?

Then I had to find people to produce it, which is usually the biggest problem. I was looking for people in my school, there were not many people around who really

want to produce. And the few people who do want to produce, and are good at it, have been doing it for so long for everybody that after a while they think, 'Now I'll get a real job, get paid. I can't keep doing graduation films for the rest of my life.' So it's very hard. I found two people two terms below me. I sent them the script and they wanted to do it. I had the camera operator who worked on my previous short, who was also from my school, and he introduced me to the cinematographer who was from the National Film School, and then we crewed up and started on the production, which took longer than we expected. We postponed once because we didn't have enough money. It took us half a year, whereas usually in our school we turn things over in three months from writing the script to final dub. So I was quite used to a different pace, but when you're all alone it's very different, and as a director/writer you're always the one who always has to push people, especially if they're not getting paid. It gets really painful at times - you have to always motivate people.

Did the script go through an approval process at the school?

Yes and my tutor suggested a couple of changes. I had a couple of things happening that time-wise weren't really in a logical order, so I changed them. And we had a script writing teacher, an American writer called Pat Silverlaski, she helped me. But at the end of the day what you change is really up to you. I think our school's quite free in that way.

Did your script change much during production?

No - maybe a line or word, but no major changes.

What was your budget?

For your graduation film you get £2,000 back from the school from your tuition fees, which is not enough to make a film. Then the camera operator put half of his graduation budget into mine, £1,000, because he wanted to shoot 35mm and I said it was too expensive. I got £2,000 from family and friends, so we had £5,000. But it ended up being £6,000 as we did go over budget. On our last weekend we were shooting in Richmond Park by the river and we got flooded. We lost the weekend's work, and then we had to re-shoot the end of the film, which meant new insurance for ano-

ther week, everything. That was really difficult. It was like, 'Why?' - but it happens. And then we had to wait because the actress was doing something on Casualty. That all took us over budget.

How did you find your cast?

I found Verona Joseph through Spotlight and the boyfriend through PCR. He didn't have an agent at the time but he got an agent after Cherish. The older people were really hard to find - that was actually the reason why it took us so long to make the film. Most black actors are either busy, or they've given up acting because it hasn't gotten them anywhere, or they're quite well known and not interested in student films anymore. Hubbard Casting were really nice. I faxed them a synopsis and then they suggested names. Then I'd call and say, 'Hubbard Casting recommended I speak to you.' You can make a stronger approach this way.

And were you happy with the way casting turned out? Did you have any reservations?

I think it was definitely difficult in terms of the older actors that we had. All three of them were already known TV actors, so they're obviously used to professional shoots, and our film was quite well organised considering, but it was still a student film. Sometimes that can cause friction, not between us really - director and actor - but I had an AD that was not very intuitive about how to handle people. He's supposed to make your job easier but he was upsetting people and I had to apologise for him. That kind of thing comes between you as director and the actor. It's not easy to work with people who are older than you are, because they have a way of doing it and then you come and you want to do it all different. I think it did work at the end, but it was harder work than with the younger people.

What did you hope to achieve by making Cherish?

My biggest goal was to make a short work and say, 'I'm really happy with it,' but it never happens like that. I wanted to make progress as a film-maker and work more with actors. Before I've been more into how it looks, what the feel is, and I've seen that there was a hole there around directing actors. Now I've concentrated on that. And I've learned that I'd love to do a story line that I haven't written myself. It seems

clearer to me when I read something that somebody else has written. You see more potential in it. When you write something you're more in it, so I would be quite interested to see how that would be different.

Do you see your cultural identity as an important part of what you want to do? Do you want to continue making things that say something about the black experience?

I definitely want to do that, but not only that. I'm kind of all over the place - I'm Eritrean but I didn't grow up there, I grew up in Germany. I live in London. So I'm actually interested in anything that is a good story, it doesn't have to be black but it doesn't have to be black. I don't really want to restrict myself into anything specific because I think I'm quite young still. Of course this background is part of me. My first feature that I'm writing will deal with it, but in a very different way to people's perceptions of a black film. Everything that's in the cinema that's black comes from America. We don't really have anything here to say that we exist, we have a different culture that might be interesting, and maybe we would like to see that as well. In the States black films are just money-making entertainment, except for Spike Lee, and I'm not interested in them. That's quite challenging, but it's also a drive.

Do you find it useful to have experience of these different countries? Do you feel it gives you an approach that's unusual?

Yes. I've learned so much about what's German about me by living somewhere else. First of all you get a bigger, bigger horizon of how you see things, what's important, and then you understand yourself better. I've always loved to travel and to meet different people. It just gives you so much inspiration really rather than being around the same thing all the time.

Do you feel your gender is important as well?

Definitely. So far all my main characters have been women, and not out of a conscious choice, it's just natural to me. When you look at most of the big films it's just the girlfriend, the supporting lead, it's a bit boring the roles that we have. That really interests me to do something different.

Do you feel you kept control of the process on *Cherish*?

I guess it's how you look at what's control. Control for me is that at the end of the day I can say 'Yes' or 'No', but it doesn't mean that I can't take other opinions or

creative input. I think the most rewarding and the scariest thing of being a director is that sometimes there's things that you just have to do and take on responsibility for it.

How do you feel about the finished film now?

Much better than when I first finished it, now that I am at a distance from it. When you first finish you just see everything you missed. I see something in it that's not just a short and it's very hard to capture it in that time frame. The father and some of the other characters are quite one-dimensional, it's basically the girl throughout, and that was not the intention. But for different reasons I ended up going that way while we were shooting. It's not the film that I had in mind, but then again I've never had that complete feeling after finishing a film. It's such an organic process, it depends who you work with, what you discover, why you're doing this story yourself as well.

So originally it was more about a group of characters?

Well the script was exactly how the film is which is why I'm trying to think, 'Did I see it as something that wasn't really there?' because we shot everything as the script is. But I was quite happy with the girl, her performance. You never have it perfect, especially when you're just starting out, but then you see what you've achieved so you think, 'Alright, the next one will be better.'

So what do you like about it now?

I wanted this to be centred on the characters, and that the camera and the look doesn't take over the story, which I've done with one of my films before. And I think I've achieved that. In *Cherish*, the actors were actually being given time to act rather than chasing the narrative. It concentrates on the people. It took quite some time to make the actors understand they could do that, because they were used to a rapid pace. But that's definitely what I wanted. It's really a rewarding process actually.

How is *Cherish* being marketed?

I'm sending it to festivals myself, and it's a lot of work. It's difficult and time-consuming. Where should I send it? What's a good festival? Where does it fit? I have to force myself because my mind is already on what I want to do next. But in film if you don't know anybody, it doesn't do you much good to write or sit at home and do your work. You have to get the work out there. It did win Best Lead Actress at the

Black Film-Makers Festival. And I think the most rewarding thing about the whole process is that I've had nice responses from audiences. People come up to me and say,,I really like your film and I can relate to it.'

Do you enjoy the writing part of the process?

Writing is the hardest thing of all. Because to write something original and gripping is really hard. I don't know whether it may come more naturally to other people. It's nice when you've got your story to the point when you've got your characters and what basically happens, then you can have fun and enjoy the next part, but the part from empty blank page to something, that's the part that's hard.

Will you still make shorts?

I don't think I would go back to shorts if I don't have to. My ideal plan is to be a director, to make my living there, to do that for as long as I get work, that's the idea. If I were to get tired of that, maybe if I had the possibility of being on the other side and doing some producing, in terms of putting out stories I like, that would be good. Sometimes I find stories I like and they're really not for me, but I still want them to be made. But that's talking like big dreams.