

## MPTD Interview with Eidolon Films Founders Tessa Moran and Ben Crosbie

**Leslie Green:** Welcome to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, Senior Communications Manager with the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the "DC Film Office."

We have the dynamic duo, husband and wife team, founders of DC-based Eidolon Films Tessa Moran and Ben Crosbie, with us here to talk to us today about their new project that just premiered, "Fate of a Salesman."

I should also mention that Ben Crosbie is one of our amazing Filmmakers of the Month, in fact, our June 2012 Filmmaker of the Month, to be exact. We're happy to have you here today. Welcome.

**Ben Crosbie:** Thanks for having us.

**Tessa Moran:** Thank you for having us.

**Leslie:** Absolutely. First, let's start off by telling our listeners how you all got started in the local film industry? What made you start Eidolon Films?

**Tessa:** We had some experience just dabbling in college, making our own short, independent films. After college, we both had entry-level positions in fields that were unrelated to film, sort of related to film, but not really.

I was a reporter. Ben was working in an entry-level position at National Geographic Channel. We were both a little unsatisfied with the level of creativity that we were able to use in our current positions.

We had this elaborate plan to, over the course of a year, save up money, buy equipment, quit our jobs, move to Israel, and make our first documentary film.

**Leslie:** Wow. That's a lot.

**Ben:** It sounds simple. We make it sound so easy.

[laughter]

**Tessa:** That was a long process of making short films through the course of the year so that we were prepared to make a longer film, buying equipment, and signing up for credit cards so we had enough miles to get to Israel. We made our first film, called "Keeping the Kibbutz."

**Ben:** That was our second film, actually.

**Tessa:** It was our second film, but it was a longer film, a PBS full-hour. We'd shot the film in Israel and then came back and said, "Oh no. Now we have to find jobs again."

We went back into the workplace for two years, at full-time jobs, all the while starting to build our business. When we were contacted by a non-profit organization, they said, "We really like your work. We'd like you to make a documentary-style video for our organization, our birth center in DC."

It occurred to us that we could make a viable business producing documentary-style videos for non-profit organizations. Over the course of the following two years, we started to build-up our client base to finally leave our jobs and work at Eidolon Films, full time.

What our business is really a hybrid between making independent documentary films for broadcast television and theatrical, and also making documentary-style videos, on commission, for non-profit organizations.

That hybrid function has allowed us to be sustainable. We've been doing Eidolon Films full time for almost four years.

**Leslie:** Wow.

**Ben:** As Tessa told the story, we started off really young, idealistic, recent college graduates, thinking that "We'll just go off and make a film and not think about what we're going to do next."

When we came back, as she said, we realized that we had to still work and make money. That's how we started into our client side of our business.

We really got into film just based on a passion that we really wanted to do something creative. We were both interested in storytelling. Tessa as a journalist. I had done short fiction films in college, and I was really into photography, as well.

We thought that producing a documentary would be a great way to take all of our skills and find an outlet for what we had at that time, very ambitious, creative energy, to try to produce our first documentary film.

**Leslie:** You were telling me how to pronounce the name of the company before we got started.

**Ben:** Eidolon Films. [laughs]

**Leslie:** Where did that name come from? How did you come up with that?

**Ben:** It's a good question. When we were looking to have a company name to start branding ourselves, we were just doing a search for really interesting and beautiful-sounding words that weren't English.

We found Eidolon, which is an English word. It means "an image of an ideal." We heard the word "Eidolon," and it had a really unique sound to it.

The definition of it really fit what we thought we were trying to do, which was create these stories, visual, and have a lot of meaning and inspiration to reach some sort of an ideal.

We just thought the word, the meaning, and the sound fit with what we were trying to do. Now, people don't forget it because they can't ever figure out how to say it.

**Leslie:** Right. [laughs] It's a beautiful name.

**Ben:** Thank you.

**Leslie:** It represents you well. You talked about getting your start and all of that. Did you always know that you wanted to do documentary filmmaking? Was that always the type of film that you wanted to make? If so, why?

**Tessa:** I was always interested in non-fiction storytelling, creative non-fiction, but I'd always thought that I would be a reporter or do that through print journalism. I did that for a while, and I found that it wasn't quite the medium that was right for me.

I'd always been interested in that type of storytelling but had really only realized that you could do it through film as a student, when I made my first documentary film, a very short student project.

When I met Ben, he was interested in fiction film. We thought that there would be a connection between both of our interests. Documentary film seemed like a good match between his visual interest and my interest in non-fiction storytelling.

**Ben:** I was really interested in fiction film in college. I made some really bad student films...

[laughter]

**Ben:** ...that one day maybe will provide comic relief for me.

When we were getting interested in try to produce our first film, I had done a couple crew positions on local productions, like music videos and in the fiction world.

I realized pretty quickly that right out of college, it's really hard to have a strong creative role in that world. I was just moving around light stands and things like that. It just wasn't what I wanted to do.

Documentary was a really great way, compared to fiction, where you do need a lot more resources, crew, and people, to start producing a film. With documentary, you can just go off with your partner, a producer, or an editor and start creating a film right away.

You can really start being in a producing role right away. That's partly what drew us to that medium, but also just the idea that we were both always interested in real-life stories that we found, that stories in reality tended to be much more interesting and unique than things we could come up with writing a fictional story.

**Leslie:** Speaking about your stories, how do you come up with the stories you want to tell on film? How do you know what inspires you, so to speak?

**Tessa:** I'm not sure if this is intentional or not, but we've always really been drawn to communities and change. This concept of how do we, as humans, identify ourselves through communities, and what happens to that? How do we identify ourselves again when that community really changes?

That was first explored in our first film, "Keeping the Kibbutz," in which we studied an Israeli kibbutz and how it was changing from a communist community to a capitalist community and what happened to the people that were left behind.

When we were making a film here in DC, "Fate of a Salesman," the storyline of many of the stores that were changing on H Street, this area of town that was changing dramatically. It seemed like it really fit into what we were doing or what we were interested in saying.

**Ben:** It's really just what catches our attention and what we feel inspired by when we first hear about the story or see it, if we are reading the newspaper "Fate of a Salesman," we had discovered just through a small piece in a "Washington City Paper" article that was profiling the street at the time, H Street.

Willie Carswell, who's the main character of our film, was interviewed in the story. Just hearing some of his quotes, and there was a picture of him in his suit and the suits behind him, that immediately piqued our interest. It was really unique and really visual, something I had never even thought about or seen before in my life.

That is how we usually get our ideas, just reading different things or passing by somewhere and just being interested in a story. Then, as we explored this story more, we knew that there was a lot more than just a headline or something that was just visually interesting for a moment.

**Leslie:** For those who don't know, "Fate of a Salesman" is your newest project. It just premiered last week. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about what the story is and why they should go see it?

**Ben:** It's a 30-minute documentary film that really captures a dramatic year-and-a-half period in this store, Men's Fashion Center, which has been in Washington, DC, on H Street, for 60 years.

It takes a look at what's going on inside the store between the cast of characters that are really a family, have been working together for decades. How they're dealing with the changes on the street, and what that's doing to their business and their future.

Really, all the people that work in this store, they've really come to identify themselves by this place and what they do. The fact that H Street has been changing over the last, really, 50 years. It's changed dramatically from when the store opened in 1952 until now.

But specifically in the last 10 years, how a lot of new businesses are coming in and a lot of changes are going on in the neighborhood, just what that's doing to their relationship to themselves, between each other, and the store.

**Leslie:** The "Washington City Paper" wrote a review of the film last week, saying that it's told with "wonderful, gentle curiosity and wistful imagery."

The review also stated that "Men's Fashion Center may have closed for a complex set of reasons, but Crosbie and Moran don't explore them in much depth."

What would you say to that observation? Why did you decide to take the angle that you took within that 30-minute time period you had for the film?

**Tessa:** Well, that was a very specific decision that we made, that we wanted the story to be told through these characters and not necessarily through the factors that were influencing them, that we also wanted the story to be a universal one, that this could be the fate of any salesman, that this could be a store in any urban neighborhood.

It was important to us that we identified the complex series of factors that may have contributed to the store's demise, but not necessarily go in great depth about...go into the local politics of why that was.

We did, at one point, film some meetings and some footage of the street cars coming in, which was also one of the many factors we could've explored. Why people are dressing down more than they used to? Why the church-going folks that went to Men's Fashion don't live in the neighborhood anymore? Why they're moving out?

We could have explored that in more depth, but I think what was important to us is that we didn't get into the nitty-gritty of those factors, but really mentioned them and focused on what effect those factors had on the people in this store.

There was also...we never left the store. It was very intentional that we filmed this almost like a play in which there was one setting, that we didn't move the camera much and that the characters moved in and out. That was a very specific decision. We never went to the characters' home, we never left H Street, because this was their world and we really wanted to capture the nostalgia of those four walls, as well.

**Leslie:** That's really interesting. Did you have anything?

**Ben:** Yeah, and I think just going back to what Tessa said, there were, as the article mentioned and knows from covering DC, that there were a lot of complicated factors that still are going on on H Street, and why Men's Fashion closed is different than why, maybe, Georgia's Place across the street, which is soon to be a Ben's Chili Bowls, closed.

Each store has its own story, and we just thought, when we started to think about exploring something beyond, really, the characters themselves and how it was affecting them, it started to feel like we were taken out of the voice of the characters.

We wanted to keep it in their voice and their experience when we explored including a meeting with the streetcar development. That it just started to feel like we as filmmakers were coming in and seeing, "This is why I closed," or, "These are the reasons why this is going on." We didn't really necessarily think that was true, or really, that we had a say in saying the reasons why it closed.

We wanted to make sure there's a section that it touches on the general reason why a store like this would close, because otherwise people really would wonder why in the world did a place like this close. But we do keep it, like Tessa said, in a more general term, so that people just get the sense that this is a neighborhood that has changed throughout the years, and this store has suffered as a result of a lot of different factors. But that could be represented in any city around the country that's dealing with similar issues.

**Leslie:** You highlight the characters of the film. Have you followed up with any of the gentlemen whose stories you told? Do you know what they're doing now?

**Tessa:** Yeah. We've been in close touch with them, especially as we've prepared for the most recent premiere of the film last Thursday, at the Atlas Performing Arts Center. They were all present on the panel, so we were in touch with them again. When we finished the film, we also had them over our home to share a meal and also see the film first before we shared it with the public.

We've been in touch with them, and as we get requests from various people in the community to do screenings, they will ultimately be involved. I think that's a role that they're really excited to play. It's been fun for us to be able to share this film and have them partake in continuing to share this film with the public.

We've been in very close touch with them in terms of what they're doing. Many of them, it's still a hard time for them. Willie is 69 years old, so he's very much retirement age. But he's not ready to retire, so I think he's at this stage where he's trying to figure out, "Do I start my own business in this very tough economic climate with very little resources to do that? Or do I just retire even though I don't feel like I'm ready to do that?"

The same goes for Jerry and Steve, who's younger. Steve is dealing with some disability issues, but I think he's looking to see where his next step is. I think they're all in this state of flux right now, just waiting to see what the next step will be. But it's been a painful time for them.

**Leslie:** Watching the film, you really do get drawn into their individual stories. You're left thinking, "Wow, what happened to these men in their lives once their store closed down?" because they were so attached to it.

Where can someone go now to view the documentary? Where can they see it?

**Ben:** Now that the film has premiered, it will be airing this week on October 17th at 8:00 PM on WHUT. It will have some other screenings on WHUT, but you can just check their website. I think [whut.org](http://whut.org), for the repeat airings throughout the week. We do plan on having, at least, a few other local screenings. We're just working on different details for that. If you check our website for the film, [fateofasalesman.com](http://fateofasalesman.com), or just [facebook.com/fateofasalesman](https://www.facebook.com/fateofasalesman), we'll just update with information on when those screenings will be.

Sometime, in the late winter of this year, so 2014, early 2014, we're still hoping to have other broadcasts in other PBS stations around the country. We just don't have the details of that yet. But once that happens, hopefully, it will also be online for people to view, streaming somewhere. Right now you have to catch it on your local PBS station, WHUT. Then, keep following us for more updates as to when it will screen other places.

**Leslie:** What else are you currently working on? What's the next film or project to be released?

**Tessa:** We have a lot of ideas for our next independent project, but we have yet to make a concrete decision on what to do. Most of our time, from now until spring, will be really quite busy with client work for non-profits. I think that's going to be consuming our time for the

moment. But we definitely plan on doing another film, probably a feature-length film, with a more ambitious distribution, potentially theatrical, so we didn't need to think carefully about what that subject will be before we jump into a project that ambitious.

**Leslie:** What stories would you like to tell that you think haven't been told yet?

**Ben:** I think we've, as Tessa said, what we've been drawn to is communities in change. Again, just through our travels around the world and living in DC, we always keep finding stories that we just think would be amazing to tell. As Tessa was saying, it's difficult to choose and make a decision.

I think in the future, we will still make, throughout our careers even, just local stories. There's a lot of DC stories that stand out, that I think are really important to tell. Specifically, it's hard to say, because I think we're just drawn to so many different types of topics.

Again, I think we'll always keep coming back to the type of story that talks about dealing with identity, people's identity, and how they relate to their community, and what happens when your identity is dramatically shifted or changed.

**Leslie:** Last question. What advice would you give to filmmakers who are just getting their start in the industry? What type of advice would you give them?

**Tessa:** I would say the most important thing is to persevere, number one, and to subscribe to failure, that it's just going to arrive at your doorstep every day, [laughs] every single day [laughs]. Because I think...and also not to accept "no" for an answer, that I think that you'll get a lot of no's and that's not necessarily descriptive that your project is bad. It's just usually a "no for now," and that's how you have to consider that.

I think that's the hardest part, to really grow a thick skin and to continue to move on with your vision, and to see it through. I think that despite the fact that we've received multiple no's that, in the end, we've found an audience for our film, and it's been right because we focused on the vision that we had, and we kept true to it.

**Ben:** Also, following up to that, also that we've realized is really important in this industry, to have relationships. That is a really good way to move away from the no's, because the default answer from most people is always "no," just because they don't have time to look at every request they get or every film that comes to their door.

The more relationships you build, the easier you're going to have to getting close to someone who can make a decision, who might see it and say, "Hey, this is really great. Let's take it, let's screen it, or we'll give you funding." Relationships are important, and starting locally is a great way.

This film is airing on WHUT, and that's because we have a relationship with our local PBS station. Even though that's just for Washington, DC, it's been incredibly helpful for having our premiere be a fun event, and getting it on TV, and meeting other people.

Relationships are really important. It can't just be doing the film and focusing on being an independent filmmaker.

When we started, we, as I said, were very idealistic that we can just be creative and make a film. But there's a lot of other things that go along with it. Again, being persevering and building relationships is a great way to be successful in this field.

**Tessa:** When you say, "Independent," it's not really, truly independent. It's very collaborative, that you, as filmmakers, do depend on other people. You are dependent on other people, whether you say it's independent or not. That those relationships are really quite important.

**Leslie:** I think you both have very, very good advice. Thank you again for joining us here today, Ben, Tessa. Thank you all for turning in to "Reel Talk with Film DC." Again, this is your host, Leslie Green, signing off. Don't forget to join us on the web at [film.dc.gov](http://film.dc.gov), like us on Facebook at [facebook.com/filmdc](https://facebook.com/filmdc), and follow us on Twitter [@dcfilmoffice](https://twitter.com/dcfilmoffice). Catch you next time...

Transcription by CastingWords