



PETER BOGDANOVICH INTERVIEW
FRAGMENTS OF PARADISE
LIFE STORIES

Peter Bogdanovich, Filmmaker
July 27, 2021
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 18 minutes and 21 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents
Peter Bogdanovich
Filmmaker

00:00:09:00

KATIE DAVISON: We'd like to begin with the hardest questions of all. Who are you?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:
I don't know. Let me know if you know anything by now. Peter Bogdanovich.

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KATIE DAVISON:
Do you remember what year? What about what time in your life you met Jonas?



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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

It was in the 50s. Late 50s, I would say. I'm measuring that by the fact that when I did the first play, I directed, was the first. The second. And it was the first play I directed. In New York, Off-Broadway was a play by Clifford Odets called *The Big Knife* about Hollywood, actually. And, the reason I remember that it was that was a 59, 60 season, and Jonas came to see it, and that's where I met him. I think he came to the theater and saw the production, which he liked, and I think that's how we met, which would have been late 68, 59 or early 60.

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KATIE DAVISON:

How did you hear about it? Do you know it was upstate?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Right then later on, about a year or so later, I did, four plays in the summer, I directed four plays, and I was the artistic director of the summer theater at the Venetian in New York, which was near Kingston, where I was born, actually, but I didn't spend any time in Kingston, really, three months. Anyway, so this was Phoenicia, and I did not expect anybody to come from New York to see it. But Jonas did. He came all the way up. He was with his brother Adolphus, and they came to see a production, that I did of Tennessee Williams *Camino Real*, which was a complicated play to do, and in one went two weeks rehearsal, but worked out when he came and he was. So I thought it was so sweet of him to bother to come all the way. All that way to see,



production, which is not bad. But, you know, it wasn't exactly, first rate because we didn't have any money, but it was it was fine. And he was very kind and very encouraging and encouraging me to make a movie or something. You know, just he was that's what he was like. He was very encouraging of artists and went all the way. I guess he liked my stuff because he we liked each other, but he went out of his way to come up there, you know, really touched me. He loved the medium and he encouraged its use in every kind of form. He wasn't, dictatorial about it. He wasn't, you know, he wasn't he wasn't, a pain in the ass about it. He just he that he wanted that to be included in the overall, understanding of film and what it could do and couldn't do. And he didn't. He is there not there's nothing that he he thought it couldn't do. And that was very encouraging at that time for all of us young guys that were just starting out, you know.

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KATIE DAVISON:

You were both sort of like struggling artists in New York at that period. Right?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

I did see him at the New Yorker Theater, which was a theater that, Dan Talbot renovated was an old theater called the York Yorktown, I think. And I lived with my parents about three blocks away from the theater. And so I used to go to that theater quite a bit and ended up writing program notes for them and so on. And then I saw Jonas there quite a few times, because he would come to see the movie and we'd talk afterwards. So I remember I don't know why this happened, but I remember standing in front of the theater, which



was on Broadway in 89th, and, somebody said, playground to me, bang, bang. And I fell down on the sidewalk, you know, he said, do falls. Now I don't do them anymore. And, maybe just it was fun hanging. Hanging with Jonas. He had a great sense of humor. I think Adolphus was with him a number of times. That was it. And then know he'd come and see the movie and, he'd talk about the movie, you know, and a movie one time. Oh, yeah. We were in the office upstairs at the New Yorker. Dan had an office up there, and I would see people up there, some of them. And, so Jonas comes up there and we're talking about movies and so on. And, you know, he was very much about, for the avant garde, this sort of avant garde Off Broadway kind of thing. And we showed a lot of classic American, mainly American films. Then that was Dan's policy. And, so, I mean, we were talking one time, and then there were 2 or 3 people in the room in the office, and Jonas goes over to the blackboard. He writes, the best films are made in Hollywood. Which he absolutely did not believe, but he did it as a gesture to me because I was saying all of these great films made in Hollywood. So he wrote the greatest films of all time in Hollywood. Totally for me. That's what he's like. Very sweet, man. But I wasn't interested, particularly in the kind of films that he was making in the underground. I think I applauded them because they were dedicated and so on, but I wasn't that interested in that kind of film. I was more interested in John Ford and Howard Hawks and and Jonas indulged me in that, in that passion. He didn't try to push me into. Those kind of off Hollywood stuff, and I didn't try to convince him about Hollywood movies. I didn't. My position wasn't that Hollywood is better than this. It's just that it was different. And I enjoyed what actually good older American films. Once in a while, when when somebody was playing that I absolutely couldn't find anywhere else. I think I saw *The Grapes of Wrath* there on a double bill with *Tobacco Road*,



two John Ford films. I think that's the best films I saw there. It was one of the Preston studios. We used to go down there. I don't know if I ever went with Jones, but we hung out. He would go see great American films. He was he was really interested in everything. It wasn't just the avant garde, you know. And he had a column in In the Village Voice, which was quite influential, and he was kind of the voice of the underground movie.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I mean, a lot of people say you started as a film critic. Was it sort of interesting or different or unique to be a cinephile at that time? Were there were there not a lot of people writing about films?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

I actually started out as an actor, not as a critic. I didn't start out as a critic at all. I just started writing about movies as a way of getting in to see them for nothing. And, and, you know, getting invitations to see the new films and so on. But I started as an actor when I was 15. Traverse city, Michigan. I acted in it was ten weeks, you know, and we had that was where I started there kind of movie. I think Smith might have come up. No, he didn't, you know, not. But, you know, it was it was, it was finished here in New York when he came to see that production camera reel. Yeah, because we were all influenced by the French who loved American films, who wrote about them as serious work. And, you know, Godard and Truffaut and those guys, really investigated the great Hollywood directors. They were, you know, Andy Sarris was very influential. And I knew Andy, and he was a pretty good friend of mine. And



Eugene Archer, who was the fourth string of film critic at The New York Times. He was a secret au tourist, you know, the whole idea of the, you know, tour, which is a French, French thing. And, and Jonas was into that. But I remember having a few conversations with him about Hollywood films, but not too many. And he didn't try to pressure me to see the avant garde either, you know? So we were just friendly.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I read somewhere that film culture was the first time the auteur was written about in America. Is that true, or do you remember?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

I mean, the auteur theory was not a theory. First of all, it was a political position statement by the French. And, but it's really simple meant that the director was the author of the film, even if he didn't write it, a position that writers would not necessarily agree with. But, that whole movement started in France and did come over here in the, in the 60s, I guess, late 50s. And Jonas was at the forefront of the idea of having an author for a movie, whether it was Hollywood or New York, you know? It all started at that period. And I don't know if film culture might have been the first sort of maybe it wasn't mainstream at all. It was pretty avant garde. But they had, you know, they did covers of Hollywood pictures also, and I wrote for them a couple of few times.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I heard you call film culture revolutionary. Can you tell me why?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Well, it was because it was. It was picking up on the French, idea and. It was revolutionary in the sense that they were the first ones to really talk about that, about the O2A theory about, of Hollywood movies and so on. And it was quite influential. Yeah, it was sort of like they picked up that idea of, the director being the author of the film and, and so on. I think I wrote a piece for the magazine about The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, John Ford's film with Jimmy Stewart and and John Wayne. It wasn't a lot of money. I think he did pay me. I think I made an issue, but I pay me 25 bucks a. And he did. I think I was one of the only people who paid.

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KATIE DAVISON:

And then when the Movie Journal column came out. How is that different?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Well, he didn't really review movies so much as he kind of talked about various things, avant garde films and so on, and sometimes personal experiences I had, I didn't follow it, really religiously, but I knew I knew what he was, where he was going with it was very interesting. He was a very interesting guy, and you couldn't quite pin him down.



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KATIE DAVISON:

What was his personality like?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Intense. Charming. Very likable. He smiled easily. And. And. Precise and very. He had a great sense of humor. And, you know, there was a sometimes there was a language problem because he had a thick accent. So on. I remember his brother Adolphus was making a film around the time we met. The laughter called Hallelujah the Hills, I think it was called, and he asked me to play a leading role in it, and I said no, because it had a scene where I'm supposed to run around the woods. A bear asked you, I ain't doing that. So I turned it down. They were not happy with me, but I said, I don't do that. I like to the office, those nice guys. Jonas was more open.

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KATIE DAVISON:

I'm trying to get a sense of how all of these different film movements kind of, like, worked off of each other, and that influenced the New Hollywood. Do you think that experimental or underground cinema was having an influence, like guerilla techniques that you used in targets? Was that something that was new and sort of breaking boundaries from what mainstream film was doing?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:



Well, yeah, it was it was underground, so to speak. It was demo distributed. Distributed. But targets was my first film, but it was, it wasn't really like an avant garde film. It had Boris Karloff in it, but but and Jonas liked it and liked some of the way we shot it and so on. You know, there was a kind of a, a schism between the, off road off Hollywood, cinema and Hollywood. And it were and Hollywood wasn't Hollywood anymore. It was all very different. It wasn't like the old time Hollywood with a studio to enjoy, really. The studios and studio system system pretty much ended in 62. Really. And. Anyway, so and the avant garde cinema went up and then down. I don't know where it is now, but Jonas was it was a real revolutionary. He was. He wanted to break down the barriers, break down. And he was very. He talked like that. Do we have to take it down and break it down and do you know. Okay. Take it easy, Jonas. He was. He was. I loved him, though. He was so dedicated, you know, and he was real. And he was a really a nice guy and a very. Dedicated men and a good friend with a kind of real revolutionary he was. He was ready to storm the best. You know, the department. He was there. It was like that. It was very, very of a leader of the underground, you know, and he had a tremendous impact on, on those kind of filmmakers. That wasn't where I was going. But he was very encouraging to me as well. And I wasn't like that. I didn't make those kind of films, all those things. A poet, filmmaker, rabble rouser, leader, revolutionary, a quiet revolutionary because he wasn't noisy about, you know, but he was kind of militant sometimes. And I rather like that about him. You know, we will do this. Right. Okay. Lead on. Well, he wrote a lot. He did a lot of his. You said, autobiographical clips. I mean, that clips, you know, he did. He did. He was, revolutionary in that sense. He went on to lead the march and give get respect for avant garde films and films that aren't Hollywood and so



on. And yet he recognized the brilliance of Hollywood at times, you know, the great directors.

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KATIE DAVISON:

And so at Fred Zucker's house at an anthology Preservation Dinner, where you were talking about the importance of film presentation in the context of all the pieces of lost because show that had been lost and what's up, doc? And even some of the mask. So I wonder if you could like, why is film preservation important to me? And it was so important to John as.

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Well, because if he if you don't preserve it, it's gone. And you know, and his film is fragile and not easy to preserve, really costs a lot of money, but it is, you know, picture made in 1920. With who? Glorious ones. And so you want to see it and to see what it was like and so on. You know, it's a very important film, but it's history. Every film is a kind of historical document of that particular story, of that particular time. You know, we both felt the same way about that. We were both kind of nutty that way. You know, we loved, the history of film. We and and Jonas was very much of a leader in, in terms of the preserving films, you know.

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KATIE DAVISON:

In, in that interview that you did with him, you, you said to him, you know, a lot of your your titles are very melancholy. And that's kind of one of the things

I like best about Jonas' films is like the melancholy. Do you remember that talking to him about that?

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PETER BOGDANOVICH:

Well, I remember that aspect of him was was very dominant. Yeah. He had a kind of bittersweet look at that life. I think he'd seen a lot of tragedy back in his home country. And, he was he was very much aware of, of the whole thing as opposed to just what he was interested in. He was interested in the world and, where it was going. And he was kind of philosophical, and he was very philosophical and very and, you know, English was not his first language. So he was always slightly struggling to find the right words. It was different, was very personal. Yeah. It was he he had his own voice and that contributed a lot I think.

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