

NICOLE GOMEZ FISHER

WRITER, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR
OF HBO'S SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES

Congrats on the success of your amazing film, *Sleeping with the Fishes*. You wrote, directed, and produced this film without an agent or a manager. Tell us about that process and anything along the way that you think might be relevant to others trying to make their own film *début*?

The process of getting *Sleeping with the Fishes* made began after many months of hot air and empty promises from producers wearing me down. I was frustrated. It was then that I decided it was time to stop relying on others and take "matters" into my own hands. It all comes down to perseverance. You have to want it in order to make it happen, which of course is so cliché and a lot easier said than done, but definitely possible.

I took a leap of faith (on what just happened to be a leap year) and reached out to an old casting director friend and asked if he would read my script. I had already put together two staged readings prior to reaching out, so I felt the script was in a solid place to be shopped around. As soon as he read it, he jumped on board. There comes a time where asking trumps fear - that's certainly something I learned along the way. Take risks!

Once that ball was rolling, it was now a matter of figuring out how to raise the money to shoot a feature. It takes a lot of courage to reach out to anyone for money (sidebar - totally different from just asking for a favor). So I drafted a friends and family email, and created an investors pack that I was able to distribute to anyone via email. Producing a film is not easy, but if you have the drive, the passion and the integrity, people will surprise you. Your enthusiasm, along with your knowledge of the business, can certainly help open doors. You have to put time and thought behind your words, paint the big picture for your investors while also being realistic.

Do your research! The internet is full of free advice and videos on "How To"...take advantage of these sites and use them to help expand your knowledge. Having an agent or manager is always helpful, but when you don't have one or the other, you have to make use of what you do have.

Make a comp list of other films that tie into yours - not just based on genre or storyline, but budget. There's just so much to learn, and it's all possible because someone has to make it, right? Writing, directing and producing *Sleeping with the Fishes* was well worth the sharp and sometimes painful learning curve.



Nicole on the set directing Gina Rodriguez
Courtesy of Prime PR

What can you suggest to help actors improve their auditioning skills and on-set behavior?

Remember that the people auditioning you want you to be "right" for the role. It makes their job easier when you come in prepared. They want you to be good and they want you to succeed. There's nothing more exciting than an actor who enters the audition room prepared. There were times when an actor would come in and they were not exactly what I had envisioned for a particular role, but they just wowed us with their choices. Don't doubt those choices. Being prepared is key. Honing your skills by taking classes and workshops always helps. LISTEN. I find that when an actor is relaxed they are more adaptable to listening to your direction. Trust your instincts and ask questions - both in the audition room and on set. If you act like a pro, you'll be seen and treated as one.

Any tips on taking direction etc. that our readers can benefit from when working with directors and producers?

Listen and be open. It's a collaborative process, but in the end you have to be willing to let go of one idea and mold and conform to whatever your director has in mind. Ultimately it's their vision - but, it's your job to translate that vision to the screen. I'd like to think of myself as an "actor's director". I like working closely with actors, so if you have that kind of opportunity to bond with a director on set, use it wisely. Open the bridge by communicating and be honest about your choices, your questions, and your work.

What do you look for in an actor when you're casting one of your films?

I look for truth, preparation, the ability to take notes, and adjust on site. You just know when an actor starts reading if they are connected to the character or if they are just "playing" an idea of that character. There is no right or wrong, it's just a matter of making choices and being amenable to adjustments. It also helps when an actor asks questions. Sometimes they do not have the chance to read the script beforehand, or they are not given the option to, so it's best to walk into a room and ask about your character. Getting feedback or backstory on your character can only help build on the choices you've made before stepping foot in the room.

What made you decide to move from acting, to writing/directing/producing?

I no longer had this burning desire to be in front of the camera. I found a safe haven as a writer as it proved to be very therapeutic for me. I enjoy the process of discovering my characters and their voices each day. As a writer, I found more options to express myself without judgment. Being behind the camera allowed me to expand my imagination to go to places I didn't allow myself explore as an actor. Writing and directing gave me the space to let go of fear. I had been struggling as an actress for so many years and found myself lost in a business that needed to identify who I was, and being myself never seemed to be enough. It was seemingly more important to others to define who or what I was. Was I Latina? Was I Caucasian? Filipino? It was so overwhelming and frustrating to identify myself in a town that couldn't see past my mixed background. However placing myself behind the camera and watching my words being brought to life became a channel that gave my voice, my vision, and my characters a place to play without judgment. It was freeing.

Directing on the other hand, gave me the chance to structure my thoughts and at the same time allow me the chance to work with actors. I love actors! There's nothing more creative and fun to me than working with people who have put their hearts and livelihood into exposing themselves. I found that I was more comfortable being critiqued about my writing than I was as an actor. That kind of exposure made me constantly question myself and it wasn't healthy for me. Writing, directing, and producing forced me to find myself and build on the strength I've always knew I had inside of me.

What advice can you give to young actors who are potentially interested in creating content at some point in their career?

Do it, but be prepared. They say luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity - and in some cases, you have to make your own opportunities. If you believe in the content and think there may be a market for it, then write it. We live in an age where we are inundated with so much content, but if you seep through a lot of it, there's still only a handful that are worth watching and tuning into weekly. If you can gather a team of artists that are on the same page, who want to learn and grow, then take the leap! To quote my film "Everything in life is worth taking the risk...it's just a matter of whether or not you're willing to take it."

Are there any acting coaches that you know and work with that you would recommend to people?

It's been years, but my favorites were Israel Hicks of The Actor's Center, and Chris Ceraso at The Ensemble Studio Theater.

You cast Gina Rodriguez in *Sleeping with the Fishes* prior to her becoming an overnight success story on *Jane the Virgin*. You obviously saw that she had something special to offer first! What was it that you saw in Gina that led you to casting her?

She just lights up a room! They say that some people just have that "it" factor and she definitely has "it". Her energy is infectious! She's so open minded and determined! We took a meeting to discuss the film and the character, and I just loved that she was so intrigued by my story, and that she was ready to dive in and explore a world of multi-cultural- interfaith craziness. She was eager and willing to work with a first time director, which is rare, but it certainly made me feel that she trusted in me and in my vision. What she brought to the character and to the screen was exactly what I had envisioned for many years before this all came to fruition.

If you could give your 15 year old self one piece of advice about working in the entertainment industry, what would it be?

The same advice I still give myself everyday! Patience. Be truthful with yourself. Know why you want to get involved and what it takes to get there. Nothing in life comes easy, but I truly believe that with hard work, combined with talent and an enormous drive, anyone can get where they want to be.